A Phenomenological Study of
Over-Involvement in Undergraduate Students

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

Student involvement scholars have long posited that greater social and academic outcomes accrue for students as they become more involved in college (Astin, 1984, 1993; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Questions left underexplored in the extant literature about the possibility of an upper limit of beneficial involvement and an abiding concern about a growing number of Millennial students encumbered by the stress of their co-curricular commitments motivated this study. Four male and four female undergraduate students, all of whom were involved in co-curricular activities at an exceptionally high level and had experienced a variety of challenges as a direct result of so much engagement, were interviewed to explore the phenomenon of over-involvement. This phenomenological study sought to describe the essence of over-involvement experienced by traditional-aged undergraduates at a large research university. Areas of inquiry included details of the lived experience of over-involved students, the challenges they faced, and the students’ motivations for beginning and sustaining such overwhelming levels of activity. Major findings included a lifelong pattern of engagement and desire for achievement prior to college; intense intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to be involved; considerable difficulties faced by over-involved students, including insufficient sleep, poor diet, damaged relationships, and debilitating levels of stress; and cultural norms of students wearing a persona of composure, so as not to reveal their vulnerability to others.
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Major Field: Educational Policy and Leadership
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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Do as much as your passion allows you to without being harmed by it.” Such is the sage advice provided by a student with whom I recently worked when asked what guidance he would give a younger student trying to understand how much campus involvement is too much. The student articulating this “wisdom” graduated college in three years, served as president of nine organizations during his senior year of high school, and was involved in seventeen different college activities. He was consistently among the first to be considered when my colleagues and I would have a new opportunity needing participation from an experienced student leader – meaning he would eventually be “rewarded” with more involvement. This student, although extraordinary in many ways, is representative of what I have perceived to be a steadily growing segment of our student population – those who are over-involved.

Despite the increasing frequency with which my student affairs colleagues and I seem to encounter over-involved students, their ranks are relatively small, and their circumstances have mostly escaped the notice of student involvement and engagement scholars, who have justifiably been more concerned with comparing involved students to those who are not involved at all. However, each year brings a new legion of high-achieving young students to our universities who are products of an ultracompetitive primary and secondary educational system and a college admissions process that rewards those who demonstrate both high academic achievement and high levels of extracurricular involvement (Pope, 2001; Robbins, 2006). These competitive norms
continue as students vie for the attention of employers, and the net result for many is a virtually untenable agenda of campus activities they hope will pave their way to the next achievement.

In his foundational study introducing student involvement theory, Astin (1984) defined student involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy invested by a student into the college experience. Astin’s (1984; 1993) theory stated that greater educational outcomes accrue for students as their academic and social involvement increases. The suggestion is that more is better. Many other scholars have built upon Astin’s work, testing the theory’s applicability when changes are made to demographic and environmental variables (e.g., Gellin, 2003; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). The construct of student engagement has emerged to assert the importance of the institution’s role in fostering involvement in educationally purposeful activities (Kuh, 2001), but student involvement theory has remained one of the most frequently cited and pragmatically useful constructs in student development literature and student affairs practice. However, an underexplored set of questions posed by Astin (1984) himself about the upper limits of productive involvement provides an important rationale for this study.

**Significance of the Study**

Since the earnest beginnings of higher education in colonial America, colleges have been concerned not only with teaching and learning but also with the character development of their students (Thelin, 2003). Even in the colonial colleges, extracurricular activity in the form of literary and debate societies, recreation, campus publications, and eating clubs complemented classroom learning in the overall mission to educate students (Nuss, 2003). Connecting the historical origins with the modern mission
of American higher education, the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) identified “liberal education” as a 21st century ideal that has endured from 17th century roots (AAC&U, 2011). According to AAC&U (2011), liberal education prepares students to deal with complexity and diversity, helps them to develop social responsibility, and empowers them to apply practical skills to real-life situations. These objectives, which undergird the core purposes of higher education, can be achieved much more effectively with a robust co-curricular dimension to a student’s experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

With attendance costs steadily rising and college pathways to various careers becoming more firmly entrenched, calls for accountability from the government, industry, and the general public have made it more important than ever for colleges to prepare students for success after graduation (AAC&U, 2011). Equipped with well-researched recommendations for high impact practices made by scholars and professional organizations (Dugan, Kodama, Correia, & Associates, 2013; Keeling, 2006; Kuh, 2009), colleges and universities can consider the ways in which co-curricular involvement shapes the experience they offer and answers those calls for accountability. The AAC&U engaged educators, employers, and accreditors to develop a set of recommended learning outcomes connected with high-impact practices in the university co-curriculum. Among the outcomes are intellectual and practical skills, such as critical thinking, oral communication, teamwork, and problem solving. Personal and social responsibility outcomes are also emphasized, including intercultural proficiency, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement (AAC&U, 2011). These fundamental learning outcomes of a modern undergraduate education have been shown to occur in co-curricular and extracurricular settings, making the role of out-of-class experiences vital to holistic student development.
This study contributes to the broader area of research on undergraduate college student co-curricular involvement by exploring the phenomenon of over-involvement. Most previous studies on student involvement and engagement have used quantitative measures to show the relationship between a student’s level of involvement and achievement of positive educational outcomes (Astin, 1984; Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Kuh, 2009). Very few published studies have been conducted to explore the questions Astin (1984) posed for future research regarding the upper limits of involvement. Some scholars have echoed Astin’s call for a greater understanding of over-involvement (Fitch, 1991; Hernandez et al., 1999; Hood, Craig, & Ferguson, 1992). Those who have previously begun to address this gap in the literature have concluded that extensive levels of involvement can lead to negative outcomes for students and have suggested that institutional interventions may be necessary to limit student participation (Gravelle, 2010; Nesloney, 2013; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014). This study employed qualitative methods to gain a greater understanding of the phenomenon, so that thoughtful, research-based policies and practices may be developed to address the issue.

The study may be more significant now than it might have been a decade ago, as a number of trends in Millennial student behavior have perhaps led to a greater prevalence of problematic over-involvement. Heeding the warnings of those who have questioned the use of generalizations based on one’s birth cohort (Letter report, 2002; Magolda & Ebben, 2007), I proceeded with appropriate caution when considering the essentialized characteristics of an entire generation of students. Though conclusions about the essence of over-involvement were not reached based on an analysis of generational
characteristics, there is knowledge to be gained from an assessment of relevant concepts appearing in the literature on Millennials. Compared with previous generations, Millennials have been branded as more pressured, affluent, busy, team-oriented, stressed, sheltered, confident, optimistic, and ethnically diverse (DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Whether because of federal and international politics, the fluctuating state of the U.S. economy, or sweeping reforms in primary and secondary education, Millennials have been pressured to achieve for their entire lives (Levine & Dean, 2012). As students, they have been pushed to study hard and to achieve as much as they can, so that they will compare favorably when evaluated for the next important opportunity (Levine & Dean, 2012; Pope, 2001). The Millennial proclivity to prioritize breadth over depth and the ability to multitask are also attributes worth exploring (Levine & Dean, 2012; Small & Vorgan, 2008; Wallis, 2006).

Millennial college students have been described as more stressed and anxious, more likely to spend time in psychological and career counseling offices, and in a greater hurry to finish college than their predecessors (Levine & Dean, 2012). Student mental health concerns have become increasingly critical for Millennial students, with compelling evidence to suggest that both severity and prevalence of mental health problems are increasing (Cleary, Walter, & Jackson, 2011). These characteristics are unsurprising, given a number of documented behaviors of college-bound high school students. Pope (2001) and Robbins (2006) provided powerfully illustrative profiles of high school students who had been conditioned from a young age to be involved in as much as possible, so that they could eventually be seen as attractive candidates for the selective colleges of their choice. It was common for these students to sacrifice sleep, nutrition, and healthy relationships with friends and family, so that they could manage...
their ambitious slate of extracurricular activities and advanced classes, all in the name of making themselves competitive for college admissions. These students moved mechanically, but tenuously, through the educational system “doing school” (Pope, 2001) and engaging in activities under the pressure of understandings held by their parents, teachers, and peers about what they needed to do to get into college. Also noteworthy from these student profiles was the tendency the students developed to internalize their stress and mask their challenges and vulnerability from peers, parents, and teachers because of their fear of exposing any weakness (Pope, 2001; Robbins, 2006). An unwillingness to engage their network of support was detrimental to their sense of belonging, a fundamental variable affecting students at all levels of elementary and secondary education (Osterman, 2000). The stress, anxiety, eating disorders, and other mental health issues students develop under the intense pressure of competition for what they perceive as a scarce commodity (college admissions) are all inputs students now bring into the college environment.

The mentality that admission into a selective college is the key to a better life is a primary motivator for many over-involved high school students (Pope & Simon, 2005). Students who are accustomed to norms of succeeding at any cost may bring the same fears, insecurities, and competitiveness into the university setting, where they may translate this state of mind to competition for awards, leadership positions, scholarships, internships, graduate programs, and jobs after graduation. Without careful consideration of the ways in which these behaviors are rewarded on our campuses, our policies and practices may continue to feed the perception that over-involvement is necessary in order to gain advantages in life. In the meantime, our counseling centers may continue to be crowded with students who have fully bought into our institutional messaging about the
importance of getting involved but who are spread too thin to care for their own well-being.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the essence of over-involvement experienced by undergraduate students who are deeply or broadly engaged in their university’s co-curricular or extracurricular culture. For the purposes of the present analysis, over-involvement can be defined as participation in co-curricular activities for students who experience involvement-related challenges to their achievement of positive outcomes. These challenges may be academic, social, health, or wellness-related. The research questions guiding the study came from an abiding concern for the well-being of students who, regardless of their motivations, invest so much time and energy into co-curricular activities, they may not be able to realize the full benefit of their investment. Murray (2010) astutely observed the transformation of a culture of involvement into a culture of busyness on college campuses as students fill their hours, sometimes quite superficially, with student organization meetings, leadership development activities, and campus events. Given some of the documented involvement behaviors of Millennial high school students (Brown, 2007; Osterman, 2000), there is cause for concern about the ways in which students conditioned for over-achievement at all costs may be set up for a stressed, anxious, and overwhelmed existence in college (Pope, 2001; Robbins, 2006).

The interpretivist qualitative design of this study enabled me to consider the ways in which each person constructs reality in the environment. Three research questions provided the basic framework for the study: (1) What does it mean to be over-involved in college?; (2) How are students motivated to become deeply or broadly involved in co-
curricular or extracurricular activities in college?; and (3) How do students describe the impact of high levels of involvement on various aspects of their lives? These broad research questions provided the foundation for many more detailed questions selected for use in the semi-structured interviews used for data collection. The research questions, which are consistent with the phenomenological methodology used for this study, are meant to reflect my interpretivist epistemological assumptions.

**Theoretical Framework**

In addition to Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement, which factors so centrally into the study design and literature review, this study considers the construct of student engagement. Student engagement has been defined as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Engagement resembles involvement with its focus on the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities, but it incorporates an additional layer of meaning implicating institutions and how they allocate resources and provide services to encourage student participation (Kuh, 2001; Strayhorn, 2012; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). In other words, it is possible for a student to be involved without being engaged. Efforts made by both the student and the institution are important components of engagement as a construct, and both components are explored in this study.

Although some scholars have shown negative or negligible effects of certain kinds of co-curricular student involvement (Anaya, 1996; Flowers, 2004; Hayek, Carini, O’Day, & Kuh, 2002), involvement has been empirically tied with many favorable educational outcomes (Astin, 1993; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Gellin, 2003; Hernandez, Hogan, Hathaway, & Lovell,
1999, Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Even so, several studies that have explored excessive levels of involvement in campus employment (Furr & Elling, 2000; Lundberg, 2004) and other co-curricular activities (Gravelle, 2010; Nesloney, 2013; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014) have shown that too much time and energy spent on these activities can have a negative influence on the achievement of educational outcomes.

Constructs related to student involvement that also helped provide a theoretical foundation for this study are social integration and sense of belonging. In his research on factors that lead to retention of college students, Tinto (1993) found that students who achieved integration into the institution’s formal and informal academic and social systems were less likely to drop out. Social integration pertains to student perceptions of informal systems like peer, faculty, and staff interactions and formal systems like involvement in co-curricular activities (Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Tinto’s (1993) theory stated that students come to college with a number of background characteristics and goal commitments, which both have a bearing on integration into the institution’s social and academic systems. Institutional and goal commitment increases as integration occurs, and the student’s likelihood of remaining enrolled increases accordingly (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto’s theory and the general notion that the student must work in partnership with the institution on academic and social commitments in order to become fully integrated have been very influential in higher education literature on retention and other important outcomes of college, but critiques of the theory of integration have given rise to a popular construct known as sense of belonging. Among the most prevalent critiques of the theory of integration are the original theory’s focus on non-minority, traditional-age populations and the insinuation that students must abandon their heritage and
assimilate into the dominant majority culture in order to succeed in college (Bensimon, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992). In response to these critiques, Tinto has clarified that the key to integration is not assimilation but finding community and connecting with peers (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The construct of sense of belonging reflects this understanding more directly.

One of the most fundamental needs on Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy, sense of belonging to a group or community is the psychological outcome of social integration (Strayhorn, 2012; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Belonging reflects one’s need to experience love and acceptance and feel affiliation with other people. It is a concept related to mental health that can be understood from physical, sociological, psychological, and spiritual perspectives (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). Much about a person’s self-esteem is based on belonging or a related concept of “mattering,” which is a person’s feeling that he or she is noticed by others and thought of as important (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). Hurtado and Carter (1997) operationalized the concept of social integration as sense of belonging and found a number of connections between this construct and involvement. Sense of belonging is particularly vital in higher education for students from underrepresented populations, and involvement has been shown to contribute to belonging for all students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008b, 2009, 2012).

Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy also provides a theoretical foundation for an analysis of motivation, which relates directly to the research questions for this study. Achieving basic needs is a powerful motivator, and as a person progresses from satisfying those fundamental needs toward the ultimate achievement of self-actualization, motivation comes from internal and external forces. Based on deCharms’ (1968) theory of personal
causation, which states that human beings are motivated more strongly by their personal priorities than by the directives of others, Deci and Ryan (1985) developed self-determination theory. This lens for examining motivation behavior positions genuine personal interest (intrinsic motivation) and goal achievement (extrinsic motivation) as components of self-determination that a person can simultaneously possess and use as needed. An application of motivation theory is important to this study for its usefulness in explaining why students get involved and why they would continue to engage in high levels of co-curricular activity even when the consequences can be harmful.

In this study, I also made use of ecological theory, specifically through models of physical, organizational, human aggregate, and constructed environments (Strange & Banning, 2015). Although each of these environmental models offers insightful vantage points from which to consider student behavior, constructed environmental models are the most independently useful to a qualitative study. Constructed environments are those that are created collectively and subjectively by participant observers, who determine behavioral norms (Strange & Banning, 2015). Environmental press and campus culture are concepts of constructed environments that influence the way students perceive their experiences, but, in a reciprocal fashion, those subjective perceptions determine the environmental press and campus culture over time. Part of the analysis of this study included a consideration of how study participants perceived institutional messages and peer influence on decisions to become and remain involved. Students’ decisions about the extent to which they devote time and energy to co-curricular activities were made, at least in part, in response to the environmental press of the institution’s culture of involvement. A theoretical lens applying constructed environmental models helped with interpretation of their perceptions.
Overview of Research Design

The design of this study makes use of a phenomenological research methodology. Phenomenology is concerned with reducing the experiences a number of individuals have with a certain phenomenon to “a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2013, p.76). Through interviews with people who have experienced the phenomenon and analysis of both what the individuals experienced and how they experienced it, phenomenologists ultimately attempt to describe the essence of the phenomenon in terms of the significance it holds for the participant (Moustakas, 1994). This type of research centers on understanding a shared experience (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). From a phenomenological description, a reader should be able to know what it is like to experience the phenomenon (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014).

A large, four-year public Midwestern university was used as the site for data collection. The university community includes colleagues who served as key partners in the process of identifying study participants. This environment was also suitable for the study because of its pervasive endorsement of co-curricular involvement as an essential aspect of the university experience from recruitment through graduation. The institutional emphasis on student engagement, the high levels of participation (as indicated by recent administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement), and the extensive array of options for students (e.g., over 1,200 student organizations, largest recreational sports program in the U.S.) made this institution an optimal research site for this study.

Patton’s (1990) logic of purposeful sampling guided the process of participant selection, with the importance of selecting information-rich cases at the foundation (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990). Criterion sampling and snowball sampling were two
primary strategies used to identify student participants. In this case, qualified participants all met four primary criteria, which are described in Chapter Three. I identified informants from the ranks of colleagues who interact with students deeply enough to recognize potential participants. Student organization advisors, campus employers, academic advisors, and staff from such departments as First Year Experience, the Multicultural Center, Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Recreational Sports, Residence Life, and Sorority and Fraternity Life were consulted and asked to share the study invitation with those students they considered to be qualified. Once potential participants indicated their interest and completed an informed consent form, students were asked to return a brief demographic survey, so that their qualifications could be evaluated. Thirty students expressed interest, 15 completed the questionnaire, and eight (four men and four women) were ultimately selected to participate.

Data collection for the study consisted of two 60- to 75-minute semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with each of the student participants, recorded using a digital recording device and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. In phenomenological inquiry, the interview is an indispensable method of gathering data about the essence of the human experience in question (Jones et al., 2014). For this study, I used Seidman’s (1998) semi-structured, in-depth phenomenological interviewing model. With this approach, participants reconstruct their experiences, discuss details of the topic, and reflect on the meaning of the experience. The interview protocols were grounded in the three research questions developed for this study and served as a general guide for the discussion. So that I could explore more rigorously the themes that emerged from the first interviews, a secondary protocol was used in subsequent interactions. The semi-structured interview format allowed me to diverge from the interview protocol, so that
topics introduced by the participants could be explored. The use of multiple interviews also incorporated in-process member checks as a way of verifying data (Galletta, 2013). All procedures mandated by the Institutional Review Board of the university in question were recognized and followed in the collection of data for this study.

**Definition of Terms**

The following key terms are defined accordingly within the context of this study:

*Campus culture* – The combination of campus traditions and history, as well as the artifacts, values, perspectives, and assumptions that shape the character of a university (Kuh & Hall, 1993, as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001).

*Co-curricular or extracurricular involvement* – “Co-curricular involvement,” which I define as out-of-class activity that is directly related to a course or field of study, and “extracurricular involvement,” which I define as out-of-class activity that is independent of coursework, are used interchangeably, as they are in most of the extant literature. The preferred default term to describe out-of-class activities will be “co-curricular,” though “extracurricular” will be used when necessary to maintain consistency with cited works. The use of either term is to be contrasted with the “curricular” aspects of the college experience, (i.e., those occurring in the classroom). “Co-curricular involvement,” for the purposes of sampling, will be defined as participation in the activities listed as examples given on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) instrument for students to consider when estimating their weekly investment of time. These include “organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.,” as well as “working for pay on campus,” and “doing community service and volunteer work” (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013).
**Constructed environments** – A model of understanding college environments that focuses on the subjective views and experiences of participant observers and assumes that environments are understood best through the consensual interpretations of the individuals within them (Strange & Banning, 2015).

**Integration** – The extent to which students share the attitudes and beliefs of their peers and faculty at the institution, as well as the extent to which students adhere to the structural rules and requirements of the institutional culture (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993).

**Millennial generation** – Americans born between 1982 and 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

**Over-involvement** – Participation in co-curricular activities for students who experience involvement-related challenges to their achievement of positive outcomes. These challenges may be academic, social, health, or wellness-related.

**Sense of belonging** – The psychological outcome of social integration, promoting overall wellness and personal motivation and reflecting the need to experience the love and acceptance of other people and feel affiliation with them (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

**Student engagement** – A construct considering both the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities and the ways in which universities allocate their resources, learning opportunities, and services to encourage students to participate in and benefit from such activities (Kuh, 2001).

**Student involvement** – The amount of physical and psychological energy invested by students into their educational experience, encompassing both academic and social dimensions (Astin, 1984).
Summary

This study expands upon previous literature in the areas of undergraduate college student co-curricular involvement and student engagement. A greater understanding of the phenomenon of over-involvement can contribute significantly to the higher education knowledge-base when applied to analyses of policies and practices that encourage healthy levels of participation in co-curricular activities. Given the scarcity of existing studies on the upper limits of student involvement, this study addressed a significant gap in the literature. The next chapter provides a thorough review of literature relevant to the study and is followed in Chapter Three by a detailed outline of the research methods. Chapter Four presents the findings from participant interviews, and Chapter Five features a concluding discussion of the results in the context of the existing literature, implications for research and practice, and study limitations.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Involvement in out-of-class activities is a critical component of a holistic college education, contributing to students’ achievement of many of the cognitive and developmental outcomes colleges are expected by accreditors, government agencies, and the general public to facilitate (Keeling, 2006). However, too much involvement may lead to unwanted outcomes (Nesloney, 2013; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014). In order to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of over-involvement for college students, it is necessary to explore the constructs of involvement, engagement, and integration. Numerous researchers in the last thirty years have built upon the work of Alexander Astin and his theory of student involvement, but few published studies have been conducted to explore the questions Astin (1984) posed for future research regarding the upper limits of involvement – the point beyond which the results may be counterproductive to successful educational outcomes. This important gap in the literature provides a key rationale for exploration of the phenomenon of over-involvement.

Astin’s theory has been applied to the experiences of students of various demographics and institutional settings, with remarkably consistent conclusions about the benefits of significant levels of involvement (Gellin, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Existing literature generally depicts the construct of involvement as quite helpful in the achievement of positive student outcomes (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014). Nevertheless, researchers have also demonstrated that not all outcomes related to co-
curricular involvement are favorable. The following review of the literature begins with an examination of the constructs of involvement, engagement, and sense of belonging, as well as principles of social integration and peer interaction, to inform an understanding of over-involvement. With that foundation established, discussion of the problematic dimensions of involvement, including a review of research on over-involvement, is followed by generational context that helps frame broad behavioral trends of college students like those who were recruited to participate in this study. Finally, additional theoretical lenses used in the analysis for this study, including self-determination theory and environmental theories, will be explored.

**Involvement and Engagement**

Phenomenologists frequently search for meaning in etymology as an additional layer of context for the research topic (Vagle, 2014). Significant meaning is often imbedded in the linguistic origins of words in the modern vernacular. Such is the case for the word at the core of this study – “involvement.” Etymologically speaking, at the root of the word “involve” is the Latin *involvere*, meaning “to envelop, surround, overwhelm” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Literally translated, the Latin root words *in* and *volvere* together mean “roll into” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Many studies of college student involvement explore the extent to which students have rolled into and enveloped themselves with the opportunities provided by their institutions to engage academically and socially. To envelop oneself with a network of support is a desirable outcome of college involvement. The positive connotation evoked by this aspect of the word origin can be related to the constructs of engagement, integration, and sense of belonging that are discussed below. However, the duality of the early uses of the word “involvement” is noteworthy and indicative of the possibility that one can envelop
or surround herself to the point of being overwhelmed. An archaic definition of involve is “to enfold or envelop so as to encumber” (Merriam-Webster Online, n.d.). Meaning ascribed to the historical linguistic relationship between enveloping and encumbering or overwhelming bound together in the origins of “involvement” still very much applies to a nuanced contemporary understanding of involvement. In the 1640s, the word “involved” was recorded with a meaning of “complicated” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). As higher education scholars have discovered, there is quite a bit of complexity to the influence of college involvement, and the ways in which the student experience can be made complicated by involvement will be explored in great depth throughout this study.

A review of student involvement literature begins with the work of Alexander Astin.

**Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement**

Astin’s theory of involvement (1977, 1984) was groundbreaking in its suggestion that involvement is not merely psychological or behavioral but that both dimensions must be understood together. As opposed to Pace (1984), who explored behavioral aspects of learning as a function of quality of effort and time on task, and other scholars who had researched the psychological aspects of motivation for learning, Astin (1984) posited that involvement implies the investment of physical and psychological energy – not just what an individual thinks or feels but also what that person does. Pace (1984) measured frequency of student use of various college resources as a way of quantifying quality of effort, but these strictly behavioral measures could not explain cognitive processes in which students engaged or their attitudes about involvement.

Astin (1984) combined psychological and sociological perspectives into a theory built primarily on five basic postulates. The first refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects, either as general as the broad student experience
or as specific as a student organization or study group. The second postulate is that involvement occurs along a continuum; different students manifest different levels of involvement in the same object, and the same student manifests different levels of involvement in different objects at various times. Third, involvement has both quantitative and qualitative aspects. It is important to know how much time a student spends and how that time was spent. Fourth, the amount of learning and personal development is directly proportional to quantity and quality of student involvement. Finally, the effectiveness of any educational policy is directly related to the capacity that policy has to enhance student involvement. In summary, according to Astin (1984):

A highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. Conversely, a typical uninvolved student neglects studies, spends little time on campus, abstains from extracurricular activities, and has infrequent contact with faculty members or other students. (p.297)

Astin (1984) derived his theory by examining the ways in which students’ pre-college characteristics interact with the college environment to produce various outcomes. At the foundation of many models of college impact is Astin’s (1977, 1993) Inputs-Environments-Outputs (I-E-O) model. In Astin’s model, inputs refer to students’ characteristics at the time of college entry, some of which are fixed and some of which have the potential to change over time. Inputs can be related to demographic or educational attributes, like gender, race, parents’ income, and test scores, as well as measurable attitudinal attributes like political viewpoints, interest level in various topics, or inclination to interact with diverse others (Renn & Reason, 2013). Environments are made up of the programs, peer groups, faculty and staff, policies, facilities, and other curricular and co-curricular experiences with which students engage. The model
considers the influence of both inputs and environments on outputs (now more commonly referred to as “outcomes”), like student development, learning, persistence, degree completion, and satisfaction with college. The I-E-O model follows students longitudinally from before college until graduation and beyond (Astin, 1977, 1993). Researchers have used the I-E-O model to explore how environmental experiences under the control of institutions influence various educational outcomes.

In their survey of student development theories, Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) suggested that Astin’s theory of student involvement may not be a developmental theory in the most strict sense, but as Astin (1984, 1993) pointed out, it differs from other theories that are either a series of hierarchically arranged developmental stages or that view student development in multidimensional terms. The focus of Astin’s theory on the behavioral processes that facilitate student development (the how) helps it to stand apart from most other theories and their focus on the developmental outcomes themselves (the what). Furthermore, according to Astín (1984), “the theory of student involvement encourages educators to focus less on what they do and more on what the student does” (p.301). This student-centric construct has exhibited remarkable staying power for more than three decades because of its simplicity, pragmatism, and applicability to the work of scholars and practitioners alike. Student involvement theory’s roots in Astin’s longitudinal study of college dropout behaviors tie involvement inextricably with critical outcomes like persistence and degree completion, but its many facets also help to provide valuable context for understanding how students develop in other important ways.

A simple glance through the items on such well-established and highly-regarded survey instruments as the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman
Survey, the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ), and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provides clues as to the wide range of purposeful college activities in which researchers are interested. “Involvement” in the college experience can be academic or social (Astin, 1984, 1993; Fitch, 1991). Participation in out-of-class academic activities like studying in groups or spending time in the library is typically measured in the major, multi-institutional surveys on involvement, and that type of involvement has significant implications for student success (Terenzini et al., 1996; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). However, as Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) observed, most of the research utilizing Astin’s theory focuses on extracurricular or co-curricular involvement. These two terms, which are often conflated and used interchangeably in the student involvement literature, will also be used synonymously here.

“Extracurricular” and “Co-Curricular” Involvement

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reaffirmed that the impact of college is determined primarily by involvement in both the curricular and co-curricular opportunities on a given campus and individual student effort. It is not enough simply to show up and passively observe the environment. To actualize the documented benefits of involvement, the student must invest time and energy and become meaningfully engaged in the activity. As Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) noted, “Probably because of the large number and wide variety of sponsored activities that might fall under the rubric of ‘extracurricular activity,’ most researchers have either operationalized the concept as a global variable, or they have made no clear distinction between extracurricular and peer involvement” (p.155). Even though “extracurricular” may imply semantically that the activity is less directly related to the curriculum of the institution than something labeled as “co-curricular,” the nuance is not explored in the extant literature significantly enough
to justify separate treatment of the terms. The important similarity is the access provided to peer interaction for those who are involved. Co-curricular involvement is of primary interest in this study, as my concept of over-involvement centers primarily on student participation in activities not directly related to credit-bearing courses.

Satisfaction, grades, retention, and graduation rates are positively linked to extracurricular involvement (Astin, 1993; Fitch, 1991; Gellin, 2003; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Involvement has also been shown to have a positive effect on various dimensions of student development and other educational outcomes (Astin, 1993; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Cooper et al., 1994; Flowers, 2004; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Hernandez et al., 1999). Perhaps most germane to this study, involvement has a strong connection to students’ sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). The link between involvement and beneficial outcomes will be explored more fully below, but the type of co-curricular involvement implicated in these studies is often defined rather broadly. Baxter Magolda (1992) noted that living arrangements, student organizations, and paraprofessional employment on campus provide opportunities for students to get involved. Some studies have explored the specific impact of co-curricular involvement in student organizations (Abrahamowicz, 1992), athletics (Hood, Craig, & Ferguson, 1992; Miller & Kerr, 2002), leadership development and volunteer service activities (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhart, 2001), or Greek life (Hayek et al., 2002), and others have considered co-curricular involvement to be more inclusive of multiple activities (Cooper et al., 1994; Dugan, 2013; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014). Despite the variance from one study to the next in what constitutes involvement, the existing research provides abundant evidence of the positive influence of co-curricular social involvement and contributes to the rationale for a focus on this type of involvement in this study.
Anaya (1996) noted that student involvement theory is useful in explaining the results of longitudinal studies that have primarily examined affective or personal development. However, the theory is not without its critiques. Harper and Quaye (2008) explained that, despite attempts to be inclusive, concepts of involvement have been built and tested on assumptions that fit majority students and that these constructs may not be as explanatory for students on the margins. From their extensive literature review of the foundational studies of student involvement, Terenzini et al. (1996) noted that student involvement theory was based on studies of White, traditional-aged students attending four-year, residential schools on a full-time basis. Hoffman (2002) noted the tendency of student involvement studies, especially studies of persistence using Tinto’s model of integration, to value conformity over pluralism. The specific exploration of the intersection of race and student involvement has been documented more thoroughly (Museus, 2008; Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015), but the applicability of student involvement theory to the circumstances of adult learners, commuter students, students at two-year or on-line colleges, and other student populations has been investigated much less frequently.

**Student Engagement**

Student engagement is a construct very closely related to involvement that has emerged in the literature. Some authors use the terms involvement and engagement somewhat synonymously, but the latter has an additional layer of meaning. Like involvement, a major component of engagement is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities, but engagement is also concerned with how universities allocate their resources, learning opportunities, and services to encourage students to participate in and benefit from such activities (Harper & Quaye, 2008;
Strayhorn, 2012; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The conceptual roots of this construct are with Pace, Sanford, Astin, Chickering, and Gamson, the latter two of which joined with other scholars to produce the “Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” in 1986 (Kuh, 2001). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) then synthesized decades of college student research that contributed to the foundation built by Kuh and other scholars for the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE and its companion surveys for faculty (FSSE), students beginning college (BCSSE), and community college students (CCSSE) assess the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived, good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience (Kuh, 2001). Items for these surveys were derived from instruments like the CIRP Freshman Survey, the CSEQ, and the College Student Survey administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), all of which also assess the college student experience (Kuh, 2001). High levels of engagement have been associated with a wide range of educational practices and conditions that support student learning and contribute to student success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Among the most effective engagement strategies, now known commonly as high impact practices (HIPs), include first-year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research, service learning, and internships (Kuh, 2008). A related set of HIPs developed through the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) pertains to student engagement through the cultivation of socially-responsible leadership capacity (Dugan et al., 2013). These HIPs include socio-cultural conversations, faculty, peer and student affairs mentoring, community service, and membership or leadership in both student organizations and off-campus organizations.

In comparison with the student-driven construct of involvement, Kuh (2009)
noted the additional responsibility placed on institutions as a defining characteristic of the construct of engagement. According to Kuh (2009), “…the greatest impact on learning and personal development during college seems to be a function of institutional policies and practices that induce higher levels of engagement across various kinds of in-class and out-of-class educationally purposeful activities” (p.688). Engagement represents an agreement between the university and the student about the educational experience. It is “associated with institutional environments that are perceived by students as inclusive and affirming, and where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels” (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p.413). As another way of articulating the difference between involvement and engagement, Harper (as cited in Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009) said:

> It is entirely possible to be involved but not engaged. … [Students can] show up and could legitimately claim that they are involved but they are not really engaged… Engagement is amount plus depth, which leads to favorable outcomes. (p.418).

Colleges and universities are doing more now than ever before to cultivate engagement (Kuh, 2009). The following section explores the importance of out of class experiences to a holistic college education.

**Significance of Involvement and Engagement to the Purposes of Higher Education**

When considering a contemporary higher education climate that has become increasingly influenced by public calls for accountability, expedient degree completion, containment of student cost of attendance, and singular focus on career readiness, one might call into question the appropriateness of an institution directing its limited resources into its co-curricular experience. Further, given the emerging popularity of online universities and surging enrollment in two-year colleges at which traditional,
residential college approaches to fostering out-of-class engagement may be ineffective, colleges and universities must consider the ways in which co-curricular involvement shapes the experience they offer and contributes to the holistic development of their students. Presented here is an analysis of how co-curricular or extracurricular involvement relates to the purposes of higher education and the role involvement plays in helping college students achieve intended educational outcomes.

The purposes of higher education in the 21st century are broad and regarded somewhat differently among different sectors of industry, government, and society at large. Universities serve economic and social missions that sometimes operate in tandem and sometimes in opposition (McArthur, 2011). In a synthesis of literature on the aims of undergraduate education, Chan, Brown, and Ludlow (2014) concluded that, in general, the purpose of higher education is:

To create, advance, absorb, and disseminate knowledge through teaching and learning; help rapid industrialization of the economy; contribute to the development and improvement of education; and develop higher order cognitive and communicative skills in young people, such as, the ability to think logically, the capacity to challenge the status quo, and the desire to develop sophisticated values. (p.2)

The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) identified “liberal education” as a 21st century ideal that has endured from colonial American notions of higher education (AAC&U, 2011). According to AAC&U (2011) liberal education is:

An approach to learning that seeks to empower individuals and prepare them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change…It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, strong cross-disciplinary intellectual and practical skills (e.g., communication, analytical and problem-solving skills), and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings. (p.9)

Chan et al. (2014) also noted the centrality of professional and vocational preparation and the tension that agenda creates between higher education as a public good and a private
benefit.

On a macro level, colleges and universities educate the workforce for a robust economy and prepare citizens for democracy, though higher education has become increasingly regarded as a consumer good (Suspitsyna, 2010). This consumer dynamic is noteworthy, as institutions, in fierce competition with each other for tuition dollars, must provide the experience students and their families seek while remaining in congruence with their own core values and the larger societal expectations for intended college outcomes. Attitudes and beliefs of students and parents as consumers of higher education may conflict with one another, leaving the market value of extracurricular involvement in the collegiate experience to be debated. Some students may be attracted to a particular institution partly because of its involvement opportunities and the importance the student places on those opportunities in their personal, professional, and intellectual development. Others, however, may view extracurricular involvement as a distraction and a drain on fiscal and temporal resources. As Cooper et al. (1994) conceived of this question, “Is the cocurricular life of the student experience a frill or a necessity?” (p.98). Involvement opportunities should therefore be rooted in relevant learning outcomes that relate specifically to the mission of the institution and higher education in general.

Regarding the broad aims of higher education, the national dialogue has increased around accountability for student success, expansion of access, retention and graduation rates, and reduction of costs without commensurate increases in attention to learning outcomes that define successful completion of degrees (AAC&U, 2011). To that end, the AAC&U engaged educators, employers, and accreditors to develop a set of principled learning outcomes. These recommended outcomes are tied in measurable ways to high-impact practices in the university co-curriculum. Among the outcomes are intellectual
and practical skills, such as critical thinking, oral communication, teamwork and problem solving. Personal and social responsibility outcomes are also emphasized, including intercultural proficiency, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement (AAC&U, 2011). These fundamental learning outcomes of a 21st century undergraduate education – developed over time by consensus in a diverse cross-section of stakeholders – have been demonstrated to occur in extracurricular settings, making the role of these out-of-class experiences vital to holistic student development (Astin, 1996; Dugan, 2013; Gellin, 2003; Kuh, 2009). Calls for accountability from federal commissions, national associations (e.g., the Voluntary System of Accountability), and accrediting agencies have required that student engagement data be presented (Kuh, 2009). In *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006), a consortium of the leading professional associations in higher education and student affairs also affirmed the interdependency of colleges’ curricular and co-curricular offerings in helping students to achieve learning outcomes.

**Positive Influence of Co-Curricular Involvement**

The role of co-curricular involvement in facilitating the achievement of favorable educational outcomes for college students has been well-documented. In fact, this type of involvement has been linked via research to almost every positive outcome of college, including the enhancement of undergraduates’ cognitive and affective development (Astin, 1996; Gellin, 2003; Hernandez et al., 1999; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

According to Cooper et al. (1994), traditional aged college students “who are involved in co-curricular activities report more positive educational and social experiences overall, increased intellectual and leadership development, success in academic and career goals, and are more likely to graduate” (p.98). Baxter Magolda (1992) found in a qualitative study that co-curricular involvement brought students face to face with diversity and
independence and that the substantial challenge and support peers received from each other positively affected student development in ways not possible in the classroom environment. Consistent with research in elementary and secondary education, Fenzel and Hessler (2001) and Martinez, Johnson, and Jones (2015) even found that college students involved in certain extracurricular activities were less likely to engage in dangerous behaviors such as binge drinking and illicit drug usage.

Among the most well-researched specific co-curricular activities is participation in clubs or student organizations. Significant statistical correlations have been found between hours per week spent participating in student organizations and public speaking ability, interpersonal skills, and leadership skills (Astin, 1993). Foubert and Grainger (2006) noted findings from studies that employed the Student Development Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SLDTI), which showed that involvement in clubs and organizations correlates positively with several areas of psychosocial development. For those who assume leadership roles in student clubs, correlations have been found with higher levels of developing purpose, educational involvement, life management, and cultural participation (Cooper et al., 1994; Hernandez et al., 1999). Cooper et al. (1994) compared non-student organization members with members and organization leaders and found that members outscored non-members on almost every developmental scale used in the study. Further, leadership roles appeared to provide the opportunity to sustain and enhance a number of developmental skills. Likewise, Foubert and Grainger (2006) found statistically significant differences between uninvolved students and those attending, joining, or leading student organizations on every area where developmental differences emerged. Their study ultimately suggested that involvement in student organizations has strong association with establishing and clarifying purpose, educational involvement,
career planning, life management, and cultural participation. Flowers (2004) found that for African American students, these involvement experiences directly impacted gains in understanding arts and humanities, personal and social development, understanding science and technology, thinking and writing skills, and vocational preparation.

Evidence has been found to support previous claims that participation in clubs and organizations is related to increased skill development, personal growth, and satisfaction with the college experience and that this type of activity leads to greater involvement in the overall college experience (Abrahamowicz, 1988; Astin, 1993). According to Abrahamowicz (1988):

Not only do student organizations and related activities provide educational and developmental benefits generally unattainable in the classroom, there is evidence to indicate that they may be important factors in involving students with their colleges in a way that enhances retention. (p.237)

Strong connections have been demonstrated between involvement in clubs and developing purpose (Cooper et al., 1994; Foubert & Grainger, 2006). From his meta-analysis of the literature, the connection Gellin (2003) found between student organization involvement and gains in critical thinking was thought to be due to students using critical thinking as part of the process of researching, joining, becoming an accepted member of the group, and gaining leadership roles. Asian and African American students enrolled at predominately White institutions cited their participation in ethnic student organizations as critical to their adjustment to campus culture (Museus, 2008). Fischer (2007) also discovered that Hispanic, Asian, and African American students who were involved in clubs and organizations had significantly higher grades.

Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) examined trends of Black student involvement in campus organizations. Previous studies suggested that marginal participation by Black
students in traditional campus organizations was attributed to a cool or unwelcoming campus climate and a perception that traditional organizations were exclusive and insensitive to their social needs. Sutton and Kimbrough found that multicultural student organizations were the primary venue for involvement among Black students, though not in the proportions previously understood. Black students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) tended to be more involved in Black student groups, and students at predominantly Black institutions were more likely to be involved in student government and as orientation leaders. Every one of the participants in Harper’s (2006) phenomenological study of the role of peers for high-achieving African American males in PWIs mentioned clubs and activities, especially predominantly Black student organizations, as his means for accessing same-race peer support and affirmation. Harper indicated that these students’ campus involvements provided opportunities for them to interact with Black students with common interests and gain visibility on campus and were therefore instrumental in the success they experienced.

Other types of co-curricular involvement have been linked with positive outcomes for students. Astin (1984) initially found that those involved with student government, honors programs, ROTC, and undergraduate research were less likely to drop out and more likely to experience beneficial outcomes in comparison to their uninvolved peers. Intentional leadership development, which can occur on college campuses as a standalone activity or as an integrated dimension of another involvement experience, can also have advantageous outcomes for students. According to Cress et al. (2001):

Students who participated in leadership development efforts not only increased specific leadership skills (such as ability to set goals, to make decisions, and to use conflict resolution skills), but they also increased their commitment to developing leadership in others, becoming involved with community action programs, and promoting understanding across racial and ethnic groups. (p.25)
Empirical evidence for beneficial outcomes related to involvement in general and involvement in specific activities is abundant. Gellin (2003) found that maintaining several different involvements can also have positive results. In his words:

Students involved in a variety of activities acquire multiple points of view and perspectives that may encourage them to reevaluate their prior opinions of the world. This accumulation of experiences may contribute to gains in critical thinking and illustrates how undergraduates can benefit from their involvement in the overall college environment. (Gellin, 2003, p.754)

Hernandez et al. (1999) also noted that the impact of college on students does not result from a single experience but involves the cumulative influence of multiple, sustained, and mutually supporting experiences both in and out of the classroom.

Noting the growth of minority student enrollment in higher education, Fischer (2007) explored what it means for Black and Hispanic students to acclimate successfully to college and how their transitions may differ from those of their White and Asian counterparts. Given previous research indicating that first-generation, Black, and Hispanic students are more likely to leave college early, Fischer explored factors of students’ adjustment to college as a means of understanding why they leave. Among Fischer’s findings was reinforcement for all racial groups that formal and informal social ties (i.e., through extracurricular activity and friends, respectively) are related positively to satisfaction in college. Another key finding from the study was that failure to form sufficient formal social connections through campus involvement resulted in a significantly higher likelihood to leave college early for all racial groups except Whites. These formal social ties were found to be far more significant for the transition, satisfaction, academic achievement, and degree completion outcomes for Black and Hispanic students. Using Sanford’s premise of challenge and support as a guiding
framework, Strayhorn (2008a) analyzed CSEQ data and tested Tinto’s theory of retention as it applies specifically to African American males. Introducing positivist conclusions about African American males into a space largely occupied by constructivist understandings, Strayhorn found that supportive relationships were positively associated with educational outcomes. Among the implications for practice were suggestions for encouraging collaboration between academic and student affairs in support of both curricular and co-curricular learning environments.

**Other Constructs Related to Involvement and Engagement**

Scholarship on the constructs of integration, sense of belonging, and peer interaction provides valuable context for an understanding of involvement and engagement. A common thread through these constructs is the fundamental importance of a student building supportive relationships with other students. Co-curricular involvement and engagement are vehicles through which this environmental interaction occurs (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2009).

**Integration**

Often associated with involvement and engagement is the construct of integration – a much-used yet beleaguered term. “Integration” indicates the extent to which students share the attitudes and beliefs of their peers and faculty at the institution, as well as the extent to which students adhere to the structural rules and requirements of the institutional culture (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). The reciprocal interaction between the person and the environment is at the core of this theory, which was developed by Tinto to explain college drop-out behaviors. Tinto’s (1993) theory of integration was based on VanGennep’s three phases of rites of passage: separation from the past, transition, and incorporation. Each of these phases must be negotiated
successfully in order for integration to occur. Tinto’s (1993) research on retention indicated that students need integration into the institution’s formal and informal academic systems and social systems in order to ensure their persistence. Formal systems include academic performance and extracurricular activities. Informal systems include interactions with faculty and peers. Academic integration refers to students’ perceptions of experiences inside and outside of the classroom that enhance intellectual development. Social integration pertains to perceptions of peer, faculty, and staff interactions and involvement in co-curricular activities (Tinto, 1993). Co-curricular involvement facilitates social integration, creating a powerful link between the two constructs. As Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) noted, measurement of involvement in extracurricular activities is one of the most commonly used approaches to research on Tinto’s theory.

Tinto’s theory stated that students come to college with a number of background characteristics and goal commitments, both of which will influence performance and how students interact with and become integrated into the institution’s social and academic systems (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Levels of integration lead to “commitments” to the institution and to goals associated with graduation and their careers. As institutional and goal commitment increases, the student’s likelihood of persisting increases accordingly (Tinto, 1993). Milem and Berger (1997) found that academic and social integration were not valued by students equally in persistence decisions, stating that academic integration did not predict either institutional commitment or intent to reenroll, but social integration positively predicted both. They also noted the importance of student engagement within the first six to seven weeks of a semester as a predictor of persistence. However, the authors cautioned that the relationship between early involvement in traditional social activities and academic non-engagement “may indicate
that ‘going overboard’ with involvement in this area has a detrimental effect on students” (Milem & Berger, 1997, p.398). There is, most assuredly, a balance to be struck.

Critiques of Tinto’s theory of integration have been prevalent in the higher education literature (Bensimon, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992). The theory’s focus on non-minority, traditional-age populations, its orientation toward sociological issues, and its assumption that students must abandon their heritage and history in order to succeed in college are among the most frequently articulated challenges (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). As with foundational studies of student involvement, most studies using Tinto’s model have focused on non-minority, traditional-aged students who live on campus at four-year institutions. Some researchers have challenged the notion that students act as autonomous agents in persistence and retention and the implication that failure to persist is due to the student’s inability to integrate into existing communities (Rendón et al., 2000). Others have taken particular exception to the notion that students who identify with non-dominant social identities must assimilate in order to achieve social integration into college communities (Bensimon, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tierney, 1992). In response to the critiques, Tinto clarified that it is finding some form of community membership, not assimilation into the dominant culture that leads to successful outcomes (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

**Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging to a group or community is the psychological outcome of social integration, promoting overall wellness and personal motivation (Strayhorn, 2012; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Situated on Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs between physiological/safety needs and esteem/self-actualizing needs, belonging reflects the need to experience the love and acceptance of other people and feel affiliation with them. Co-
curricular involvement provides students with the opportunity to make connections with peers and to develop such affiliations. According to Maslow’s theory, a person’s more basic social needs must be met in order to function at higher levels. Belonging is therefore a prerequisite for building self-confidence and realizing one’s potential. Sense of belonging is a concept related to mental health that can be understood from physical, sociological, psychological, and spiritual perspectives (Hagerty et al., 1992). Hagerty et al. (1992) defined the psychological dimension of sense of belonging as “a person’s experience of being valued or important to an external referent and experiencing fit between self and that referent” (p. 174). A related concept is “mattering,” which is a person’s feeling that he or she is noticed, is thought of as important, and relies on others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). Schlossberg (1989) suggested the concept of marginality, defined as the feeling that one does not matter to others, as the antithesis of mattering. She found that experiences of marginality can result in feelings of depression and insecurity.

Adding depth to Tinto’s model, Hurtado and Carter (1997) tested a conceptual model of sense of belonging to examine how Latino students’ pre-college characteristics and collegiate experiences in their first two years of school contributed to their belonging in their third year. Operationalizing the concept of social integration as sense of belonging, Hurtado and Carter found that discussing academic material with peers outside of class, membership in religious organizations, and membership in social-community organizations were most associated with feelings of belonging.

The study of sense of belonging has been demonstrated to be particularly important to understanding the experiences of underrepresented populations (Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008b, 2009, 2012). As Hurtado and Carter (1997) stated,
“Perhaps what is most important is that integration can mean something completely different to student groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education” (p. 326). Researchers have demonstrated differences in feelings of sense of belonging experienced by at-risk and minority student populations. Ostrove and Long (2007) found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported lower levels of academic and social adjustment and sense of belonging in college. Particular challenges also exist for first-generation students, making it less likely for members of this subgroup to develop strong relationships with other students and to become involved on campus (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Scholars have measured the differential experiences of diverse student groups, and although specific results have varied, previous research has consistently supported the notion that student involvement contributes to a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012).

**Peer Interaction**

The essential element common to the constructs of student involvement, social integration, and sense of belonging is peer interaction. Dugan (2013) noted the significance of Newcomb’s early work on the influence of peer group interaction on student attitudes and Weidman’s research on peer normative pressure. Newcomb (1962) defined peer groups as “any set of two or more students whose relationships to one another are such as to exert influence upon them as individuals” (p. 489). Newcomb’s theory of peer interaction suggested that peer groups arise based on pre-college acquaintanceships, physical propinquity in the college environment, and/or similarities of attitudes and interests. Astin (1996) later validated the centrality of peer interaction, positing that the three most powerful forms of involvement are academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups. A student’s peer
group was also found by Astin (1993, 1996) and Terenzini et al. (1996) to be the strongest single source of influence on cognitive and affective development. Greater interaction with peers has been connected with more favorable outcomes, in part because peers have the capacity to involve each other more intensely (Astin, 1996; Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Peer interaction has also been connected empirically to students’ growth in interpersonal competence, cognitive complexity, moral development, openness to diversity, and humanitarianism (Hernandez et al., 1999; Kuh, 1995; Terenzini et al., 1996). Despite the great benefits of peer interaction that can occur for involved students, there are also potential perils, which will be explored in the following section.

**Problematic Dimensions of Involvement**

For all of its virtues, not all involvement is consistently associated with positive outcomes, particularly when that involvement reaches levels that may be considered excessive. In an effort to ground the phenomenon of over-involvement in the existing literature, this section presents a discussion of the ways in which scholars have found co-curricular involvement to have a negative or negligible influence on college outcomes. In the sections that follow, exploration of studies that have described various dimensions of over-involvement leads into an operational definition of the phenomenon.

**Negative or Negligible Influence of Co-Curricular Involvement**

Although much empirical evidence exists to demonstrate the benefits of involvement outside of class, some studies have reached conclusions that do not support the general assumptions that all involvement is good and that more is better. Flowers (2004) found that although student organization involvement experiences resulted in some benefits, those experiences had only a small and trivial direct influence on African American students’ academic and social developmental gains. Flowers’ results even
suggested that some student involvement experiences may negatively impact student
development due to the distraction from educational activities created by those
experiences. Contrary to many previous studies, Terenzini et al. (1996) did not
ultimately conclude that co-curricular involvement led to the educational outcomes
indicated in much of the extant literature. As the authors stated:

> Overall, the literature contains little consistent evidence suggesting that
> extracurricular involvement per se has a direct impact on students’ academic or
> intellectual development. It seems reasonable to suggest, however, that formal
> extracurricular activities may have an indirect effect on learning gains through the
> kinds of interpersonal contacts and interactions they create between students and
> faculty members and between students and their peers. (Terenzini et al., 1996,
p.155)

The importance of peer interaction resulting from co-curricular involvement cannot
be understated, but scholars may not always agree on whether the value of this type of
involvement is derived from the experience itself or from the social interaction that
occurs as a result of participating.

As noted above, “extracurricular” or “co-curricular” are terms that have been
defined both narrowly and broadly. Several studies have made connections between
examples of this type of involvement and negative outcomes. Strayhorn (2012) found
that more than 20 hours spent studying or working each week, working off-campus, and
being rejected for membership by a fraternity or sorority had negative implications for
students’ sense of belonging. Terenzini et al. (1996) also noted that, compared to their
peers, smaller gains on academic or cognitive growth measures occurred for those
involved students who belonged to a fraternity or sorority, played intercollegiate men’s
basketball or football, worked full-time, spent more hours socializing with friends, or had
fewer academic-related out-of-class experiences with faculty and other students. In their
review of the literature, Hayek et al. (2002) detailed a number of negative outcomes of participation in sororities and fraternities as “antithetical to the educational process” (p.643), including less exposure to different racial and ethnic backgrounds, less openness to diversity, lower average grades, negative effects on cognitive skills and gains, and higher frequency of incidents of academic dishonesty. Martin, Hevel, Asel, and Pascarella (2011) and Hevel, Martin, Weeden, and Pascarella (2015) found that sorority and fraternity participation had no effect, positive or negative, on educational outcomes for freshman and seniors, respectively. It should be noted that other studies have demonstrated positive outcomes for participation in Greek life (Astin, 1984), so this aspect of co-curricular involvement remains somewhat enigmatic for scholars examining its nuances. Astin (1984; 1993) recognized that some forms of involvement, including honors participation and athletic involvement, can have both positive and negative outcomes. These two specific examples were found to isolate students from peers, though other benefits accrued to those who participated (Astin, 1984).

Levine and Dean (2012) attributed some of the increases in multicultural tensions experienced by college students to the more recent trend of “mitosis” of student organizations. In their words:

The result, for example, is that student clubs kept getting smaller and more specialized. The undergraduate business and entrepreneurship club might divide into Asian, black, women’s, gay, Caribbean, Catholic, and accounting business clubs. In turn, the Asian business club might break into Chinese, Japanese, Southeast Asian, and Korean business clubs. In this manner, undergraduates continually reduced the number of students they defined as being like themselves. (Levine & Dean, 2012, p.96)

Hoffman (2002) showed that students of color “seem to face a more dichotomous involvement experience than do their White peers” (p.733), in that students of color were
found to be either highly involved or socially isolated, while White students fell more in the middle of a continuum. Hoffman’s study also discovered a stronger positive relationship between involvement and success measures of academic achievement and retention for students of color than for White students. Some types of involvement, such as those that promoted high levels of social interaction and involvement with school spirit, were found to have a negative relationship with satisfaction, but others, like leadership involvement, were found to be positive. Hoffman’s findings contribute to an understanding of the mixed value of certain types of involvement for students who do not align well with their university’s dominant culture.

One common thread in the critique of student involvement’s influence on educational outcomes is that time spent on activities unrelated or only marginally related to academic pursuits detracts from time spent directly on learning. Flowers (2004) speculated on the causes of negative outcomes for participants in his study, stating that their out-of-class and social experiences “may have served to distract students from engaging in more developmental activities (e.g., studying, writing, etc.)” (p.649). Anaya (1996) proposed a postulate to Astin’s theory stating, “involvement in activities not directed toward an educational outcome may diminish the outcome if it consumes time and energy that might otherwise be devoted to that outcome” (pp.619-620). The results of Anaya’s study ran contrary to previous studies, which had yielded positive associations between extracurricular involvement and learning. The idea that spending too much time on non-academic activities may diminish academic performance has prompted some scholars to examine specific thresholds in certain types of involvement.

A popular type of co-curricular activity involving many students is on-campus employment. Increasing numbers of students are employed, either on campus or off-
campus, and there is growing concern about the impact of working on the college experience, especially for students who work more than 15 to 20 hours per week (Furr & Elling, 2000; Lundberg, 2004). Astin (1984, 1993) heralded a moderate amount of part-time employment in an on-campus job as a facilitator of retention but cautioned that detrimental effects were evident for those working full-time off-campus because their work drew time and energy away from college. Lundberg (2004) tested this claim by examining CSEQ data from students who were employed off-campus for varying numbers of hours. She found that higher numbers of hours students worked off-campus (most significantly beyond 20) had a negative effect on their engagement with peers and faculty, less engagement with peers around nonacademic issues, less satisfaction with student relationships, and less frequency of interaction with faculty. However, Lundberg (2004) noted, “working hindered involvement, but did not have a negative effect on learning. This is contrary to Astin’s involvement theory (1984) and it is worthy of further investigation” (p.209). Gellin (2003) and Pascarella et al. (1994) concluded that on-campus employment provided a greater benefit than off-campus employment, but Furr and Elling (2000) found that students working more than 15 hours on campus experienced a negative impact on their cognitive development.

**Review of the Literature on Over-Involvement**

Among the suggestions for future research at the conclusion of Astin’s most frequently cited article introducing his student involvement theory were a series of thoughts and questions that help to frame the phenomenon of over-involvement. According to Astin (1984), “Although the theory of involvement generally holds that ‘more is better,’ there are probably limits beyond which increasing involvement ceases to produce desirable results and can even become counterproductive” (p.307). Astin (1984)
also posed two questions reflecting his thinking on the possibility of a phenomenon over-involvement:

What are the ideal upper limits for various forms of involvement? Are problems more likely to develop if the student is excessively involved in a single object (e.g., academic work) rather than in a variety of objects (e.g., academic work, part-time job, extracurricular activities, social activities, and political activities)? (p.307)

Although a few scholars have posed questions hinting at these directions for further research, the topic has remained relatively unexplored. Addressing this gap in the literature is one of the key motivations for this study.

Hernandez et al. (1999) also recognized the absence of research on over-involvement, as noted in their review of literature on the impact of involvement on student development and learning. Questions they posed provide structure for this study. In their words:

…none of the studies mentioned in this paper assessed the results of too much student involvement: at what point involvement has a negative effect on students’ academic and personal development? At what point does a student’s involvement with campus activities become so time-consuming that he or she cannot reflect on any new skills learned from the experiences he or she has had? Can quality of involvement and quality of experiences and relationships be overshadowed by a push for students to be too involved in activities? To what extent should student affairs educators be concerned with breadth versus depth, and quality versus quantity, of student involvement? These are intriguing questions which deserve more attention. More consideration should also be given to the consequences, if any, of a student affairs division encouraging too much student involvement. (p.193)

Despite occasional revelations in the literature that important insights could be gained from examining this phenomenon, few studies have been conducted or published on its specific implications. Important in the analysis of Hernandez et al. (1999) is the emphasis on both the role of student personnel administrators in influencing the environmental press for high levels of involvement and decisions made by the student to
engage in high levels of activity.

**Support for the Virtues of Moderate Involvement**

Huang and Chang (2004) responded to the calls for further research on over-involvement in their survey of 627 third-year undergraduates in Taiwan. The authors explored questions of optimal levels of involvement in academic work and student organizations in an effort to understand the relationship between these types of involvement and the possibility of an upper limit of participation relative to achievement of successful outcomes. They discovered a positive, linear correlation between academic and co-curricular involvement. That is, increases in co-curricular involvement did not result in decreases in academic involvement. According to Huang and Chang’s (2004) analysis, “This reduces the likelihood that excessive cocurricular involvement is negatively associated with academic involvement whereas moderate cocurricular involvement is positively associated with academic involvement” (p.402). The upper limit Astin (1984) suggested may exist was not found by Huang and Chang, as those students with the highest levels of academic and co-curricular involvement scored highest on all four of the study’s student growth measures (self-confidence and cognitive, communication, and interpersonal skills). Huang and Chang’s (2004) study reinforced that more involvement is better and strengthened arguments for the value of co-curricular involvement in cognitive and affective development, but their focus on students in Taiwan left questions about the applicability of their results to students in the U.S.

Researchers have previously examined differences among students at varying levels of co-curricular involvement. Moderate involvement has been linked with more favorable outcomes (Fitch, 1991; Hood et al., 1992). Fitch (1991) compared students based on their level of intensity in extracurricular involvement to find out if differences
existed in their interpersonal values. Fitch determined intensity level by examining participant scores on an Extracurricular Involvement Inventory (EII), which measured quantity and quality of extracurricular participation. By comparing means, Fitch divided respondents into categories of “lowly,” “moderately,” and “highly involved.” He then assessed responses to the Survey of Interpersonal Values (SIV) and found significant differences among the three groups for scales of independence, benevolence, and leadership. Highly and lowly involved students had more values in common with each other than with moderately involved students. According to Fitch (1991), “Students who are moderately involved in extracurricular activities display a pattern of interdependence, whereas those peripherally and heavily involved are motivated by egoistic desires” (p.24) or “those things that are of a self-serving nature” (p.28). Further, Fitch found that students in the highly involved group valued being in charge of others and having authority over others, while those in the moderately involved group came closest to Chickering’s concept of interdependence (understanding the value of both giving to and receiving from society and others). Fitch ultimately concluded that moderation may be the key in achieving balance and interdependence, but he questioned whether intensity of involvement was a result of personality type or a result of developmental changes that occur as individuals mature. Hood et al. (1992) also noted that moderate participation in non-academic activities did not affect academic outcomes negatively but that extensive involvement could require interventions on the part of the institution. Preliminary results from a study of the connections between alcohol consumption and different combinations of extracurricular activities indicated there could be a connection between heavy drinking and participation in four or more activities (Martinez et al., 2015).

Using SLDTI data from students at the beginning of their freshman year,
beginning of their sophomore year, and end of their senior year, Foubert and Grainger (2006) examined developmental differences among students who were not involved in clubs, those who only attended monthly club meetings, and students who held a leadership position in an organization. The authors explored the extent to which varying levels of involvement in student organizations coincided with student development along three of Chickering and Reisser’s vectors: moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, and establishing and clarifying purpose. The authors confirmed a hypothesis that students who occupied leadership roles would show greater development than those who were not members, those who had only attended a meeting, and those who were members but not leaders. Foubert and Grainger reached conclusions about psychosocial development but called for more research on the relationship between 10 hours or more of weekly involvement in student organizations and gains in critical thinking.

**Evidence of the Influence of Too Much Involvement**

In a qualitative study focused on African American students at PWIs, Guiffrida (2004) critiqued Astin’s theory by suggesting there may be an upper limit to the correlation between involvement and achievement. Guiffrida compared groups he called “actively involved students with high grades” and “overinvolved students with low grades,” both of which were made up of students devoting significant time and energy to African American culturally-based student organizations. Most germane to the present analysis is Guiffrida’s finding that the depth of involvement and level of commitment to the organization was reported by students in the overinvolved/low grades group to be a primary reason for their low academic performance. According to Guiffrida, “Placing so much emphasis on the benefits of group membership, these students sacrificed time on
academics to fulfill their organizational responsibilities” (p.94), and “…no matter how hard they worked, overinvolved students often felt unsatisfied with their accomplishments” (p.95). The notion that such dedication to and singular focus on a particular co-curricular activity (psychological energy) could constitute over-involvement, regardless of the number of hours spent, is an important contribution made by Guiffrida to this discourse.

One of the most commonly used measures of academic success in college is grade point average (GPA). Zacherman and Foubert (2014) explored whether or not successively higher numbers of hours of involvement per week correlated with GPAs. The authors analyzed a sample of 51,874 respondents to the 2006 nationwide administration of NSSE, comparing self-reports of grades with self-reports of weekly hours spent involved in co-curricular activities. The researchers found that students involved in 1 to 10 hours of activities per week had higher grades than other students. Interestingly, the grades of those involved in 11-30 hours of activities per week were not significantly different than those of students who were not involved at all. The concept of over-involvement was implicated in the finding that those involved in 30 or more hours of weekly activities reported lower grades than students in any other category. Zacherman and Foubert (2014) ultimately concluded that a light amount of involvement (1-10 hours) was beneficial to academic outcomes but that moderate to heavy involvement (11-30 hours) had no impact, and excessive involvement (30 hours or more) resulted in lower grades. Although these findings focus only on GPA and not other educational outcomes, the results suggest that previous assumptions about “the more involvement, the better the outcomes” may not hold true.

Nesloney (2013) examined connections between participation in Greek life and
feelings of both connectedness to the institution and being overwhelmed. Surveying 193 fraternity and sorority members at a large, southwestern university, Nesloney asked questions relating to time management, involvement in other activities, and the impact of the participants’ involvement in Greek life. She found that the most over-involved and overwhelmed Greek students tended to be women and those involved in more than one activity. The finding that females tend to be more stressed than males is consistent with research in several disciplines (Adlaf, Gliksman, Demers, & Newton-Taylor, 2001; Brougham, 2009; Hall, 2006). However, in their analysis of NSSE data correlating GPA with hours of involvement, Zacherman and Foubert (2014) found that male students with high levels of involvement had lower grades than female students at the same involvement levels. This finding led the authors to conclude that males are more susceptible to becoming overwhelmed by their involvement (Zacherman & Foubert, 2014). Gender-based differences in the way students experience over-involvement is well worth further exploration.

Many of the participants in Nesloney’s (2013) study indicated a desire for balance in their lives, wishing for more time to relax, sleep, or work out. These students were deeply involved in the activities of their fraternities and sororities and reported being overwhelmed as a result. Nesloney concluded that students need assistance in balancing their involvement and proposed interventions that could help Greek students regulate their involvement levels. Zacherman and Foubert (2014) also recommended that student affairs practitioners monitor the hours of involvement undertaken by their students, even suggesting that universities develop “involvement alert systems” (p.167) akin to those early warning protocols used by some colleges to spot academic struggles that may contribute to persistence decisions.
Gravelle (2010) conducted a phenomenological study on over-involvement and found that for her participants, a high level of involvement began at a young age as a result of encouragement from family and friends. Participation in multiple activities was found to relate to patterns established in earlier levels of education. The students in Gravelle’s (2010) study were selected through participation in a survey that identified the consistency of their experiences with the sampling criteria, which included full-time enrollment at the small, private university where the study took place, participation in at least four organizations, holding at least one leadership role in an organization, employment on- or off-campus, and devoting at least 10% of their time to student organizations. Phenomenological interviews with six students were conducted, yielding several themes considered to be essential to the phenomenon of over-involvement. Among the themes that emerged were that over-involvement was fostered by a strong intrinsic moral belief system, a support system that encouraged high levels of involvement, and a desire to effect change at the university. Participants reported placing a higher level of importance on their co-curricular activities than their coursework, claiming that their involvement defined them as individuals, allowed them to improve the university, and gave them a means for helping others. Although these students did not consider themselves to be “over-involved” – and, in fact, thought of themselves as having found balance – Gravelle noted that some of them had lost a friend, gotten very little sleep, felt overwhelmed, or missed classes because of their involvement.

Murray (2010) observed that the absence of solitude and the reward system universities create for highly involved students are two factors that combine to create and sustain a culture of busyness, perhaps resulting in a superficiality of outcomes. He argued that college administrators have an important role to play in (1) helping students
to discern their best opportunities for co-curricular involvement, (2) creating more meaningful opportunities for involvement, and (3) making space in students’ lives for solitude and reflection as ways of preventing “the descent of a culture of involvement into a culture of busyness” (Murray, 2010, p.15). To date, the influence of excessively high levels of involvement on college outcomes has received marginal attention from researchers. These studies indicate the presence of factors well worth exploring, so that the phenomenon of over-involvement can be understood and addressed appropriately through policy and practice.

Proposing an Operational Definition of Over-Involvement

Given that Astin (1984) described involvement in terms of both quantitative and qualitative measures, there may be multiple ways of conceiving of over-involvement. One way of defining over-involvement is by examining time on task. That is, over-involvement could be defined strictly in terms of hours spent each week on co-curricular activity, particularly in relation to central tendencies of the population in question. NSSE, which gathers data annually from thousands of students in the U.S. and Canada on self-reports of participation in educationally purposeful activities, provides a possible starting point for determining a statistics-based line of demarcation for over-involvement. Nearly 335,000 students from 568 colleges and universities of all classifications participated in the 2013 administration of NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). Nationally, in 2013, 4% of first year students and 4% of seniors reported their average weekly hours of co-curricular involvement to be greater than 20 (i.e., selecting categories of 21-25, 26-30, or >30). Relative to the percentage of students who reported being involved at all (68% of first year students and 56% of seniors), this standard could provide an appropriate starting point to develop a definition of over-
involvement.

The 20 hour per week threshold as a line of demarcation for determining which students may be over-involved is consistent with previous studies that have identified 20 hours as the maximum number of weekly hours a full-time enrolled student may spend working for pay before experiencing diminishing returns on their investment of time (Hood et al., 1992; Lundberg, 2004; Strayhorn, 2012). Beyond that point, there are negative implications for students’ sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), learning and persistence (Astin, 1984; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1998), and further co-curricular involvement (Lundberg, 2004), due mostly to the isolation from peers that results from employment and the lack of available hours to engage in other activities. Researchers have noted a difference between working on-campus and off-campus, explaining that off-campus employment draws time and energy away from vital peer and faculty interaction in college (Astin, 1984; Pascarella, et al., 1998). Scholars have also shown that moderate amounts of involvement (i.e., 15 hours or less) with on-campus employment are beneficial for achieving desired educational outcomes but that excessive amounts (i.e., 20 hours or more) either on or off campus can be detrimental to successful outcomes (Astin, 1984; Lundberg, 2004; Pascarella et al., 1998). With respect to employment, studies have shown that it is possible to be too involved.

Criteria identifying students as over-involved in Gravelle’s (2010) study included full-time enrollment, being a member of at least four organizations and an officer within at least one, having at least part-time employment, and devoting at least 10% of their time to student organization involvement. Depth (i.e., amount of physical and psychological energy) and breadth (i.e., number and diversity of activities) of campus involvement were both considered to be important for identifying participants who
exhibited the phenomenon, though a sampling criterion of participation in at least five distinct activities speaks to the importance the researcher placed on breadth in defining over-involvement. However, despite the assumption that simultaneous participation in multiple activities may characterize over-involvement more explicitly, there is not sufficient evidence in the extant literature to suggest that an optimal or critical number or range of activities exists. Quantifiable aspects of over-involvement can currently be tied empirically only to hours spent.

Stating explicit criteria, such as hours spent on certain tasks, to define over-involvement is important for identifying students who may be at risk, but case-specific qualitative criteria may also be considered in a holistic definition of the phenomenon. For example, if a student involved in more than 20 hours per week of co-curricular activities earns a high GPA, makes solid peer connections, exhibits good mental and physical health, and makes progress toward her degree, should she be considered too involved? Without exploring her particular circumstances, it may be difficult to know what challenges she may experience as a result of her high involvement. Nesloney (2013) defined over-involvement as “an excessive, or unusually great involvement which leads to someone feeling overwhelmed by the scope of his/her involvement” (p.8). For Nesloney, subjective feelings of being overwhelmed factored significantly into the operational definition of over-involvement. However, it should be noted that Nesloney designed a quantitative study in which survey participants rated their levels of feeling overwhelmed alongside reports of their level of involvement, sense of institutional connectedness, and other variables. The development of a definition based on insights gained from hypothesis testing is not consistent with the premise of qualitative inquiry. To fully define the phenomenon of over-involvement, more qualitative research on the
Although they identified participants and conducted their studies in different ways, both Nesloney (2013) and Gravelle (2010) concluded that too much extracurricular involvement poses a potential threat to persistence and may be connected with Millennial trends of busyness and desire for high levels of achievement. High levels of involvement, even those over 20 hours per week, may not necessarily be considered over-involvement unless the depth of the involvement prevents the student from achieving an educational outcome or a desired state of physical or mental health. For example, if a student’s stress, anxiety, sleeplessness, lower-than-desired grades, or inhibited degree progress can be attributed to her high levels of co-curricular involvement, she may be considered over-involved. Based on NSSE data representing student self-reports of time spent on co-curricular activities, 20 hours a week could serve as a starting point for identifying over-involvement. However, given the case-specific nature of students’ differing learning styles, social skills, and time management abilities, it is possible for one student to be involved in fewer hours of activities than the next yet still experience the involvement as an impediment. For the purposes of the present analysis, over-involvement can be defined as participation in co-curricular activities for students who experience involvement-related challenges to their achievement of positive outcomes. These challenges may be academic, social, health, or wellness-related. The growing concern about the prevalence of over-involvement can be further understood through an analysis of generational characteristics of today’s undergraduate students.

**Generational Context**

A generation can be defined as a cohort of individuals sharing birth years and significant life events (Westeman & Yamamura, 2007). Individuals within a generation
tend to share a cultural world-view shaped by historical and social events that occur during their developmental years (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007). Particularly notable events, or cultural influences, that take place during the formative years of childhood and adolescence have indelible influences on individuals and shape generational characteristics (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Howe and Strauss (2000) identified and synthesized many of the dominant characteristics shared by the majority of members of the generation of people born between 1982 and 2000 – a group known as “Millennials.” Millennials currently constitute the population of traditional-aged college students. Compared with previous generations, as a cohort, Millennials have exhibited characteristics that have branded their generation more affluent, busy, team-oriented, stressed, sheltered, confident, optimistic, and ethnically diverse (DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Perhaps more than any previous generation, Millennials have been pressured to achieve for their entire lives (Levine & Dean, 2012). As students, they have been pushed to study hard, avoid personal risks, and take full advantage of the opportunities surrounding them. The economy, political accountability for schools at every educational level, and increasing selectivity of colleges have all been factors in the evolution of a new educational milieu that drives students to achieve as much as they can, so that they can be fit for the next important opportunity (Levine & Dean, 2012; Pope, 2001).

Much has been written on the Millennial proclivity to prioritize breadth over depth and the ability to be engaged in multiple activities simultaneously (Levine & Dean, 2012; Wallis, 2006). Wallis (2006) noted that this multitasking generation is constantly stimulated, seldom taking time for needed reflection, and warned that “Habitual multitasking may condition their brain to an overexcited state, making it difficult to focus
even when they want to” (Wallis, 2006, p.5). Likewise, Small and Vorgan (2008) described the concept of continuous partial attention, in which Millennials’ minds can never truly focus on an individual task. In the authors’ words, “…when paying partial continuous attention, people may place their brains in a heightened state of stress. They no longer have time to reflect, contemplate, or make thoughtful decisions…they exist in a sense of constant crisis—on alert for a new contact or bit of exciting news or information at any moment” (Small & Vorgan, 2008, p.18). Although researchers noting the Millennial trends in fractured attention may first consider the multiple uses of technology to be the driver for this generation’s habitual multitasking, some of these behaviors have stemmed from parents who provided high expectations and an abundance of activities from which their children could learn (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008).

Levine and Dean (2012) made observations of Millennial patterns of involvement related to the recessed economy, based on their review of results from recent iterations of the Student Affairs Survey. The authors stated:

Student affairs officers described their students as more stressed and anxious, more academically driven, more frequently using psychological counseling services, and in a hurry to finish college. They were also more career focused, spent more time in the career counseling offices, and were eager for internships, particularly paid ones or anything else that would give them an edge in the job market. (p.26)

The connection between more hours spent working and fewer hours spent involved on campus was also attributed to economic factors experienced uniquely by students in this generation (Levine & Dean, 2012). However, students not committed to more than 10 hours a week of employment could be described a bit differently. As Levine and Dean (2012) concluded:

Today’s college students are engaged to an even larger degree than many of their
predecessors. They are acting more individually and less visibly. They have not locked themselves in their rooms to play video games, nor has the economy driven them away from helping others. This generation is quietly engaged, outside traditional social institutions and politics. (p.146)

Magolda and Ebben (2007) cautioned about the homogenization and essentialism that can result from viewing students through the lens of a generational theory. In their words, “Essentialized generational theory inadvertently reduces otherness, uniqueness, and singularity; reinforces stereotypes; and diverts attention away from those not in the dominant profile” (Magolda & Ebben, 2007, p.141). Authors of a letter report written for the Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education of the National Research Council of the National Academies (2002) concluded that popular writing on generational differences, such as Howe and Strauss’ *Millennials Rising*, was based on non-representative samples and selective data analysis. The Council cautioned that the notion of distinct generations with clear differences between them is not supported by social science research. Further, they advised that claims of large, dramatic differences among youth cohorts in different generations were unwarranted. In their analysis, high-quality longitudinal research documented a great deal of stability in youth attitudes and values, and the limited change that did occur did so gradually (Letter report, 2002).

Another notable critique of the use of generational theory applies fairly specifically to the popular stereotypes of Millennials. Many children were necessarily left out of the generalizations made by Howe and Strauss (2000), who focused their study on affluent school districts in Northern Virginia. Survey responses from 655 high school seniors (Class of 2000) and teachers in the school district resulted in a profile of Millennials representative of opinions of the privileged class, since standardized test scores for these students were above the national average. Not all students have affluent
parents who were highly involved in their lives and paid for them to take music lessons, participate in sports leagues, and engage in extracurricular school activities. The gap between students from affluent families and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be just as pronounced in co-curricular experiences and habits related to involvement as it is in academic achievement. Nevertheless, with these cautions duly noted, the use of a generational theory lens can contribute to an understanding of the shared experiences of students in this birth cohort, as it pertains to this study.

State of Millennial Student Emotional Health

Research suggests that students who self-report lower levels of emotional health upon college entry struggle to develop a sense of belonging on campus, and they are both less satisfied with their college experience and less likely to complete their degrees (Eagan et al., 2014). The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) reported from the results of its 2014 American Freshman Survey that college student emotional health was at its lowest point in 30 years (Eagan et al., 2014). When asked to compare their own emotional health to other people their age, only 50.7 percent of the first year students participating in CIRP’s 2014 survey reported that their emotional health was above average – the lowest response to that question since it was first asked in 1985 (Eagan et al., 2014). According to Douce and Keeling (2014), there has been a steady rise in students experiencing overwhelming levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as evidenced by panic attacks, feelings of hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts. These emotional health issues are detrimental to academic performance and success (Douce & Keeling, 2014), and with campus counseling centers reporting record numbers of visits and increased wait times of up to four weeks (Misner, 2014), it is clear that colleges are experiencing unprecedented challenges in assisting students in crisis.
Data from the 2013 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) II indicated that about one-third of college students in the U.S. had problems functioning because of depression in the last 12 months (American College Health Association, 2013). Almost half said they had felt overwhelming anxiety in the last year, 20 percent said they had seriously considered suicide in their lifetime, and 5.8 percent said they had attempted suicide. The NCHA survey also found that four of the top five “substantial obstacles to their academic success” were sleep difficulties, stress, anxiety, and depression. These mental and emotional health challenges are becoming more prevalent among Millennial college students, both upon matriculation and throughout their college careers (Eagan et al., 2014). As multiple college health assessments have indicated, these emotional health issues may develop in response to or become exacerbated by high-pressure home and school environments in which students live and work prior to entering college (American College Health Association, 2013; Eagan et al., 2014).

**Millennial High School Involvement**

Though pre-college experiences do not constitute the main focus area of this study, lifelong patterns of activity and early motivations for co-curricular involvement are explored to determine if themes emerge. High school student involvement in extracurricular activities is a major criterion for college acceptance. Although some educational researchers have suggested that these activities may detract from academic achievement, many more scholars have argued that participation in high school extracurricular activities is a positive force in a student’s life (Basinger-Fleischman, 2006; Brown, 2007; Chaput, Little, & Weiss, 2004; Finn, 2002; Marsh, 1992). Everson, Millsap, and Diones (1995, as cited in Brown, 2007) found that the level of a student’s participation in extracurricular activities was directly and positively related to Scholastic
Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. Everson et al. (1995) also found that participation in extracurricular activities benefited low socioeconomic and minority students more than it did other subgroups, a conclusion also reached by Marsh and Kleitman (2002). Brown (2007) examined the effect of high school involvement on academic achievement and established a category of “extensive participation” for those engaged in school-sponsored extracurricular activities for a period of at least 10 hours per week. The students in this upper level of involvement were found to have the highest academic achievement.

The connection between involvement and sense of belonging has been documented for adolescent students in the U.S. (Finn, 2002; Osterman, 2000). The importance of adolescent school belonging for academic and psychological outcomes is the topic of a growing body of research. In an integrative review, Osterman (2000) found that sense of belonging was related significantly to educational outcomes in: (a) the development of processes conducive to student success; (b) academic attitudes; (c) social and personal attitudes; (d) engagement and participation; and (e) academic achievement. Perhaps not surprisingly, children who experienced a greater sense of belonging were found to be more competent and autonomous and have higher levels of academic motivation. A child’s psychological sense of belonging was shown to have a connection with behaviors of increased classroom engagement, participation in school activities, and interactions with peers and teachers. Conversely, children who reported lower levels of sense of belonging were found to have experienced exclusion, lower academic achievement, diminished interest in school, and higher rates of attrition. Maladaptive behaviors in children result when the child’s need to belong has not been met (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000).

Osterman’s (2000) review revealed that sense of belonging is a fundamental
variable affecting students of all ages and across all levels of elementary and secondary education. The research Osterman reviewed also suggested that sense of belonging is strongly associated with student engagement. Consistent with Maslow’s (1943) belief in the importance of supportive environments for all human beings and Astin’s (1984, 1993) call for the development of thoughtful environments in which involvement is encouraged, Osterman argued that educational environments contribute directly to student involvement. The author therefore charged primary and secondary schools to create conditions that promote engagement.

A final contribution from the literature connecting Millennial generational context and what is known about involvement at the high school level comes from a qualitative study conducted by Stanford educational researcher Denise Clark Pope. Pope’s in-depth profiles of five high-achieving high school students created after a year of observation were the basis of her 2001 book entitled *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students*. Pope uncovered a culture of high-achieving students compromising their values and manipulating the system to get the grades they believed they needed for future success. More germane to this study, these students were sacrificing sleep, nutrition, and healthy relationships with friends and family, so that they could maintain a virtually untenable schedule of extracurricular activities and advanced classes, all in the name of making themselves competitive for college admissions. Instead of developing a genuine passion for learning and a sense of belonging, they were simply busy, in their own words, “doing school.” Stress, anxiety, eating disorders, and other mental health issues developed for these students as a result of the pressure they felt from their parents, their teachers, themselves, and the weight of the educational system in general (Pope, 2001). Another great cause
for concern was the tendency these students developed to mask their challenges and vulnerability from peers, parents, and teachers because of their fear of exposing any weakness.

Excerpted here are passages from Pope’s (2001) study, which were selected to frame the issue of over-involvement among Millennial students enrolling in college:

Eve is enrolled in so many advanced courses and serves on so many committees and clubs, she cannot possibly do everything she needs to do and still, as she puts it, “have a life.” Instead of seeking some sort of balance between work and play, as Kevin believes he does, Eve chooses to focus solely on her school commitments at the expense of an active social life, and often at the expense of her health, as well. (p.34)

If I quit something, I will consider myself a failure, and I really fear failure….Most of the time, I am really proud that I was able to withstand all the stress. It makes me a stronger person, and, like, next time I know I will be able to deal with it and not break down. I think high school really builds up your tolerance for stress. (p.35)

The findings of Pope’s study have served as the basis for a number of policy reviews and reforms among high school leaders and curriculum planners, as well as college admissions offices (Pope & Simon, 2005). Robbins (2006) chronicled a pattern of response to the high-pressure culture of the American educational system similar to Pope’s findings, which she called an “overachiever culture” (p.15). As Robbins (2006) noted, “Sometimes from as early as their toddler years, millions of students are raised to believe that there is nothing more important than success, and nothing that reflects that success more than admittance to a top-tier college” (p.14). When these highly-motivated Millennial students complete their high school odysseys and matriculate to colleges that offer even more co-curricular opportunities, they may be proceeding with established habits and expectations related to what they feel they need to do in order to be validated by the next achievement. Earning or keeping a scholarship, winning awards, getting an
internship, and making themselves marketable for graduate schools and employers are all goals that could simply replace undergraduate admission as the singular focus for these high-achieving students. An issue to be explored is whether students of this mindset are actually deriving the empirically demonstrated benefits of student engagement or if they are just “doing involvement” as a means to a competitive end. Students bring these pre-college behavioral “inputs” into the college environment, which can be analyzed from several theoretical vantage points.

**Environmental Theories**

An environmental lens, grounded in the framework of campus ecology, provides a valuable perspective from which to view the impact of involvement on students. Generally speaking, ecology is the concept used to represent the study of interactions between organisms and their environments (Banning, 1978). The concept has been adapted from biological principles to the study of human behavior, and from the study of human ecology, the campus ecology movement emerged in the 1970s as a perspective for how student affairs administrators support students in college (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). At the core of ecological theory is the mutual influence of the individual and the environment on each other (Ozaki & Renn, 2015). That is, individuals experience stimuli in the environment that either reinforce traits and behaviors or require adaptation, but individuals may also cause adaptations in the environment. Outcomes, such as learning and student success, are the product of these interactions (Renn & Reason, 2013). Strange and Banning (2001) expanded the campus ecological perspective by introducing four goals for the intentional design of campus environments: inclusion, safety, involvement, and community building. The authors argued that institutions have the ability to create and sustain environments that reflect these goals, resulting in a
humanistic approach to fostering student success. Strange and Banning (2001) also identified four different models or approaches to the analysis of student-environment interactions: physical, organizational, human aggregate, and constructed. Each features unique perspectives on the college environment useful in the data analysis for this study. The strengths and weaknesses of each environmental approach are briefly detailed below.

**Models of the Physical Environment**

Physical characteristics are often the most obvious features of a campus environment, but their influence on student behaviors is seldom as overt. The physical environment comprises everything from lighting, furniture, green spaces, artifacts, and architecture to placement of buildings, accessibility, cleanliness, and interior color schemes. Each of these attributes contributes to the behavior and attitudes of the people who encounter them. Physical environments collectively contribute to four important needs: community, territory, landscape, and wayfinding (Miller & Banning, 1992). Spaces designed to bring people together and facilitate social interaction contribute to feelings of community (Knell & Latta, 2005). Consideration of the need for students to claim a space as their own relate to feelings about territory and landscape, which are tied to notions of safety and belonging (Miller & Banning, 1992). Wayfinding, or spatial orientation, entails the use of cues from the physical environment to navigate it successfully. Those who may feel lost on campus may develop stress and anxiety, affecting their self-efficacy and other interactions within the environment (Arthur & Passini, 1992, as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001). Intentional design that facilitates the fulfillment of needs in these four areas is important to successful interactions with the physical environment.

A physical environmental approach to predicting, understanding, and facilitating
student interactions with the environment can be quite useful. The strength of the use of physical environmental perspectives for understanding the nature of student-environment interactions is its emphasis on the possibilism and probabilism of students either behaving in ways predicted by the design or adapting in unexpected ways. Much can be understood through an analysis of the ways the physical features of a campus hinder or promote learning (Strange & Banning, 2015). Those responsible for designing physical campus environments can communicate non-verbally about the values of the institution through the strategic consideration of comfort, safety, aesthetics, maintenance, and artifacts (Rullman & van den Kieboom, 2012). A singular focus on the physical environment, however, fails to incorporate many attitudinal and behavioral norms that have developed as a result of non-physical influences, like human characteristics and the verbal communication of institutional values. Exploration of only the physical dimension of environmental interactions may predict certain behaviors (Strange & Banning, 2015), but it ignores other powerful influences on the achievement or non-achievement of outcomes.

**Models of the Organizational Environment**

In order to justify its existence and meet its goals, any environment must maintain some degree of organization. The effectiveness of an environment is determined by the extent to which it meets the objectives it was designed to achieve. According to Strange and Banning (2001), “Organizations can be thought of as environments with a purpose” (p.61). Purposeful environments in higher education, like classrooms, departments, residence halls, and student organizations, are typically characterized by a set of organizational dimensions including complexity, centralization, formalization, stratification, production, and morale (Strange & Banning, 2015). Organizational
dimensions of an environment are determined through answers to questions like “What are the rules?” “How are decisions made?” “How will members be rewarded?” and “How do members feel about their involvement in the organization?” Whether viewed from a rational-bureaucratic perspective (formal functions and reporting lines), a collegial/political lens (representation, power, and persuasion), or a postconventional perspective (culture, values, tradition, and history), organizational environments are ultimately defined by the kinds of concerns raised by participants (Kuh, 1996).

Each of the structural dimensions mentioned above can lend valuable perspective to an overall understanding of the organizational environment. Strange and Banning (2015) outlined some of the most salient characteristics of each. The complexity of an organization is determined in part by the number of units and subunits that serve the organization’s purposes and how they are arranged to meet its objectives. Centralization refers to the way power is distributed, whether a highly centralized structure where few people have decision making authority or a decentralized structure in which formal power is shared. Formalization is a focus on the importance of rules and regulations, whether explicitly stated in formal documents or implicitly communicated verbally or symbolically. An organization’s level of formalization can be understood through the number and specificity of rules and the extent to which they are enforced. Stratification refers to the differential distribution of rewards, which reveals levels of status, privilege, and value among members. Production in an organization has to do with the organization’s outputs and is often measured against previous levels of production. Increases in the quantity of production often raise questions about the quality of the outputs. Finally, morale, which has connections to each of the other dimensions, refers to the satisfaction of members in an organized system. These characteristics can be
observed within environments of co-curricular activity, especially student organizations. An analysis of the organizational environment at a given institution should include observations of several of these dimensions and commentary on the tensions between the organizational environmental factors and individual members’ expectations.

**Models of the Human Aggregate Environment**

Holland (1973, as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001) and Moos (1976) stated that the dominant features of an environment are, in part, a function of the typical, collective characteristics of the individual people who inhabit it. These features can be demographic, like age, race, and gender, or they can be psychological, like interests, learning styles, and personality types. The human aggregate perspective of the campus environment focuses on these dominant characteristics and uses generalizations to predict the ways in which interactions occur. Strange and Banning (2001) described a number of taxonomic and typological models created by scholars over the last half century that used the human aggregate approach to define campus environments. Clark and Trow (1966, as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001) examined the intersection of students’ levels of identification with the institution and involvement with intellectual ideas to describe Academic, Nonconformist, Collegiate, and Vocational subcultures. Students in the Academic subculture identified strongly with both the institution and ideas, whereas Collegiate subculture students all but eschewed intellectual pursuits while showing a strong identification with the institution’s social opportunities and extracurricular activities. Clark and Trow’s subcultures are similar to the eight student types developed by Astin (1993) based on CIRP data (Scholar, Social Activist, Artists, Hedonists, Leaders, Status Strivers, Uncommitted Students, and No Type), each of which is based on different attitudes, behaviors, and values reported by students.
Based on the same human aggregate premise that environments are defined by the dominant characteristics of its inhabitants, Holland (1973, as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001) offered a different aggregate typology based on vocational interest personality types. Holland’s typology, as well as other personality and trait-based typologies like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Gallup StrengthsFinder, are often used as tools for predicting the interactions between students who do or do not share the dominant characteristics and the environment in which they live. These empirically-derived taxonomies and typologies can offer valuable insights, but they are only as strong as their ability to acknowledge the degrees of differentiation and consistency within them. Highly differentiated and consistent aggregates are those whose members are quite homogeneous, making their characteristics easily identifiable to people both within and outside of the group (Strange & Banning, 2015). Predictions about a person’s satisfaction, stability, and intention to remain within a certain environment are made based on the congruence between their attributes and the dominant characteristics of the aggregate. Highly differentiated environments are less likely to conform to the differing needs of an individual because they are reinforced by the homogeneity that attracted people into them in the first place (Strange, 2003). Likewise, highly focused individuals who exhibit strong identification with certain characteristics are less likely to change their behavior to fit with the environment. These individuals may leave to seek a more congruent environment, whereas a person with less differentiated personality and behavioral patterns may try to adapt (Strange & Banning, 2015).

The use of a human aggregate approach to examine student-environment interactions brings attention to both the benefits and perils of generalizing about populations. Scholars have emphasized the value of using taxonomies to devise
interventions and to understand the needs of the populations they describe (Astin, 1993; Dugan, 2013; Strange & Banning, 2015). Human aggregate models offer a great deal of descriptive and predictive value for helping to shape campus environments productively. However, Cegler (2012), Harper and Nichols (2008), Kuh (2015), and Magolda and Ebben (2007) cautioned about the hazards of essentializing populations, whether the generalizations are defined by sexual orientation, gender identity, race, or generation status. It can be perilous to rest on one’s conclusions about college students, given the constantly changing attributes of the general population and the thoughtful ways in which scholars challenge and test previous assumptions. Even so, some of the foundational literature has remarkable staying power. For example, Dugan (2013) made a compelling argument for the unique contributions his taxonomy for patterns of involvement can make to the student taxonomy literature, but his work bears resemblance to (and even borrowed terminology from) Clark and Trow’s nearly 60 year-old conclusions on peer group interactions. Nevertheless, the reliance of human aggregate approaches on positivist generalizations makes them susceptible to critique for their potential to gloss over the unique circumstances of individuals. Students who may escape tidy categorization or change over time have an important perspective to offer that may not be accounted for by statistics-based human aggregate models. A phenomenological approach to understanding the essence of an experience common to inhabitants of an environment gives a researcher more capacity to consider the nuances and refine any generalizations accordingly.

Models of the Constructed Environment

The environmental lens best suited to the qualitative nature of this study is the constructed model. According to Strange and Banning (2001), “Constructed
environments focus on the subjective views and experiences of participant observers, assuming that environments are understood best through the collective perceptions of the individuals within them” (p.86). The authors identified environmental press, social climate, and campus culture as socially constructed concepts that are predicated on consensual interpretations of campus environments. Students determine the norms through their collective perceptions, but then those perceptions shape the way those and future students behave in the environment. Constructed approaches to understanding student-environment interactions perhaps best reflect the ecological concept of mutual influence, and use of these approaches centers the lived experience of the student in the analysis.

Similar to notions of human aggregate perspectives, in which an environment is partly defined by the dominant characteristics of the people within it, socially constructed approaches focus on collective perceptions, which are more subjective than observable. Collective perceptions of the individuals within an environment characterize that environment and contribute to the environmental press. Press relates to environmental demands and norms determined by behavioral consensus (Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Strange & Banning, 2001). Baird (1988) noted the difference between presses based on objective inquiry (alpha press) and those based on individual interpretations (beta press). Beta presses can be further understood as private (i.e., those related to the unique view of an individual) or consensual (i.e., those related to estimations of experiential commonalities) (Baird, 1988). For example, an outside observer may conclude that an institution fosters student involvement by seeing that the university registers hundreds of student organizations (alpha press). A student may attribute her robust co-curricular involvement to the accessibility of activities that relate
specifically to her interests (private beta press), but she might also believe that most of her peers are just as involved due to the wide diversity of activities available (consensual beta press). Growth for students occurs when there is a match between their individual needs and the environmental press of the institution. Conversely, a lack of congruence between the needs of an individual and the perceived environmental press can inhibit growth (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Campus climate has been defined as “the current perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that define the institution and its members” (Bauer, 1998, p. 2) and, more descriptively, as “the overall ethos or atmosphere of a college campus mediated by the extent individuals feel a sense of safety, belonging, engagement within the environment, and value as members of a community” (Renn & Patton, 2010, p. 248). Climate is a product of the environment and individuals’ interactions within it, but it is a relatively flexible aspect of the environment (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015). Separate climates may exist for various subpopulations of students. Institutions can make concerted efforts to change the campus climate if members of a subpopulation feel that it is unwelcoming or unsupportive toward them. Renn and Reason (2013) described campus climate as a “felt” concept – that is, measured from the perspective of individuals, not necessarily by demographic and behavior-based data. For example, if university leaders use statistical reports of harassment or hate crimes to claim that the climate is positive for students of color, but students of color do not perceive it that way, the climate is not positive (Renn & Reason, 2013). Scholars have examined climate from the perspectives of race (Hurtado et al., 2007), sexual orientation (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010), gender identity (Hart & Fellabau, 2008), and student veteran status (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009), among many others. Collective, socially-constructed perceptions define
the campus climate, but the climate is not so deeply entrenched that it cannot be reshaped, either by intentional efforts to improve it or by incidents that may worsen it.

Weidman’s (1989) model of undergraduate socialization focused on the normative pressure put on students by campus environments to conform to widely accepted values. Normative pressure refers to the influence over attitudes, values, and personal goals exerted by reference groups in which the student has established close relationships. These reference groups can be peers at the institution, family, or groups with which the student is affiliated outside of the college environment (e.g., work or church). Weidman (1989) claimed that students who are heavily involved in co-curricular group experiences may be more likely than uninvolved students to form meaningful referent group relationships with peers and therefore be influenced by their normative values. This aspect of environmental press is related to suggestions scholars have made that institutional fit – the degree to which student inputs match with the dominant culture of the college they have chosen – has an influence on values and attitudes (Astin, 1984; Hoffman, 2002). The affective influence of peer interaction and institutional expectations for involvement on the experiences of participants in this phenomenological study are noteworthy areas of exploration.

Another concept of constructed environments relevant to the present analysis is that of campus culture, defined by Kuh and Hall (1993) as the “confluence of institutional history, campus traditions, and the values and assumptions that shape the character of a given college or university” (pp.1-2). Less easily changed or influenced than campus climate, campus culture incorporates more engrained, historical phenomena and represents deeply imbedded norms and beliefs that permeate every aspect of life at the university (Quaye et al., 2015). Artifacts, perspectives, values, and assumptions are four
levels of culture described by Kuh and Hall (1993). Physical, verbal, and behavioral artifacts are those landmarks, stories, events, and rituals that help to convey insider information about tradition and core values to members of the campus community. Perspectives, or socially shared norms and rules, define what is acceptable behavior in an institution and can be conveyed in many ways by students, staff, and faculty. For example, some institutions make important statements early and often about the centrality of social justice and leadership development to their mission or the importance of co-curricular engagement to their university experience. Values reflect the “espoused as well as enacted ideals of an institution” (Kuh & Hall, 1993, p.6) and are communicated pervasively and consistently through college catalogs and websites, mission statements, orientation messaging, and strategic planning documents. Finally, assumptions are more abstract elements of campus culture that indicate how people in the organization think about the nature of reality, time, space, human nature, and relationships (Schein, 1992, as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001). These subjective and socially constructed aspects of campus culture can be powerfully influential on students, and much can be learned by exploring the perspectives of the students themselves on how the culture has shaped them.

**Environmental Approaches to the Analysis of Student Involvement**

Institutions that value the influence of co-curricular involvement on learning and development begin to communicate their expectations even before students enroll. Pervasive messaging about co-curricular opportunities in admissions materials, reinforcement during orientation programs, and consistent connections made between involvement and career preparation are examples of concerted strategies used by universities to establish a campus climate supportive of involvement. By investing
resources into facilities, staffing, and programming that foster engagement, universities communicate to their students that campus involvement is an expected environmental interaction. Over time, students contribute to a flourishing campus culture of student engagement, and their collective understanding of the environmental press becomes a more powerful motivator for new students to become involved than anything the institution could contrive. Artifacts, perspectives, values, and assumptions all align to define the culture (Kuh & Hall, 1993). Institutions must then monitor perceptions of the climate to ensure that the norms do not privilege some students at the expense of others.

Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991) described environmental characteristics of “Involving Colleges” – the authors’ term for institutions that are able to create and maintain campus climates promoting educationally purposeful behavior among their students. Colleges successful in encouraging active student participation in campus life exhibited three primary factors: (1) a coherent philosophy that clarifies expectations for student behavior and guides campus policy; (2) a campus culture that encourages loyalty and student participation; and (3) people committed to student learning who champion the connection between co-curricular experiences and the goals of the institution. These Involving Colleges have an ethic of care at the core of their philosophies and values. They also have powerful cultural influences on student involvement, such as traditions, language, and symbols. The environmental perspective taken in the analysis of the institutions in the Involving Colleges study provides a valuable precedent for the application of such a theoretical lens in this study.

Each of the four approaches to studying college environments (physical, organizational, human aggregate, and constructed) has value in the process of considering the environmental influences on involvement behaviors. A combination of the four
approaches may result in the most complete understanding, but it is the constructed approach that prevails as the most independently useful model. The individual merits of the use of each environmental lens in an analysis of how students become and remain involved are identified below.

As was mentioned previously, physical environmental models contribute to four important student needs: community, territory, landscape, and wayfinding (Miller & Banning, 1992). The strategic placement and diligent maintenance of physical facilities that host co-curricular involvement activities, such as student unions, recreational centers, cultural centers, and residence hall lobbies can facilitate environmental interactions related to these needs. Conversely, sense of community can be stifled, territorial needs rendered unmet, and wayfinding made difficult by a lack of attention to the promotion of physical environments where co-curricular involvement should occur. Campuses that create inviting physical spaces for peer interaction and own their end of the engagement agreement by investing in the prevention of physical barriers to involvement are communicating in symbolic and functional ways about the value they place on out-of-class learning and development. A physical model, however, is insufficient on its own for explaining involvement behaviors. Certainly, powerful involvement experiences can occur in spite of lackluster facilities if aspects of the constructed environment, such as environmental press and campus culture, are influential enough to counter unmet physical needs.

Use of an organizational environmental lens can be insightful from the perspective of both the larger institution and the smaller groups in which students are involved. The compatibility of a student with the organizational environment is an important dynamic to examine when identifying sources of stress or strain. Where an
educational organization falls on a continuum of static (rigid) to dynamic (flexible) is noteworthy. According to Strange and Banning (2001):

…powerful developmental environments, whether in the classroom, student organization meeting, or residence hall association, are those that exhibit characteristics of dynamic organizations, where individual differences are appreciated, participation is expected, interactions are personal rather than functional, and risk-taking is encouraged. (p.74)

Students interested in exploring their identities through their co-curricular involvement and seeking the sense of belonging that typifies supportive environments may experience dissonance in organizations with fixed norms that do not allow for such exploration. As a result, they may struggle to maintain their membership or withdraw from the environment altogether.

Stratification and production are two organizational dimensions that could be particularly useful to an application of an organizational environmental model to the study of student involvement and over-involvement. Status for student leaders involved in organizations and initiatives valued more overtly by the university administration is often realized through the conferral of certain benefits unavailable to students with less status. This stratification could mean that students involved in certain activities may be more likely to receive award recognition, invitations to represent the university on trips, or inclusion in prestigious meetings and other settings. Likewise, student organizations in closer alignment with institutional priorities may enjoy campus office space, extra funding, or other additional resources. The perks available to those at higher levels of status in stratified systems may serve as powerful incentives for students to add more involvement to their agendas. Involvement-related challenges stemming from an institution privileging certain students or organizations over others may be unintentional,
but awareness of the influence of this environmental factor may serve to rectify some of the potential issues related to this dynamic. Status can be a compelling motivator for ambitious Millennial students looking for any advantage on their way to the next achievement (Pope, 2001; Robbins, 2006).

As Strange and Banning (2015) noted, the value of an organization is assessed by what it produces. Given the competition for talented students and calls for accountability in higher education (Kuh, 2009), production is an organizational structural dynamic perhaps more important now than it has ever been. Institutions need to produce “more than last year” to assert their progress in the marketplace, attract additional resources, and create a sense of accomplishment among their members. The university’s need to quantify production results in more environmental press for the importance of certain activities. For example, if the organization must demonstrate growth in student service to the community, participation in leadership development initiatives, and establishment of intimate learning communities through increases in the number of student organizations, more fiscal, human, and marketing resources may be directed to the promotion of those activities. The result of such a focus could be much stronger messaging to students about institutional expectations for co-curricular involvement. Production, therefore, drives the complexity, formalization, stratification, and morale of the organization (Strange & Banning, 2015). Students attracted to the institution’s emphasis on a culture of engagement may thrive within it, while others are repelled by it. Viewing the environment from an organizational perspective can inform an understanding of the more complex human aggregate and constructed environmental approaches.

Human aggregate models are even more useful than physical and organizational models to the study of environmental interactions with student involvement. Whether
applying existing, empirically-derived taxonomies and typologies, such as those developed by Clark and Trow (1966, as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001), Astin (1993), or Dugan (2013) or conceiving of aggregates in more institution-specific ways, human aggregate models identify behavioral trends that can illuminate patterns of student involvement. Typologies are useful for determining where to direct educational interventions and how to tailor those interventions to the unique needs of various student populations (Astin, 1993). Categorical descriptors of involved students, like Clark and Trow’s Collegiate subculture and Astin’s Leaders and Status Strivers, help compare and contrast common characteristics of those who engage in co-curricular activities with those who prioritize scholarship or are disengaged altogether.

Dugan (2013) developed a student involvement taxonomy for the specific purpose of providing more explicit guidance for scholars and practitioners evaluating the relative value of different types of co-curricular experiences. The author identified an absence of “middle-of-the-road” approaches to the study of involvement in the extant literature, finding instead that researchers have applied micro-level (impact of specific activities), macro-level (any co-curricular participation), or scattershot (randomly curated sets of activities) approaches. Through his analysis of Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) data, Dugan established eight latent classes of involved students, including Affinity Group Affiliates, Identity and Expression Leaders, Academic Careerists, Cultural Collegiates, Athletes, Social Recreators, Recreational Academics, and Social Collegiates. Dugan’s study is useful for understanding how students are involved and who typically populates various peer reference groups. However, even Dugan’s thorough statistical analysis on the specific topic of co-curricular involvement does not account for subjective perceptions and changes over time, as his taxonomy was based only on
involvement experiences of seniors. Among the directions Dugan proposed for future research was the suggestion that qualitative replication of his model could result in deeper understanding of involvement patterns. Aggregate models have provided important insights about involvement behaviors and peer group interactions, but they generally lack the ability to incorporate the subjective perceptions necessary to gain a full understanding of environmental interactions. The concept of taking a qualitative approach to understand the essence of a common experience bears resemblance to a human aggregate model, but it enables the researcher to incorporate the distinct nuances of individual experiences into the analysis.

Gaining an understanding of the ways and extent to which students perceive the environmental press to get involved is important for institutions as they make decisions about resource allocation. Much of this knowledge can come from organizational and aggregate approaches, but a complete understanding must incorporate first-hand accounts of student perceptions, based on their lived experiences. Not every student experiences involvement in the same way, and even though it is not possible to ask every student personally about their perceptions, attempts to gather qualitative information from a diverse group of informants can provide insights that aggregated generalizations may not yield. Ultimately, institutions must help students find a match between their individual needs and the environmental press if growth is to occur (Strange & Banning, 2015). An understanding of the socially constructed environment is crucial to this mission. An environmental approach mostly characterized by a constructed model but incorporating strengths of each of the other three can provide a complete picture of student perceptions about their involvement – and over-involvement – experiences. An understanding of theories related to motivation is also useful to an analysis of involvement behaviors.
Motivation Theories

Many modern studies of motivation contain elements of one of the most cited motivation theories, Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. Maslow posited that humans must first satisfy their basic physiological needs for food and water before seeking safety and shelter and ultimately pursuing more complex social and cognitive motives such as belonging, respect, and self-actualization. Subsequent theories of motivation grew from studies in the workplace, including McClelland’s (1953) Acquired Needs Theory, which stated that all people have the need for achievement, affiliation, and power, though individuals possess more or less of each than others. According to McClelland, individuals are concerned with belonging and performing a valuable task within a group. Once that task has been mastered (achievement), individuals then seek to improve their standing within the group (affiliation). Once affiliated, exerting influence (power) over the group is a reflection of the human need to make a significant impact on the surrounding environment. Priorities shift over time, indicating a constant state of change in motivation levels and attitudes (McClelland, 1953).

Richard deCharms (1968) advanced a motivation theory based on personal causation, stating that “man is the origin of his behavior” (p.272). deCharms stated that personal priorities are a much stronger source of motivation than external forces and that more powerful motivation results from choice and the state of being free (origin) than from being under the control of another (pawn). This theory of personal causation or intrinsic motivation has influenced many contemporary theories, including Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory. At the core of this theory are three motivational processes located along a continuum of self-determination: intrinsic and extrinsic, which are self-determined and based on internal and external loci of control, respectively, and
amotivation, which is the absence of internal or external motivation. A central concept of this theoretical perspective is that the source of motivation comes from either being genuinely interested in a topic (intrinsic) or by striving to achieve a required goal (extrinsic). With continued research, Deci and Ryan (2000) showed that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were not mutually exclusive. That is, an individual may possess both and use each when appropriate. Self-determination gained general acceptance as a motivational theory that could be applied in many different settings, particularly in educational environments (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Darner, 2009) and remains one of the most useful theoretical constructs for describing motivation behavior. The theory’s application to the present study is important in the analysis of why students choose to engage in a level of activity that may result in harmful outcomes.

**Summary of the Literature**

For the last forty years, one of the most researched dimensions of the impact of college on student development pertains to the influence of involvement, engagement, and social integration. Astin (1984) posited that the more a student invests physical and psychological energy into the college experience, the more favorable that student’s educational outcomes will be. Scholars have tested almost every conceivable dimension of the effects of involvement on educational outcomes, including the exploration of differential influences based on race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, institutional setting, and various types of activities. Although some scholars have found negative or negligible effects, the overwhelming majority of studies on co-curricular involvement have supported theories connecting participation in college activities with academic achievement, persistence, development of important social skills, and development of a sense of belonging. However, Astin allowed for the possibility that an upper limit may
exist for productive levels of involvement, but relatively few studies have focused on this phenomenon. This chapter identified and addressed this gap in the existing literature as a justification for the study.

The term “over-involvement” implies an excessive amount that contributes to challenges experienced by the student in the achievement of positive outcomes. That aspect of the phenomenon may be partially or entirely perceptual and case-specific, depending on the perspective of the involved student. An aggregate-based typology may not capture the nuances of the phenomenon. That said, qualitative inquiry aligned with a constructed environmental approach is necessary to gain a more complete understanding. A socially constructed approach to the study of over-involvement is appropriate because of the subjective and perceptual nature of the phenomenon itself. The centrality of student stories to an understanding of over-involvement is an important aspect of the analysis. Physical, organizational, and human aggregate models can describe over-involvement interactions to a certain extent, but a constructed approach provides the best opportunity for the phenomenon to be fully understood. Much like a room whose temperature can be measured in physical terms by degrees Fahrenheit but experienced differently as cold or hot by two different people within the environment, over-involvement has a subjective aspect that may not be sufficiently defined by statistical analysis. A nuanced understanding of how one student with similar co-curricular involvement to another perceives herself as over-involved, while her counterpart experiences no involvement-related challenges, may be possible only through qualitative study meant to explore the students’ perceptions.

Research that has been conducted on the phenomenon of over-involvement has shown connections between high levels of involvement and stress, sleep deprivation,
strained relationships, feelings of being overwhelmed (Gravelle, 2010; Nesloney, 2013), and lower GPAs (Zacherman & Foubert, 2014). These findings, which need to be substantiated by future studies, seem to connect with scholars’ observations of highly-involved Millennial high school students (Pope, 2001). By using a theoretical framework based on the scholarship on student involvement, engagement, social integration, sense of belonging, models of college environments, and self-determination, this study was guided by research questions related to motivations for high levels of involvement, the meaning of over-involvement, and the influence of over-involvement on students’ lives.
Chapter 3

Research Design and Methodology

This study contributes to the broader area of research on undergraduate college student co-curricular involvement by exploring the phenomenon of over-involvement. Most previous studies on student involvement and student engagement have used statistics to show the relationship between a student’s level of involvement and achievement of positive educational outcomes (Astin, 1984; Cooper et al., 1994; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Kuh, 2009). Few published studies have been conducted to explore the questions Astin (1984) posed for future research regarding the point beyond which student involvement may be counterproductive to the achievement of successful educational outcomes. This chapter begins with a statement of the research questions under consideration, then moves to a discussion of the interpretivist paradigm used for the study and an explanation of the rationale for phenomenology as the methodological approach. Details of the design of the study, including descriptions of the methods of sampling, data collection, and data analysis are followed by a discussion of ethical considerations and trustworthiness and a statement on bracketing.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The research questions for this study came from a place of concern for students who buy into institutional messaging about the importance of involvement but who may be making decisions about that involvement without regard for their own well-being. Despite the existence of survey data and quantitative studies examining time on task and quality of effort, the questions I had could not be addressed adequately through
aggregated generalizations. Without considering the ways in which each person constructs realities in these environments, an understanding would be quite limited. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the essence of over-involvement experienced by undergraduate students who are deeply or broadly engaged in their university’s co-curricular or extracurricular culture. Three research questions provided the basic framework for the study and the detailed questions selected for use in the initial semi-structured interviews: (1) What does it mean to be over-involved in college?; (2) How are students motivated to become deeply or broadly involved in co-curricular or extracurricular activities in college?; and (3) How do students describe the impact of high levels of involvement on various aspects of their lives? These questions are meant to reflect interpretivist epistemological assumptions, and they suggest a fit with the phenomenological methodology chosen for the study.

**Situating the Study within an Interpretivist Paradigm**

Discussion of the research design and methodology employed in this study must begin with some explanation of the paradigmatic assumptions used and their fit with the research questions under consideration. Generally speaking, qualitative research is a situated activity that puts the observer in the naturalistic environment and more clearly captures the complexity of behaviors and experiences (Jones et al., 2014). Identifying themes and developing a genuine understanding of a particular phenomenon are key characteristics of qualitative research. A qualitative approach is context-dependent, inductive, and richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998). Subjectivity of the researcher is not only inevitable, it is also an important aspect of the research process that helps define qualitative inquiry (Jones, et al., 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Given the intention of the study to describe the phenomenon of over-involvement in undergraduate college
students, a qualitative approach is necessary in order to illuminate the complexity of the lived experience of the study participants.

Glesne (2011) defined a paradigm as “a framework or philosophy of science that makes assumptions about the nature of reality and truth, the kinds of questions to explore, and how to go about doing so” (p.5). The research paradigm utilized for the study is one of interpretivism, a term Creswell (2013) used interchangeably with the slightly narrower notion of social constructivism. Designed to understand the world, the purpose of interpretivism is to contextualize and comprehend (Creswell, 2013). Researchers who situate themselves within this paradigm use methodological strategies such as observation and interviews in their efforts to understand as much as possible about the lived experiences of those with whom they research. The goal of an interpretivist researcher is to identify patterns of meaning and describe findings as authentically as possible.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) identified four philosophical assumptions of a qualitative research paradigm: ontological (the nature of reality), epistemological (the nature of knowledge), axiological (researcher positionality), and methodological (how to discover what can be known). For those operating from an interpretivist paradigm, realities are a combination of interactions among individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). This ontological relativism underscores the assumption that multiple realities exist based on people’s experiences. The understanding that reality is socially constructed serves as a key underlying assumption in the interpretivist paradigm (Jones et al., 2014). The epistemological view is transactional in nature, and assumptions in an interpretivist research paradigm focus on the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Reality is assembled through layered interactions and is constantly renegotiated, owing much to the rapport built between the participants and the researcher (Glesne, 2011). The
axiological assumption in the interpretivist paradigm refers to the idea that researchers identify their positionality and bring reflections on their own values and beliefs to their interpretive analysis (Creswell, 2013). Finally, the methodology used in qualitative research is inductive, and a number of established methodological approaches may suit an interpretivist paradigm. A detailed description of the phenomenological methodology proposed for this study can be found later in this chapter.

The use of an interpretivist epistemological paradigm enabled me to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of over-involved undergraduate students through interpretation of their first-hand accounts. Through open-ended questions meant to explore these students’ motivations, perceptions about their own balance, and consequences for keeping such a busy schedule, I provided a forum for the participants to describe their reality and construct the meaning of their experience through our discussion. As I compared their responses and identified meaning units from the accounts they shared, I co-constructed meaning by incorporating my own interpretation. This interpretivist/social constructivist worldview is a natural fit with the phenomenological methodological approach I employed, and both the purpose statement and research questions developed to begin the study are a reflection of the desire to make sense of the meaning the participants have about their involvement.

The development of research questions is a continuous process in qualitative research. Initial questions are grounded in previous research, but the researcher must also remain receptive to the opportunity to follow participants down emergent paths. Each initial research question in the study was intended to illuminate the essence of over-involvement by addressing a different aspect of the phenomenon – students’ motivations for getting started and expanding their involvement, the meaning they ascribe to the
experience of being deeply involved, and the influence they feel their high levels of involvement has on their lives. All three questions relied on individual stories being shared as a way of understanding the phenomenon on which they are based. The paradigmatic assumptions of interpretivism provided a framework for all aspects of the research design.

**Methodology – Why Phenomenology?**

This study employs the research methodology of phenomenology. Phenomenology is concerned with reducing the experiences a number of individuals have with a certain phenomenon to “a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2013, p.76). Phrased another way, phenomenology is “the study of the lived experiences of persons” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58) with the objective of getting “at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience” (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). In the study of a phenomenon, the primary focus is on the significance it holds for the participant (Moustakas, 1994). This type of research centers on understanding a shared experience (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). From a phenomenological description, a reader should be able to determine what it is like to experience the phenomenon (Jones et al., 2014). This approach to research draws heavily upon a philosophical foundation, and it has been adapted over time to help scholars in the social sciences gain a deeper understanding of various human experiences.

**Phenomenology Explored**

Historically speaking, the advancement of the philosophy of phenomenology is often attributed to the German philosopher Edmund Husserl during the late 19th century (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Husserl attempted to develop a universal method of philosophy, devoid of presuppositions, by focusing purely on phenomena and describing
them. Husserl’s concern was with the lifeworld – that is, “the world as it is lived, not the world as it is measured, transformed, represented, correlated, categorized, compared, and broken down” (Vagle, 2014, p.22). This philosophical concept stood in stark contrast with the Cartesian subject-object dualism – in which consciousness and meaning could only exist in the mind, separate from the world – that had dominated Western philosophy (Sokolowski, 2000). Husserl developed a transcendental approach, whose “most basic philosophical assumption was that we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken sensory experience of phenomena” (Patton, 1990, p. 68). Moustakas (1994) explained the transcendental approach as that “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (p.34). Central to Husserl’s approach was the attitude of phenomenological reduction, also known as bracketing, which compels the researcher to remain only within the raw data and to remove any presuppositions or interpretive analysis (Vagle, 2014). Husserl’s transcendental approach to phenomenology was critiqued and expanded upon by his students and other philosophers, and ultimately a number of different schools of phenomenological thought emerged (Crotty, 1998, as cited in Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

Husserl’s student, Martin Heidegger, rejected the transcendental imperative to bracket oneself from the phenomenon being explored and argued that one cannot separate the research from his own being in the world (Vagle, 2014). Heidegger’s philosophy of hermeneutic phenomenology provides the basis for the approach taken in much contemporary educational research. Hermeneutics is generally defined as the “art, theory, and philosophy of interpreting the meaning of an object” (Schwandt, 2007, p.136), specifically the printed word. Hermeneutic phenomenology diverges from Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology because of its explicitly interpretive turn.
Heidegger’s hermeneutic paradigm, espoused and expanded by his student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, focused on the study of text and language as the means by which the question of being in the world can be unfolded (Schwandt, 2007). Etymology, or the study of word origins, may also factor into a hermeneutic approach. “Phenomenology” itself, which is a compound of the Greek words *phainomenon* and *logos*, “signifies the activity of giving an account, giving a *logos*, of various phenomena, of the various ways in which things can appear” (Sokolowski, 2000, p.13). Descriptions are an essential aspect of the hermeneutic approach, and Heidegger asserted that all descriptions are inescapably interpretive. Although hermeneutic phenomenology calls for bracketing and the phenomenological reduction, an important distinction is that hermeneutics calls for the bracketing of pre-suppositions, not of interpretations (van Manen, 1997). An interpretive analysis of the textual transcripts of participant interviews is essential to this study, as the ultimate objective of the study is to describe the universal essence of the participants’ lived experience.

The philosophical tradition of phenomenology gave rise to such related philosophical movements as poststructuralism, existentialism, feminism, and postmodernism, and major figures like Foucault and Derrida found impetus for their writings in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, and other phenomenologists (van Manen, 1997). More contemporary philosophers and phenomenologists, such as Merleau-Ponty, Giorgi, Moustakas, and van Manen have adapted concepts from the foundational schools of transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology to develop modified approaches that aid scholars and researchers in conceiving of the complexities of phenomenological inquiry. As Vagle (2014) stated, “Some may lament the fact that there is not a single, crystal clear, and unified way to craft phenomenological research” (p.52), but the
existence of multiple philosophical schools of thought and adapted approaches gives phenomenological researchers a great deal of flexibility to choose methodologies that help them to understand the phenomenon under investigation.

**Hallmarks of Phenomenology**

The first defining feature of phenomenology is its emphasis on a single concept or idea to be explored (Creswell, 2013), such as fear, professionalism, or love, as it is experienced by a group of individuals. Through interviews with people who have experienced the phenomenon and analysis of both what the individuals experienced and how they experienced it, phenomenologists ultimately attempt to describe the essence of the phenomenon. An important phenomenological principle is that surfacing the essence of an experience means bringing forth the meaning of the experience itself, not just a conceptualization of it (Heidegger, 1996; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). This is a daunting task for the researcher but one of great methodological merit if undertaken thoughtfully. Max van Manen (1990) acknowledged the primary tension in attempting to shed light on a phenomenon *as we find it*. In his words, “To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: To construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (van Manen, 1990, p.18). Efforts to understand the world around are bound-up in language. With a hermeneutic approach, the phenomenologist turns and returns to close readings and interpretations of texts so as to generate more robust interpretations of others’ attempts to make meaning of the world (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Vagle, 2014).

Phenomenological methodology as a social science approach uses naturalistic inquiry to “inductively and holistically understand human experience in context settings”
Inherent in this methodology is the value placed on the study of the phenomenon within its natural environment and the requirement that the research interaction takes place with the entity-in-context for as complete an understanding as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Phenomenologists do not engage in the work of mathematicians and scientists in the positivist tradition, who seek to explain more precisely how things work. Instead, the phenomenologist aspires to slow down and illuminate aspects of the lived world. A hallmark of phenomenological research is that the “unit of analysis” is the phenomenon itself, not the individual who experiences it (Vagle, 2014).

Also among the characteristics of a phenomenological approach are the role of the researcher as the data collection instrument and a reliance on a qualitative methodology in order to capture the larger embodiment of the individual lived experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Moustakas (1994), “The method of reflection that occurs throughout the phenomenological approach provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience” (p. 47). The reflexive, inductive data analysis typical of a phenomenological approach provides a better understanding of how influences interact, and it illuminates the interrelated realities of both the researcher and the participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Phenomenology therefore validates the assumption that “the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 1990, p. 78). As the data collection instrument, the phenomenological researcher does have a responsibility to acknowledge positionality and to make efforts to bracket, or set aside pre-understandings. Bracketing, also known as phenomenological reduction or what Husserl called epoché, is a hallmark of phenomenological research, but as
mentioned above, the transcendental and hermeneutical approaches treat this concept slightly differently. The transcendental approach calls for removal of the researcher’s personal experiences, so that a fresh perspective can be described. The hermeneutical approach calls for the containment of presuppositions but does not prohibit, and in fact relies upon, the researcher’s interpretive turn.

Because the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the essence of the over-involved student experience, the research design uses a phenomenological methodological approach. To understand “over-involvement,” it is important to understand the common experiences of several students who have experienced it. Although a narrative or case study methodology could also provide insightful descriptions of the lived experiences of these students, the analysis of a phenomenology gets at those aspects of the phenomenon shared by all the participants. I want to know, “What does it mean to be over-involved?” This type of question is intended “to find out what a certain phenomenon means and how it is experienced” (van Manen, 1997, p. 29). I sought the interpretations of those undergraduate students experiencing college while heavily involved, and that is what phenomenological inquiry provided: “a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (van Manen, 1997, p. 41). That type of understanding is attractive to me as a scholar-practitioner hoping to apply the knowledge gained from this qualitative study to a more enlightened approach to developing policy and effective practices. As I continue my collaborative work with colleagues in student affairs to nurture a culture of purposeful student involvement on college campuses, I want to be equipped with a more thorough understanding of the experiences of those who are so very deeply or broadly engaged. Phenomenology uncovered some vitally important commonalities from these experiences.
Design of the Phenomenological Study

In his description of the interpretive, hermeneutical approach to phenomenology, van Manen (1997) identified six interrelated research activities that connect methodologically with all aspects of a research design. First, one must turn to a phenomenon of deep personal interest. Second, one must investigate the experience as it is lived, not as it is conceptualized. Third, one must reflect on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon. The fourth activity is to emphasize language and to describe the phenomenon through the art of writing and re-writing. Fifth, one must sustain the initial level of commitment to the phenomenon under investigation all the way through the study by maintaining a strong pedagogical relation to the phenomenon. Finally, one must balance the research context by considering parts and whole. This perspective on the phenomenological process is not prescriptive, but it provides a useful framework for considering the methodological influence on specific research methods.

Focus of the Study

The turn to the phenomenon is the phenomenologist’s way of determining the focus of the study. In the phenomenological tradition, the study should focus on the exploration of a single concept. As van Manen (1997) suggested, this begins by identifying a human experience about which the researcher is passionate. This discernment process may include spending time with the phenomenon through reading, writing, discussion, observation, and contemplation about what it is like to experience the phenomenon before any data are collected (Vagle, 2014). Ultimately, the researcher’s “abiding concern” (van Manen, 1990, p.31) or the unsettled questions that emerge from a compelling interest (Jones et al., 2014) determine the focus of the study. While determining the focus of the study, the researcher can begin the process of bracketing by
identifying her own experiences with the phenomenon and considering the ways in which those pre-understandings influence her interest in the topic. Vagle (2014) also recommended that researchers avoid getting too attached to initial thoughts, so that they may remain open to what the phenomenon might become.

My abiding concern, which will be described in more detail below, has developed in recent years as I have encountered more students who seem unable to flourish despite their involvement in activities that tend to lead to successful outcomes. This concern implicates another integral step in the turn to the question – the ways in which I bracket my presuppositions. Despite the value that may be implied by the term “over-involved,” I had to be cautious not to frame this question for myself or others as a problem/solution dialectic. I had to allow the data to determine the direction of the interpretation. By stating my positionality, reflecting on my own experience with the phenomenon in question, and doing my best to bracket my assumptions, I was better able to focus on a hermeneutic interpretation of the text of the interview transcripts. However, rather than attempt to remove my experience from the analysis in the transcendental tradition, I conceived of my process of bracketing as a way of exposing the “preunderstandings” that influenced my interest (van Manen, 1990). My role as the researcher with interpretation and co-construction of meaning is an important dimension of the analysis, but the ultimate aim is to illuminate the lived experiences of the study participants.

Research Questions

The development of research questions is a continuous process in qualitative research. According to Vagle (2014), in phenomenological research, “the phenomenon and the accompanying research question is the most important consideration, and then all other questions of method follow” (p.77). As a wellspring of guidance for every other
aspect of the study, a research question should be thoughtfully articulated, and any emergent variants should be closely related. Phenomenological research questions are “open-ended, evolving, and non-directional” (Creswell, 2013, p.138) and are intended to illuminate the essence of the phenomenon by asking, “What does it mean to be/experience ___?” This type of question is intended “to find out what a certain phenomenon means and how it is experienced” (van Manen, 1997, p. 29). In contrast with the “descriptive” questions typical of ethnographic research and the “process” questions usually found in grounded theory studies, phenomenological research questions are “meaning” questions and typically begin with what or how, rather than why, so that the central phenomenon may be explored holistically (Creswell, 2013).

**Site Selection**

To complete this study, a large, four-year public university located in the Midwest was used as the site for data collection. Its geographical proximity was a practical consideration, but more importantly, the university community includes colleagues who could serve as trusted key informants in the process of identifying participants who meet the criteria for selection in the study. Perhaps even more importantly, the university under consideration was attractive for what is already known about its culture of student involvement. A significant aspect of the literature review on college student involvement implicates the influence of the environment on decisions about involvement and achievement of outcomes (Terenzini et al., 1996; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). This environment was preferred because of its widespread endorsement of co-curricular involvement as an essential aspect of the university experience from recruitment (Admissions Viewbook, 2014) to orientation (Get Involved, 2014) to matriculation and beyond. Results from the 2010 administration of the National Survey of Student
Engagement (NSSE) at this institution revealed that 78.3% of first year students and 75.3% of seniors felt that the university encourages involvement in campus events and activities (Student Life Research and Assessment, 2011). The same study discovered that 80% of first year students were involved in at least one to five hours of co-curricular activities per week (Student Life Research and Assessment, 2011). The institutional emphasis on student engagement, the high levels of participation, and the extensive array of options for students (e.g., over 1,200 student organizations, largest recreational sports program in the U.S.) make this institution an optimal research site for this study. An exhaustive environmental audit to be conducted as a means of understanding the environmental press and other nuances of the campus culture at one or more additional universities is beyond the scope of this study.

Focusing site selection on one large institution resulted in plenty of information-rich cases who met all the requisite criteria while still allowing for a baseline of understanding about institutional cultural norms to factor into the phenomenological analysis. As Creswell (2013) cautioned, “The more diverse the characteristics of the individuals, the more difficult it will be for the researcher to find common experiences, themes, and the overall essence of the experience for all participants” (p.150). A focus on a single institution aided in the process of discovering commonalities without compromising on criteria regarding social identities of potential participants.

**Sampling Criteria**

With the purposeful strategy of criterion sampling, the researcher looks for assurances that all participants have one or more particular characteristics in common (Patton, 1990). In this case, qualified participants met a number of criteria enumerated below. Broadly speaking, the population experiencing the explored phenomenon is
traditional-aged (18-24) undergraduate students enrolled full-time at a four-year college in the United States. To ensure the participants had enough time on campus to reach high levels of involvement, qualified students were those in their second year in college or beyond. Study participants could be transfer students, and they did not need to fit any specific criteria regarding their gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, socioeconomic status, or any other aspect of their social identities. However, the final group of participants chosen for the study intentionally reflected some gender balance and representation of non-majority identities. Although it was not known if the study would reveal differences in involvement experiences along those identity lines, the essence of the phenomenon of over-involvement illuminated experiential commonalities across these differences.

It should also be noted that high levels of involvement may be a luxury more easily afforded to students with the financial means to prioritize it. Some opportunities (e.g., international service trips or high-cost sport clubs) may privilege students who can afford the extra fees those activities require. Likewise, those students who need to earn money during college to pay tuition and support themselves may find it more difficult to engage in the kinds of co-curricular activities enjoyed by their peers who do not have such obligations. The socioeconomic dimension of over-involvement had the potential to be an emerging theme as the study unfolded. The sampling criteria were not defined in any specific way by socioeconomic status, but I was vigilant for information provided by the participants that may have contributed to an understanding of this dimension.

A temptation when defining sampling criteria for this study could have been to determine a time-based threshold for the amount of involvement that may qualify a student to be considered “over-involved.” For example, with Astin’s (1984) original
premise of quantitative and qualitative measures of involvement in mind, NSSE data may have provided a line of demarcation for participant selection. In the 2010 administration of NSSE at the study site, 10% of first year students and 10% of seniors reported their average weekly time spent on co-curricular involvement to be in categories suggesting more than 15 hours (categories were 16-20 hours, 21-25, 26-30, and >30). Even at a university that promotes and rewards co-curricular involvement in the way this institution does, more than 15 hours of involvement per week is the self-reported norm for only 10% of the population. This standard could have been used to provide key informants assisting with sampling with sufficient guidance for identifying students.

However, even if the phenomenon of over-involvement could be related to a certain number of hours of participation in activities, it would have been short-sighted to define a criterion that might exclude students spending less hours but experiencing the same involvement-related challenges as their peers who spend more hours. Recognizing the possibility that some students may have no trouble managing 16 or more weekly hours of involvement, a more subjective criterion was necessary. Likewise, the possibility that students deeply involved in 15 hours or less each week may have encountered challenges that could constitute a state of over-involvement had to be considered. Involvement is the investment of physical and psychological energy (Astin, 1984, 1993), so a person for whom only a few hours of time were spent engaged in the physical interactions of their activities may have been spending countless more hours reflecting, planning, worrying, or processing in some way that led to involvement-related challenges. With that possibility in mind, the criterion of participants having experienced academic, social, health, or wellness-related challenges as a result of their co-curricular involvement was one that needed to be determined subjectively, first through the
informed judgment of gatekeepers and then through self-reports from prospective participants on the initial demographic survey (see Appendix C).

It should also be noted that the examples of types of involvement given on the NSSE instrument for students to consider when estimating their weekly investment of time include “organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.” (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). The NSSE instrument separately lists “working for pay on campus” and “doing community service and volunteer work” as activities on which students are asked to comment. On-campus employment and volunteer community service are both types of campus involvement that have been shown to result in benefits similar to those connected with student organizations and the other activities mentioned on the NSSE instrument (Hood et al., 1992; Lundberg, 2004). “Co-curricular involvement,” for the purposes of sampling, was defined as participation in the campus activities listed above – that is, a combination of the NSSE categories described herein.

The criteria used in selecting study participants were as follows:

- **Undergraduate students of traditional age (18-24) enrolled full-time** – Much of the existing literature on the impact of co-curricular involvement focuses on the experiences of traditional-aged undergraduates (Terenzini et al., 1996; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). My interest in the participants being enrolled full-time was motivated by the desire to include students who were most likely to be immersed in the college environment at the time of our interview. As noted above, these students should not have been in their first year of college.

- **Students experiencing academic, social, health, or wellness-related challenges as a result of their co-curricular involvement** – Because over-involvement was
defined for this study according to involvement-related challenges to the achievement of positive outcomes, participants had to identify themselves as having experienced such challenges. Examples of involvement-related challenges included low grades, loss of connection with friends or family, stress, anxiety, sleeplessness, or poor diet. However, it would not be enough for the student to have experienced one or more of these challenges without also attributing the issues in some way to their high levels of co-curricular activity.

- **Students with whom I have had no significant previous interactions** – As part of my work as an administrator in Student Life, I encounter a number of student leaders in both voluntary and employed capacities each year. However, the reality of life on a campus of nearly 60,000 students is that the deeds of even the most involved leaders are likely to escape notice. I activated my network of colleagues on campus who work closely enough with students to be able to evaluate their fitness for participation in this study. So that I did not rely on any presuppositions about the students themselves and so that I could avoid any ethical issues related to my familiarity with the participants, I excluded any nominations of students with whom I had any significant previous interaction.

- **Consenting participants who would be available for two 60- to 75-minute time blocks for interviewing and who can articulate their lived experiences** – The success of a phenomenological study relies very heavily on the quality of the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2013). A criterion I emphasized in my appeal for nominations was the students’ availability to meet two times and their ability to communicate effectively. Although this criterion could be a statement of the obvious, the need for information-rich cases
made it necessary for me to leave nothing to chance on even the most basic expectations.

**Sampling Procedures**

Selection of participants for this phenomenological study was designed in accordance with Patton’s (1990) logic of purposeful sampling, focusing in depth on a relatively small group of individuals and grounded in the purpose of the study and its research questions. The central principle of any purposeful sampling strategy is the importance of selecting information-rich cases (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990). Further, the thoughtful and defensible identification of sampling criteria are of critical importance to the design of the study (Jones et al., 2014). In phenomenology, it is supremely important that participants have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Inherent in determining sampling methods for a phenomenological study is the tension between the ambiguity necessary to allow an emergent design to take form and the specificity necessary to ensure study participants will exemplify the phenomenon. Two primary purposeful sampling strategies were utilized to identify participants – criterion sampling, as described above, and snowball or network sampling.

**Snowball sampling.** I employed the purposeful sampling strategy of snowball sampling, or what Glesne (2011) also referred to as network sampling. With this approach, the researcher obtains information about cases of interest from people who know what cases are information-rich (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990). I identified trusted key informants from the ranks of university staff and faculty who interact with students with enough depth that they may be immediately familiar with ideas for potential participants. Student organization advisors, campus employers, academic advisors, and staff from such departments as Residence Life, the Multicultural Center, Recreational
Sports, Student Wellness Center, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Sorority and Fraternity Life, and First Year Experience were asked to think critically about qualified students and to share the study invitation. I engaged 48 key informants with an e-mail detailing the sampling criteria (see Appendix A) and requested that each of them share the study invitation letter attached to that message (see Appendix B) with up to three students. This e-mail also indicated that a $20 gift card incentive would be provided to participants. Twenty of those contacts confirmed receipt of my request and forwarded the study invitation. Some of them sent the message only to a small number of specific students they thought met the criteria. Others forwarded the invitation more broadly to entire student organizations or an undisclosed number of fellow colleagues they felt would have specific ideas of qualified students. A few of these primary informants indicated they were more comfortable sharing the invitation broadly and letting students decide for themselves about their fit with the criteria than they were with labeling students as over-involved. This snowball sampling was sufficiently widespread to reach a large, diverse group of potential participants. As an interesting and ironic side note, I encountered four separate students in person whom I knew from my work at the university who indicated they received the invitation but were too involved to be able to make time for the interviews.

**Participant identification and selection.** Students who received the study invitation, which included a full description of the study and the requirements to participate, were asked to contact me with their initial interest or questions about the study via e-mail, by phone, or in person. The 30 students who responded were then sent a message (see Appendix D) via e-mail that included the informed consent form (see Appendix G) and given a completion deadline along with an invitation to communicate
with me about any questions they might have before proceeding. Two students requested in-person meetings to discuss the study, and one requested a phone conversation. Three additional students corresponded via e-mail with questions before deciding to proceed. Sixteen of the 30 students returned the informed consent form. Of the 14 who did not complete the form, 11 did not respond to follow-up messages, one declined due to concerns about being recorded, and two indicated specifically that after further consideration, they would not have time to participate.

The 16 students who formally consented to proceed were e-mailed a brief demographic survey (see Appendix C) designed to collect basic information that would allow me to compare and evaluate their qualifications. Fifteen of the 16 students returned the questionnaire, which prompted for details about the students’ date of birth, racial and gender identities, year in school, academic program, transfer status, list of co-curricular activities with estimates of time spent per week, confirmation that they had experienced challenges as a result of their involvement, and which types of challenges they had experienced. Six categories of involvement-related challenges were provided, and students were directed to select all that applied to their experience. I evaluated the questionnaire responses to identify a participant group that represented a reasonable cross-section of academic majors, years in school, involvement experiences, and social identities, and consideration was given to the number of different types of challenges each student indicated having experienced. I ensured through this process that the students met all the study criteria, especially that they had experienced high levels of involvement and involvement-related challenges and that I had not had any significant previous experience with them. From the group of 15 who provided their information, eight participants – four women and four men – were selected. Table 1 provides a
summary of the demographic information for the final participant group. Six of the eight participants identified as students of color, seven different majors (not counting double majors) were represented, the years in school ranged from second to fifth, and each student selected no fewer than three of the six categories of involvement-related challenges with four of the participants selecting all six.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Majors/ (Minors)</th>
<th>Self-Reported Challenges on Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobby</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Marketing (Fashion Retail Studies)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briana</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chicana</td>
<td>Neuroscience (Spanish, Globalization Studies)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabby</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Integrated Language Arts, English Education</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>Sociology (Chemistry)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Food, Agricultural, &amp; Biological Engineering</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rania</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>Biology, Neuroscience</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhiana</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bi-racial Black/ White</td>
<td>Health Information Management Systems</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vikas</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Indian-American</td>
<td>Environmental Public Health (Humanitarian Engineering)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Selected students were notified via e-mail (see Appendix D) and asked to indicate their availability for the first interview by way of an anonymous Doodle poll. This online tool enabled them to show their availability for meeting times I had proposed over the span of three weeks without revealing their identities to anyone but me. I invited
each student to propose a convenient location that would allow for comfortable, dialogic conversation while also providing privacy and clear digital recording (Galletta, 2013) but suggested my office on campus as a default location if there were not another space they preferred. After the initial interviews occurred, this same procedure was used to schedule the follow-up interview times and dates. Once all eight participants were confirmed with their initial interview times, the seven participants who were not selected were contacted via e-mail (see Appendix D). One of the original eight participants asked to reschedule her interview twice and then did not show up for the third mutually agreed-upon time before asking to withdraw from the study due to busyness and other personal challenges. One of the seven students who was initially not selected – a female with comparable survey responses – was then invited to participate, and she accepted the invitation.

**Sample size.** The ideal sample size for this study was identified as a range from six to ten participants. Patton (1990) advised that “Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (p.184). Because the goal of qualitative research is not generalizability, in-depth information from a small number of participants can be incredibly valuable. Jones et al. (2014) noted the importance of congruence between the needs of the chosen methodological approach and decisions about the size of the sample. To that end, Creswell’s (2013) guidance for a phenomenological study, based on recommendations from Dukes and others is between three and ten, though even that range is somewhat context-specific. Paraphrasing van Manen and Dahlberg, Vagle (2014) advised, “the phenomenon calls for how it is to be studied” (p.75). In other words, the nature and complexity of the phenomenon determines the parameters for sample size and participant criteria. For the phenomenon
under investigation, six to ten information-rich cases was thought to be sufficient to reach what Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as saturation – the point at which the redundancy of the information being gathered is a clue to the sufficiency of the sample size. The final participant group of eight students reflected these understandings and allowed for a diverse set of identities and experiences to be considered.

**Data Collection**

Creswell (2013) described data collection as a series or circle of interrelated activities connected with the research questions. After engaging in the carefully considered processes of site selection and purposeful sampling, gaining access and building rapport with study participants can begin. Most important to the premise of data collection is the careful articulation of a research question to which all the specific methods of gathering information can connect (van Manen, 1997). Data collection for phenomenological studies most often takes the form of unstructured, face-to-face interviews with participants, though observations, written descriptions, and artistic forms like drawings and photography are also a good fit for many phenomena (Vagle, 2014). Data collection for this study consisted of two 60- to 75-minute semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with each of the eight student participants. Interviews, whether one-on-one or in groups, have been used extensively for data collection in the social sciences and are an extension of conversation as an ancient form of gaining knowledge (Kvale, 1996). In phenomenological inquiry, the interview is an indispensable method of gathering data about the essence of the human experience in question (Jones et al., 2014). In an interview conversation, a researcher listens to how people convey the interactions and experiences of their lived world, hears them express their perceptions of the world through their own words, and seeks to become familiar with the participant’s life through
what is said (Kvale, 1996).

Qualitative interviews are characterized by open-ended questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and above all else, interviews are conversations (Kvale, 1996). Kvale (1996) characterized qualitative interviews as efforts to understand the world from the subjects' position, to make the meaning of their experiences known, and to discover their lived world separate from scientific reason. Interviews permit the gathering of respondents’ perceptions in their own words, an essential attribute of qualitative data collection. This approach gives the researcher the ability to communicate the significance of the experience from the respondent’s point of view. The phenomenologist must present a structure through which people can respond in a way that comprehensively embodies their point of view on a given subject, situation, or experience – in this case, the experience of being deeply or broadly involved on campus. However, “structure” does not necessarily mean that a rigid protocol is used to shape every interview in a similar fashion. In phenomenological inquiry, it is often not necessary or even desirable to conduct interviews in the exact same way (Vagle, 2014). As long as the interview is conducted with a clear sense of the phenomenon and the research questions, the interviewer can be responsive to the participant and still incorporate structure without the use of an a priori protocol (van Manen, 1997).

This study made use of Seidman’s (1998) semi-structured, in-depth phenomenological interviewing model. Seidman’s (1998) approach involves asking participants to reconstruct their experiences with the topic, discussing details of the topic, and reflecting on the meaning of the experience. The first 60-75 minute interview focused primarily on rapport- and trust-building, helping participants to understand the scope of the study, and gathering initial content information. The second interview was
then used to build upon emerging understandings, challenge and discuss what had been learned to that point, and engage in member-checking. The semi-structured interview format permitted divergence from the structure of the interview protocol, so that topics introduced by the participants could be explored. The use of multiple interviews also incorporated in-process member checks as a way of verifying data (Galletta, 2013). The dialogic nature of this interaction also reflects Lather’s (2001) concept of constitutive validity, in which the collaboration between the researcher and the participant strengthens claims of legitimacy.

**Interview procedures.** In an effort to be transparent about the nature of the study and to reinforce the premise of informed consent from the students for their participation, each interview began with a full description of the purpose statement and a summary of the procedures I planned to utilize. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the research process at any point. Before the interview began, I also explained that I was interested in knowing about both co-curricular involvement, which I define as out-of-class activity that is directly related to a course or their field of study, and extracurricular involvement, which I define as out-of-class activity that is independent of their coursework. For the purposes of our interview and this study, since I did not intend to explore nuances of the differences between those two types of involvement, I explained that we could use the terms interchangeably and that for questions about “involvement,” I wanted them to consider both types together.

After offering to answer any questions they had about the study or the structure of the interview, we proceeded with the interview protocol. Use of an interview protocol, as suggested by Patton (1990) and Creswell (2013), helps ensure a measure of consistency, but the semi-structured nature of these interview conversations permitted the flexibility to
explore emergent directions (Galletta, 2013). The interview questions in the primary protocol (see Appendix E) were derived from the three research questions developed for this study and served as a general guide for the discussion. I began with verification of the participants’ questionnaire responses on a few basic demographic details and a list of their college activities. I then moved on to questions about their involvement at younger ages, motivations for being involved, and the impact their involvement has had on various aspects of their lives. At the end of the first interview, I explained the option to select a pseudonym as an additional way of protecting their identity. So that I could explore more rigorously the themes that emerged from the first interviews, I utilized a secondary protocol (see Appendix F) in the follow-up conversations.

Interviews were recorded using a digital recording device, and field notes were taken throughout the interview to assist in the documentation and note my reactions, observations, and reflections. Immediately following each interview, I took the reflexive step of listening to the digital recording to make notes of my reflections of the interview process (Patton, 1990). The digital recording was then shared with a professional transcriptionist via a password-protected network drive. Once each transcript was returned to me, I engaged in a verification process of ensuring the accuracy of the verbatim transcription. That reading was followed by another close reading, as required by the hermeneutical process of analysis.

Interview recordings were archived on a computer by participant first name or pseudonym and interview date. Audio file and transcription duplicates were also kept in encrypted cloud storage, so that I could secure the data in the event of computer memory loss or other equipment failure. The hard copy interview documentation was stored in a locked file cabinet in my office at the university. All procedures mandated by the
Institutional Review Board of the university in question were recognized and followed in the collection of data for this study.

**Methods of Data Analysis**

As with other qualitative methodologies, phenomenological approaches to data collection are intertwined with data analysis as a constant, interpretive process (Vagle, 2014). After interviewing participants, phenomenological researchers turn to the transcripts and begin the reflective process. Significant time is devoted to the scrutiny of the data and the identification of units of meaning and themes. The iterative process of reading, writing, reflecting, and repeating helps understanding emerge. As van Manen (1997) stated, “Not until we had written this down did we quite know what we knew…but it [writing] also allows us to reclaim this knowledge and make it our own in a new and more intimate manner” (p.127). Vagle (2014) emphasized the whole-part-whole nature of phenomenological data analysis in which holistic readings of the text meant to attune the researcher to the entirety of the data are followed by several line-by-line readings that allow the researcher to break out themes, which can then be recombined to explicate a more holistic, analytic understanding.

Data analysis was conducted according to the recommendations for phenomenology provided by Moustakas (1994) and further modified by Creswell (2013). Although Moustakas is better known as a transcendental phenomenologist, and this study adopts more of a hermeneutical approach, the steps Moustakas outlined provide a well-reasoned and frequently utilized framework for phenomenological researchers of any tradition. Creswell (2013) described this particular analytical approach as a modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. At the foundation of this approach is the identification of an essential phenomenon to study, a review of the literature on the
subject, and the development of research questions structured to capture the meaning of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). With the basic framework of the study constructed, the steps of analysis can begin.

**Steps of Phenomenological Data Analysis**

First, as a means of bracketing my personal experience as the researcher and directing more of the focus in the data analysis to the participants, I created a brief account of my personal experiences with the phenomenon within the context of my abiding concern motivating the study. This statement appears in the bracketing section near the conclusion of this chapter. After considering my own experiences and inherent biases, I proceeded to analyze the transcript data. In the second step, for each interview, I engaged in the process of what Moustakas (1994) referred to as “horizontalization,” which is the identification of significant statements in the transcript. I sought specific statements about how the participants have experienced high levels of involvement, what motivates them to remain involved, and what impact such high levels of involvement has had on their lives. In the third step, those statements were grouped into themes of experiences, or “meaning units” common to all of the study participants. Next, interpretation of those themes occurred through a textual description of what the participants experienced and a structural description of how they experienced it. Finally, a composite description that incorporated the textual and structural themes common to all participants was developed to represent the essence of over-involvement. According to van Manen (1990), these methods are consistent with the focus on individual accounts typical of both an interpretivist epistemology and a phenomenological methodology.

Considerable time and energy was spent on the analysis of the transcripts, reducing the transcript data by coding for common themes using organizational
techniques suggested by Creswell (2013) and Glesne (2013). The horizontalization process is crucial to the interpretive analysis and final reporting because it creates a foundation on which the rest of the study is based (Moustakas, 1994). Glesne (2013) described coding as “the progressive process of sorting and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data…that are applicable to your research purpose” (p.194). A coding manual was created to ensure organization and reliable categorization of themes across participants, and these codes were constantly refined and negotiated during analysis of each transcript. Using NVivo 11 software, separate analytic files were kept for subjectivity, quotations, and conclusions as a means of keeping data interpretation organized. Finally, as a trustworthiness measure, participants were given the opportunity to engage in member-checking at both the transcription and analysis stages. Doing so enabled each participant to offer any clarification, propose corrections, and perhaps suggest interpretations I may not have considered as we engaged in a collaborative co-construction of meaning. Although no changes were proposed to the transcripts, several of the students did suggest edits I then made to their individual profiles.

Use of Field Notes and Reflexive Journaling

The use of field notes and memo writing are important strategies in the research processes of many qualitative researchers (Jones et al., 2014). Memo writing as a consistent, reflexive component to the analysis accompanied all phases of data collection and interpretation. Throughout the interview, transcription verification, and analysis processes, I kept and made reference to field notes and reflexive memos collected in a journal. The field notes allowed me to track the timeline of the study and record my perceptions of the details of my interactions with the participants. Body language, facial
expressions, and other contextual details of my interactions with the students that could not come through in the data recordings were registered, as plenty of good data exists in these types of observations. The field notes were an important reference as I interpreted and analyzed the text later in the process (Glesne, 2013), but they also contributed to my ability to write the rich, thick descriptions necessary for the credibility of the study.

**Trustworthiness**

One of the most fascinating and contentious issues in the world of empirical research in the human sciences has to do with the existence and nature of validity criteria used both by quantitative researchers in the positivist tradition and by qualitative researchers operating from one or more postpositivist paradigmatic assumptions. Validity represents the correctness of a statement or argument or the confidence in one’s claims to knowledge (Schwandt, 2007). In the positivist mission to predict and test hypotheses, a valid measure is one that actually measures the variable it is supposed to measure. The positivist view of validity in the human sciences would hold that to argue the validity of a finding is to argue that finding’s truth and certainty.

There is, however, disagreement as to the essential premise of validity constructs in qualitative research (Kvale, 1995). Many operating from interpretivist, critical, or deconstructivist ontologies reject the notion that only one reality exists (Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2014). Postpositivists find problematic the assertion that one evidentiary standard can be used to evaluate the truth or certainty of a finding, when realities are constantly socially constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Nevertheless, validity, whether viewed in its conventional sense as a criterion of accuracy, as a more adaptable interpretation known as trustworthiness, or as an entirely unknowable construct to which one cannot or should not subscribe, represents a standard of power and legitimacy.
Whether determined by deeply entrenched hegemonic institutions or loosely confederated communities of scholars questioning and renegotiating the boundaries, validity or trustworthiness criteria are seen by those within reach of Western normativity as necessary for establishing standards for “truthful” and useful findings.

**Trustworthiness Measures**

Postpositivist validity criteria in qualitative research were recast by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as “trustworthiness” criteria, which speak to the quality or goodness of qualitative inquiry. The authors developed four criteria that serve as naturalistic equivalents to conventional validity measures. Credibility, which parallels internal validity, addresses the fit between study participants’ views of their realities and the researcher’s representation of those views. Transferability, or Erickson’s (1986) concept of “particularizability,” akin to the positivist notions of external validity or generalizability, refers to the responsibility of the researcher to provide thick description sufficient enough for a reader to determine whether or not a given case might resemble the case being studied. Dependability, which resembles reliability, refers to the degree to which the researcher’s methods are logical and documented. Finally, confirmability, which mirrors the concept of objectivity, refers to the establishment of a discernable connection between the researcher’s interpretations and the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria, while themselves not able to address every post-realist critique, have provided some measure of the situated, relational, and temporal flexibility qualitative inquiry requires without mandating universally normative procedures (Lather, 2007).

Several procedures described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell (2013) that contribute to trustworthiness are often used in phenomenological research. Many of these procedures were utilized in the present study as validity measures. Prolonged
engagement in the field as a trustworthiness procedure relates to the fifth of van Manen’s (1997) six phenomenological research activities, which is to sustain the initial level of commitment to the phenomenon under investigation all the way through the study.

Prolonged engagement is one of the most significant advantages I have as a practitioner. In my eighteen years as a student affairs professional, I have developed trust, credibility, and a well-developed awareness of the culture that are beneficial in my interpretive analysis. As a means of ensuring the credibility of the study, I also engaged in triangulation of data collection methods, including member checking at the transcript and interpretation stages, reflexive journaling, and multiple interviews. Through the use of multiple methods for collecting data, triangulation provides several vantage points and allows the researcher to have more confidence in the inferences made (Glesne, 2011).

However, Vagle (2014) questioned the necessity of triangulation, given the deep meaning that emerges during phenomenological research and the potential triangulation has for making the analysis too mechanistic.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell (2013) pointed to the use of rich, thick descriptions to allow the reader to fully enter the context of the research. As an additional credibility measure, in Chapter Four I have provided evidence of referential adequacy through examples from a well-developed data corpus. I have also shared excerpts from interview transcripts that indicate the use of in-process member checks, during which I summarized and reframed to ensure that I had captured the essence of my participants’ testimonials. These procedures, coupled with transparent narratives about my own positionality, should give the reader a well-informed opportunity to evaluate the transferability of the case studies I have shared.

Dependability in qualitative research can be achieved by maintaining consistency
of methods, participant interactions, and research questions (Creswell, 2013). By developing detailed field notes and verbatim interview transcripts, consistently using interview protocols with participants, and documenting the data collection and analysis processes thoroughly, I increased the dependability of the study. Confirmability refers to the ability for multiple researchers to reach the same conclusions through careful data analysis and can be established through a detailed audit trail of the researcher’s interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail for this study consists of written field notes, digitally recorded interviews, a coding manual, process notes, and member checking data. As a final trustworthiness procedure, I engaged fellow doctoral students in peer debriefing and review to gain insight from external reflection. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described peer debriefing as “a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind” (p. 308).

**Ethics**

In the conduct of this study, every effort was made to satisfy the participants’ basic protections as outlined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). These protections include the right to provide and withdraw consent, the expectation of confidentiality, and the right not to be deceived by the researcher. Potential participants had the opportunity to review the parameters of the study, ask questions to inform their decision, review and sign an informed consent form, and pull out of the study if they needed to do so. Confidentiality and anonymity was maintained by interviewing privately in a mutually agreed-upon location and giving each participant the opportunity to select a non-identifiable pseudonym at the beginning of the data collection phase. The process of explaining and obtaining informed consent was also framed in such a way that
participants understood the control they had over their part of the study.

As I proceeded through data collection, analysis, and reporting of the results, I attempted in every way to observe “the ethical imperative to ‘do good’” (Jones et al., 2006, p.155). I attended in supportive ways to my relationships with the study participants, understanding the need for genuine and empathetic listening and support throughout the process and beyond. There is also the matter of a power dynamic I addressed in my conversations with the students. In the process of building rapport and framing their participation strictly as a confidential contribution to a research project I am conducting as a graduate student, I discussed how my stature as an administrator might influence their responses. The selection of students with whom I have had no prior significant interaction was an added measure to mitigate this power dynamic. As I interviewed these students, I was constantly aware of my pre-understandings, my subjectivity, and my identity as an administrator, so that I did not steer their responses in a particular direction.

Jones et al. (2014) discussed the ethical implications of ensuring congruence between the chosen methodology and the statement of purpose and research questions. Implicit and explicit expectations about the nature of the interactions between the researcher and the participants and promises about the outcome of their participation are communicated through these important components of the study. Those interactions must remain genuine, and the promises must be fulfilled. The purpose statement and research questions for this study have been drafted specifically with a phenomenological methodology in mind, and every aspect of the study was constructed to help discover the essence of over-involvement. Further, Erickson (1986) compelled qualitative researchers to avoid ethical issues related to evidentiary inadequacy. With this concept in mind, I
collected data to the point of saturation, looked for disconfirming evidence, and invested the requisite time and thoughtfulness into the interpretive stage of the study to ensure the integrity of the evidence I have presented.

The “backyard” nature of this study also presented ethical considerations about which I needed to remain mindful even beyond the completion of the research. Even though the scale and complexity of the institution in question is such that common issues with backyard research can be avoided, choosing to do research where I study and work could have compromised future interactions with study participants. Creswell (2013) warned against the study of one’s own workplace, due mostly to the risky potential of obtaining politically sensitive information. In this case, my use of several validation strategies and procedures for protecting the identities of the study participants mitigated this risk. However, the knowledge I gained from in-depth interviews could also have implicated colleagues, departments, and organizations with which these students have interacted. I made every effort to treat this information confidentially and responsibly, even beyond the temporal parameters of the study.

**Bracketing**

Like so many who have been conditioned into the positivist paradigm, my concept of good science and my identity as a researcher began to take shape at a young age. As I now envision lateral movement between research paradigms, I have found myself turning and returning to an interpretivist epistemological view. The social co-construction of meaning and reality that defines interpretivism and the focus on culture and lived experiences in a naturalistic environment are concepts that I can no longer disassociate from what I consider to be good, holistic science. However, in spite of all the methodological possibilities available in qualitative inquiry and the appeal they hold
for me, Pascale’s (2011) explanation of analytic induction reminds me that I remain tethered to some extent to the dominant tradition of hypothesis testing. Where I feel myself breaking from tradition is in my excitement about adopting a situated methodology, a commitment to emergent design that builds off of negative cases, and a burgeoning cognizance of the role played by my own subjectivity.

Despite the transcendental phenomenological notion that the researcher must bracket out experiences with the phenomenon, the hermeneutical approach to phenomenology embraces the interpretive role of the researcher. As Pascale (2011) stated, “It is impossible to know an independent, objective world that stands apart from our experiences with it” (p.53). Indeed, the researcher and the researched cannot be separated (Lincoln, 1995). Glesne (2011) commented on the importance of the interrelated influence of the researcher, the researched, and the setting and noted the ubiquity of an autobiographical element in qualitative research that incorporates good reflexivity. In the hermeneutical tradition, however, it is important for the researcher to make a statement about her experience with and interest in the phenomenon, making every reasonable effort to apply the attitude of phenomenological reduction to the bracketing of presuppositions that might lead to inferential decisions about the essence without fully considering participant voices.

A growing part of me embraces the unpredictability and emergent potential of reflexive design, but another part, which I am not yet able to repress completely, appreciates the structure of a priori positivist research protocols. Like training wheels on a bike for a young rider, they are known, and they are safe – but they are restrictive, and once they have come off, they should never need to be put back on. I find myself now in an exciting transitional moment in which the positivist tightening of those training wheels
is giving way to the loosening made possible by the decentered, rhizomatic space of postpositivism.

My interest in the topic of this study comes from an abiding concern for the well-being of students who seek a well-rounded college experience through involvement outside of the classroom. My preunderstandings about co-curricular involvement have been under development for most of my life. From my own positive experience in high school and college with the benefits of co-curricular engagement to the transformational experiences of others I have had the good fortune of observing as a professional, I have developed a firm belief in the power of meaningful involvement. As a track and field athlete, a student government leader, a fraternity officer, a student employee, and a member of several service, academic, and honorary organizations at my undergraduate institution, I maximized my out-of-class experience and graduated feeling even more passionately about the importance of involvement than I did when I began my college career. I attribute much of my personal, professional, and leadership development to my high level of co-curricular and extracurricular activities, and I have spent my professional career encouraging involvement and creating opportunities for college students. My lived experience and the anecdotal evidence I have gathered over the years from witnessing and facilitating student involvement has been consistent with much of the empirical data gathered by quantitative researchers who have used statistics to show that the greater a student’s level of involvement, the more positive the educational outcomes will be (Astin, 1984; Cooper et al., 1994; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Huang & Chang, 2004; Kuh, 2009, Terenzini et al., 1996).

As I situate myself within this study, I must first reveal my bias in favor of involvement. I firmly believe in the positive role of involvement in helping students to
become more effective and efficient academically, assisting in the development of a robust social network that contributes to their confidence and persistence, and serving as a complement to classroom instruction as a student develops the intellectual, interpersonal, and intercultural competencies necessary for success beyond college. Professionally, my colleagues and I have put a great deal of effort over many years into the development of a “culture of involvement.” We have reveled in the fact that student organization membership levels have soared, hours of student service to the community have surged, and the profile of a typical student now includes meaningful involvement in at least one co-curricular or extracurricular activity.

However, my compelling interest in this study of student involvement comes from my observation of those students who seem encumbered by their co-curricular commitments – very devoted but also exhausted and stressed, possibly due to the scope of their responsibilities. As I set forth in phenomenological inquiry, any assumptions I might have made as a practitioner about the causality between the high levels of involvement of these students and the stress I have observed them to have had to be bracketed to the fullest extent possible. As I co-constructed meaning from the stories I heard, I had to be ever mindful of the biases I have developed in favor of involvement as an indispensable aspect of a college experience. I also had to resist the temptation to revert to my positivist foundations and develop hypotheses to test. This study permitted me to move from a deductive line of reasoning to one that is inductive. I can now own my subjectivity and allow the data to lead me in a reflexive process of interpretation and co-construction of meaning.

Chapter Summary

Owing to its deeply philosophical origins and its focus on illuminating the essence
of a single human experience, phenomenology serves as a complex but very useful methodological approach in qualitative inquiry. Six interrelated phenomenological research activities in the hermeneutical tradition described by van Manen (1997) relate to every aspect of the research design. Turning to a phenomenon of deep personal interest, investigating the experience as it is lived, reflecting on the essential themes, writing and re-writing, maintaining a strong pedagogical relation to the phenomenon, and considering both parts and whole are the interpretive research activities that connect to all parts of a study from determining its focus to data collection and analysis. A phenomenological methodology, which is congruent with an interpretivist epistemology, is ideally suited to the exploration of undergraduate student over-involvement, a phenomenon whose essential themes have not been documented in the extant higher education literature.

The six interrelated research activities van Manen (1997) described as common to the hermeneutical approach to phenomenology are reflected in various aspects of the research design. Determining the focus of the study and developing research questions are motivated by the first activity, turning to a phenomenon of deep personal interest. Investigating experience as it is lived guides the data collection process and compels the researcher to create thick descriptions of everyday occurrences that are free of conceptualizations. The third activity, reflecting on essential themes, drives the writing process by foregrounding the *qualis* or “whatness” of the phenomenon – a determination about its uniqueness that can only come from a focus on essential themes (Jones et al., 2014). Data analysis is guided by the art of writing and rewriting, particularly in the hermeneutic tradition, which emphasizes language so strongly. The phenomenological researcher is reinforced personally by a commitment to the abiding concern that motivated the study. Maintaining a strong, oriented relation to one’s compelling interest
influences every aspect of the study and moves the researcher to deeper action in life beyond the research. Finally, maintaining a balance between the parts and the whole is a challenge undertaken throughout the process of data collection and analysis. Navigating the tension between a focus on the essential nature of the phenomenon and the overall structure of the study pushes the phenomenological researcher to remain attentive, reflexive, and committed to the abiding concern throughout the research process.

This study contributes to the broad area of research on the impact of extracurricular and co-curricular involvement on college students by exploring a level of engagement seldom uncovered in previous research. The design of this study incorporates trustworthiness criteria into participant selection, data collection, interpretive analysis, and reporting procedures. The findings will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of the motivations and experiences of some of our most deeply engaged students, so that we may apply new interpretations to our policies and practices.
Chapter 4

Findings

As noted in Chapter Three, after bracketing the researcher’s assumptions, phenomenological data analysis begins with data reduction. The eight participants in this study spent a collective total of more than 18 hours in the recorded portions of our interviews, generating 344 single-spaced pages of transcription, which were then thoroughly explored for meaning units in search of the essence of over-involvement. In the phenomenological tradition, this chapter provides a co-constructed description of the experiences of these students. In order to provide an appropriate context for the descriptions of the ways in which the study participants experienced over-involvement, this chapter begins with a brief introduction to each student. What then follows is an analysis of the stories they shared of their lived experience of over-involvement. In this chapter, I explore the students’ pre-college influences on their involvement choices, their motivations to get involved in college, a description of their daily lives with the phenomenon of over-involvement, motivations to remain involved in spite of the challenges they experienced, and a composite description of the essence of the phenomenon.

Participant Profiles

The four women and four men who participated in this study represented eight different primary majors. Among the participants were one second-year student, three third-years, three fourth-years, and one fifth-year, ranging in age at the time of our
interviews from 19 to 22. All were born in the United States, though half of them were from the state in which this large, public university resides, and half were from other states. The racial and ethnic diversity of the participants was perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the sample, as it helped to demonstrate the cross-cultural nature of the phenomenon. One student identified as African-American, one as Middle Eastern, one as Chicana, one as Latino, one as Asian-American, one as Indian-American, and two as White. The college activities in which these students engage include everything from varsity athletics, Greek life, student government, and cultural student organizations to study abroad, undergraduate research, campus employment, volunteer community service, and leadership development activities. Their collective involvement experiences represent a multidimensional cross-section of the opportunities available at their institution. Demographic information about the participants is presented in Table 1. A representative quote and brief summary of each student, every one of whom took the opportunity to review and suggest edits to their own profile, is presented below (in alphabetical order) in an effort to provide context for the data analysis.

Bobby

“It’s consuming my life, which I love because it’s what I want to do, but it’s making it really hard to stay focused on school and kind of put school first since you know I have to finish this before I can go have a job.”

Bobby is a third-year student from a nearby suburb majoring in Marketing with a minor in Fashion Retail Studies. He aspires to a career in the fashion industry and has been very strategic about his career preparations since he began college. Bobby recalled music as a lifelong involvement that began at age 5 with violin and expanded to include piano at age 9. While adding robust involvement with theater during middle school, he began playing tennis at age 12. Both of these activities developed into deep, year-round
commitments for him during high school, and he attributes much about his work ethic and time management abilities to the challenge of managing his involvements alongside a very focused approach to his studies. Both of Bobby’s parents graduated from the university he now attends, and his older sister, who went to a different university, served as president of her high school’s National Honor Society chapter – a position Bobby and both of his parents also held. Involvement in a variety of activities was very much an expectation supported by his parents throughout his youth.

Keenly aware of his image and the competitive environment in which he works and studies, Bobby recognizes the importance of not only being highly involved but also managing the perception that he can handle anything that may come his way. Like many business majors on this campus, Bobby identifies strongly with the college of business and finds that almost every bit of his engagement with the university, both academically and with co-curricular activities, occurs within the sphere of the college. He devotes much of his extracurricular attention to his leadership of a relatively new student organization, which aims to connect fashion retail companies with students interested in the field. He described this involvement as a “24-7 thing” with the organizational e-mail and social media accounts he manages always open on his computer, even during classes. His attention already frequently fractured by the demands on him made by this organization and other co-curricular commitments, Bobby recently resigned from a 10-hour per week campus job within the college to make time for an off-campus internship with a major, international retailer headquartered in the city. Between the time of our first and second interviews (about a month apart), Bobby began this new position, which requires roughly 25 hours a week of his time. He struggles to keep up with the pace of this new work environment, which he simultaneously loves and claims is consuming his
life in unhealthy ways. He finds it increasingly difficult – both physically and psychologically – to prioritize school among the demands of his professional and student organization involvements, as these out-of-class commitments are bringing his life after college into focus.

Bobby’s average day begins at 6:00am, and he is on campus by 7:00am for a slate of classes that runs from 8:00am to 7:00pm with only a lunch break as a scheduled interruption. Following dinner, through which he will often work, Bobby engages in student organization meetings and events until typically 10:00pm, at which time he returns home to study until he goes to bed around 12:45am. He described his schedule as a completed puzzle that has no space for additional pieces, and he explained the stress and frustration that occurs when something beyond his control imposes itself – as in the case of a day when he could not make time to go to the pharmacy for medicated eye drops that he needed to keep his eye from tearing up so badly he could not see. Bobby attributed lower grades, loss of connection with friends, poor diet, poor sleep, stress, and anxiety to his high level of involvement but spoke several times on the importance of maintaining an exterior persona of calmness and control. In the latter stages of our conversations, he disclosed that he had been in therapy and on medication for depression in high school and that the pressure to seem on top of things continued to be a trigger for him. Conceding that he has developed a caffeine addiction, Bobby has come to rely upon sipping coffee and water all day as a survival mechanism, quantifying his daily intake as the equivalent of 7 to 12 shots of espresso. He longs for the ability to make more time for his boyfriend, who is out of college and self-employed, but he thrives on the challenge of excelling in work and school in preparation for a fast-paced career.
Briana

“So I mean it’s like little things you know, little things that make you smile and make you happy and you can just kind of ignore how crazed it is. So when I was arguing with my mom where she’s like, ‘Drop it, just drop all of your stuff,’ I’m like those are literally the only things in my life that are making me happy right now how can I drop it? I think that’s the big reason I stay involved.”

Briana is a Chicana woman in her fourth and final year as an undergraduate majoring in Neuroscience with a specialization in Molecular and Cellular Neuroscience and minoring in Spanish and Globalization Studies. Originally from the Midwest, she began high school in the Southwest and finished at the top of her class in a different state in the South. At the time of our interviews, she was preparing for medical school while managing major commitments as a student research assistant, executive leadership roles in three student organizations, membership in two more, participation in an intensive two-year leadership development program, and regular volunteering in the psychiatric unit of the university’s medical center. Her choice of this university was influenced heavily by the availability of diverse involvement, study abroad, and research opportunities. Like most of the participants, Briana referenced the university’s Student Involvement Fair at the beginning of the school year as one of the most visible ways the university promotes co-curricular engagement. Unlike the others, however, she described her experience at the event as “getting shot with like a bazillion arrows,” conceding that the massive table fair is fine for students intending to find one or two activities but lamenting that for students like her intending to get over-involved, the availability of so many attractive options in one place hits them “where they’re weak.” Even as a senior, she has intentionally signed up to staff the display tables for organizations in which she is already a member, so that she will be too preoccupied to visit the other tables and join
something else.

Briana recalled trying a lot of activities as a young child, hating a lot of them, and quitting them – once to the great chagrin of her father who volunteered to coach her soccer team for the season, only to have her quit after the first game, while he continued to honor his commitment. As she progressed through middle school and high school, she immersed herself in countless volunteer service opportunities and several academic organizations and competitions. Her mother would frequently serve with her, but she recalled that her parents never really pushed her into activities, fearing that she would become distracted, stressed, burnt out, and otherwise incapable of focusing on her academics. Briana felt motivated on her own to become well-rounded, and developing a lot of different interests became a value for her that she continues to prioritize in college. Encouragement to slow down and let go of some of her co-curricular commitments is a source of tension and disagreement for her with not only her parents but also her closest friends. Despite the pressure others may put on her not to be so over-committed, Briana is resolute in her insistence that she can handle the challenges.

Briana described a daily schedule that often begins at 5:30am, so that she can be in her research lab by 7:00am. The nature of the research she is doing with mice requires her to visit the lab more than once a day, and her walking commute to the facility takes up valuable time. Her schedule of classes, meetings, events, and study time often has her engaged without a break until after 10pm, and after finally going to bed as late as 2:00 or 3:00am, she sometimes gets only three to four hours of sleep before doing it all again. She identified poor sleep, poor diet, stress, anxiety, and loss of connection with friends and family as negative outcomes related to her involvement, but she maintained throughout our conversations that the responsibility she feels to help others and the
benefits she gets from being involved are far more compelling than the challenges. In our first conversation, Briana made an off-hand comment about being scared of having free time, spoken in a somewhat casual context of explaining that she liked being busy. This comment, however, gained a lot more significance as we began to explore some of the most difficult days of her academic career. Near the end of our second interview, she described a long battle with bouts of depression that would render her too sad to function for days at a time. She believes that keeping her mind and body occupied with so much involvement gives her the best chance of keeping the depression at bay. Although being overwhelmed can be a trigger for these dark episodes, the busyness can be a tonic. Even Briana appreciated the irony in her statement that she might want to talk to a counselor, but she never has the time.

**Gabby**

“I didn’t realize that I could make a career out of doing the things that I loved, and so for me I stopped looking at it as involvement and they were just part of me…There’s not really a separation for me between me and my involvements. My involvements are me.”

Gabby is a White female fourth-year Integrated Language Arts and English Education major from a suburban town in the same state as the university. Receiving a great deal of encouragement from her parents to engage in many activities as a child, Gabby recalled a family expectation in which she would have to try something for at least two seasons before deciding to quit. As a young child, Gabby was involved in Girl Scouts for five years and various types of dance from age 4 through sixth grade. In middle school, she switched to sports and cheerleading, staying with softball and basketball through high school. Her other high school involvement included service with special needs children, student council, serving as president of her National Honor Society chapter, and organizing two dance marathon events to raise money for pediatric
cancer research and the Make a Wish Foundation. Despite this involvement and excellent academic performance, Gabby’s social standing at her small high school changed almost literally overnight in the spring of her freshman year when she was disciplined for her participation in a party by being removed from the softball team for a third of the season. Also victimized by a sexual assault during this incident at the age of 14, Gabby experienced a stigmatized reputation with her peers and the staff of the school, and she did not know how much she could rely on the social support system she had started to build. One particular administrator, who believed in Gabby’s potential and did not change the way he interacted with her throughout this ordeal, asked her to help lead an initiative that would help students get prepared for state graduation tests. Over time, this involvement restored her confidence and motivation, helped her recover her immense social capital, and set her on a course for high levels of involvement for the rest of her educational career.

Gabby’s father attended this university but, according to her, did little other than go to class and study. She wanted her experience to be radically different. Now in her final year of college, Gabby reflects very fondly on a slate of co-curricular involvements that has at times reached 45 to 50 hours a week. She has been exceptionally devoted to the university’s student programming board, having been a member for four years and a committee chairperson for one. Her job as a resident advisor in one of the university’s newest residence halls also puts considerable demands on her time, stamina, and emotional health. Like many of the other participants, Gabby described multiple days a week that began early in the morning, were packed with class, work, and involvement often without a break, and ended very late at night, when she would then get to the task of studying. Her student teaching field placement seized even more of her time during her
third year in school, during which she said she was at her most overwhelmed. Although she has performed well in the classroom, she described her academic effort as a C+ while giving herself an A+ for effort in her campus involvement. Gabby conceived of her involvement as who she is, not simply what she does, and even at the peak of her over-involvement, she would not consider quitting because she loved the activities and the relationships so much. In the last year, she has had a revelation about the centrality of her college involvement to her life and her career aspirations. After wanting to be a teacher since the second grade, she now plans to pursue a career in higher education and student affairs, feeling that she was meant to do the work of student development.

Gabby indicated that she had involvement-related challenges in every category on which I had asked her to comment but that sleep and diet were the two that concerned her the most. During her sophomore and junior years, she said she felt fortunate to get five hours of sleep per night during the week and would sometimes try to steal time for 10-minute naps in the library, the programming board office, or outdoor benches on campus just to function. As she hastily ate lunch during both of our late afternoon interviews, she explained that she rarely feels hungry when she has a lot going on and that even though her RA job provides her with a dining plan, she finds it difficult to make the time to get food in between her various commitments. Even more than these physiological challenges, I was concerned for the extent to which Gabby said she must multitask during the day, which results in her never giving her best effort. She described the lectures of her instructors as “background noise” while she works on assignments for other classes or tasks for her co-curricular involvements. She has also developed a very strong reputation among friends, residents, co-workers, peers, and staff for being positive and optimistic in the face of any challenge. Her natural inclination to be positive reinforced
by countless people who have praised her for it and who may rely on her positivity as a source of inspiration for themselves, Gabby has also struggled to find appropriate ways to share her stress and anxiety authentically. She described coping mechanisms of crying in isolation, binge eating ice cream, and venting to her mother over the phone – all of which enabled her to conceal her vulnerability from those whose environment she said she did not want to ruin with her bad day. In spite of these challenges, Gabby enthusiastically promotes involvement to other students and has begun to develop more mature, trusting relationships with close friends that allow her to manage her stress in more genuine ways.

**Jonathan**

“I’m silently freaking out on the inside. Very silently but I realize if you freak out about this you’re going to waste more time, so you should probably calm down and methodically work through all of this or you’re not going to be able to work through any of it.”

Jonathan is an Asian-American male and a fifth-year senior, majoring in Sociology and minoring in Chemistry. He is the only one of the study participants who began his undergraduate career at another institution, in this case a small, private institution about 45 miles from his home. In his first year of school, he devoted all of his time and energy to a challenging music major and did not get involved in anything outside of class. His lack of social connections was among the reasons he initiated a transfer to his current university. Since transferring, he has commuted to campus from his parents’ house and has maintained a high level of involvement on campus and in the community. Jonathan recalled a Korean cultural norm of fast-paced busyness called *bali bali* (translated as “hurry hurry”) influencing his childhood activities. In an effort to help him become well-rounded, his mother would push him to do more and more, sometimes signing him up for activities he did not enjoy. His constant involvement with music,
sports, and theater from an early age through high school had him feeling overcommitted even before beginning college, and he sees his younger sister, now in high school, on a similar but even more rapid path. He struggles with stereotypes of Asian Americans as being good at math and music, and he thinks about how his involvement choices have evolved over time to conform to or diverge from the stereotypes that resonate with him. As a college student, he enjoys the activities so much and feels so compelled to help other students with their identity development that he has no regrets about the toll his high level of involvement has taken.

Jonathan thought of his college involvement in terms of three different realms – academic, co-curricular, and church, with a fourth distinct realm of performing arts emerging more recently. His early college involvement was defined by a commitment to his church as a Sunday school teacher, event planner, and family group coordinator. At the university, he joined an Asian a cappella musical performance group during his second year, which paved the way to more of a focus on campus involvement during his third and fourth years. This organization introduced him to other identity-based involvement opportunities, including an Asian American Association and an Asian Pacific Islander cohort program run by the university’s Multicultural Center, both of which had available leadership opportunities Jonathan seized. Being featured in two separate viral YouTube videos helped him gain visibility on campus and social capital to go with it. In his fourth and fifth years, the nature of his involvement expanded to a regional level as he became the advocacy chairperson for a conference of Asian American college students in the Midwest and joined a knowledge community for undergraduates through a national higher education association that helped him to think even more critically about the intersection of multiple identities. Jonathan continues to
build on involvement opportunities that have enabled him to intertwine his passions for research, musical performance, and identity development as he completes his degree and prepares for graduate programs.

Jonathan’s struggles with over-involvement include poor diet, barely six hours of sleep per night, lower grades, loss of connection with family and friends, and high levels of stress. He described a daily schedule that began with his commute from home, where he would not return until 10:00pm or 11:00pm most nights – an occurrence that has caused strain with his family. In contrast with many commuter students, Jonathan achieved high involvement in spite of the challenges of not living on or near campus. Even so, his involvement in his local community, specifically his church, led to some of his most irreconcilable difficulties, as these commitments claimed seven to eight hours on each of his weekend days, leaving him virtually no time to relax or study. At the height of his over-involvement, Jonathan described high tension, physical reactions in the form of hives and dehydration, and emotional challenges stemming from the need to appear composed in the company of other students he thought to be just as involved. As his undergraduate career draws to a close, he feels grateful for the experiences he has had, challenging as they were, but he ponders how different his experience may have been if he applied his passion for social justice and interrogating Asian stereotypes to involvement in activities like student government that might have provided a different platform.

Matt

“I’ve never really found anything massively worthwhile in life that’s worth doing that also happens to be easy. So with anything important, anything worthwhile comes a challenge. I definitely would describe myself as over-involved, but it’s more the result of having passions that aren’t exactly small time commitments and caring so much about
different organizations and having different requirements from my major, and all these things competing at once causing this phenomenon.”

The only varsity athlete among the study participants, Matt is a Latino male from the East Coast in his third year, majoring in Biomedical Science and minoring in Economics. Matt’s high levels of involvement can be described as both very broad and very deep, as he has made an exceptional commitment to several major out-of-class activities. He is disciplined to a point of remarkable predictability and rigidity in his schedule, and after a couple of years of adding involvements, he explained that he is in a place where he can no longer commit to more without letting something go. Matt has been thoughtful with his involvement choices by examining the purpose of each new opportunity and proceeding only after confidently relating it to successful outcomes after college. Matt’s father pushed him to do the best he could in as many things as he could handle from a young age. Although he played several sports and spent some time in the Boy Scouts because his friends were involved with it, Matt has been wrestling since he was five years old and began a year-round commitment to it around the time he started middle school. He derives a great deal of motivation for all things in life from the level of effort he sees from his wrestling teammates, and he appreciates how his participation forces him to have discipline, makes him physically and mentally stronger, and affords him a release from all of his stress while engaged in it. Matt is also very aware of how uncommon it is for an NCAA Division I varsity athlete, particularly one from a national championship-winning team, to be an honors student and as involved as he is in other co-curricular opportunities. He occasionally wonders if his other commitments put him at a competitive disadvantage as a wrestler. He has, however, found peace with that possibility because of the value he knows his other involvement adds to his life and his
career aspirations.

Matt could not recall a time in his nearly two and a half years in college when he had watched television or played video games. He has neither the interest nor the time, as his day, which begins at 5:00am and ends around midnight, fits weightlifting, classes, checking in at his research lab, wrestling practice off-campus, an MCAT prep course for three hours in the evening, and student organization meetings together so tightly, there is barely time to eat. Matt is a member of a social fraternity, the president of a Greek honor society, and a participant in an intensive leadership development program full of other students so busy in their own ways that group meetings can typically only occur late at night. He recalled how a compliance meeting for student athletes during his first day on campus was held at the same time as the university’s Student Involvement Fair, a scheduling issue he originally thought of as unfortunate and coincidental but later came to suspect was intentional. Nevertheless, he made it to the event in its closing minutes and got connected with a religious organization. This helped him build community outside of his varsity team, which was particularly helpful when a concussion he suffered in competition during his freshman year rendered him unable to go to class for three weeks or to wrestle for several months. Buoyed by a faith-based value to serve others and driven by a lifelong family value that quitting is never an option, Matt expanded his involvement to its current state, which leaves little time for self-care. However, he rationalized that some of his activities are inherently structured to allow him to work out his stress, reflect on his experiences, and enjoy social interaction with peers and teammates.

Unique to Matt’s circumstances are some physical issues related to his athletic involvement. The structure of the sport is to organize competition according to the
weight of the wrestler. Athletes attempt to build as much muscle as possible without gaining enough weight to move into a higher weight class. Matt described physical and emotional challenges with the process of “cutting weight,” a practice in which wrestlers attempt to lose weight rapidly through exercise, perspiration, and starvation immediately prior to a weigh-in to verify their eligibility. Matt explained that cutting weight provides an advantage because it induces an adrenaline response faster and leaves the wrestler with a lower body fat percentage and a larger lean muscle mass. He thought that the process helped him to focus and perform better in general but left him irritable, impatient, and sometimes emotionless as he struggled to mask his frustration. Matt happened to be cutting weight on the day of our second interview and had just come from a class in which he found his classmates’ questions particularly irritating, so he prefaced his interaction with me with the caveat that he may come across as devoid of emotion as he contained the emotional effects of this competitive ritual. We also discussed his dependency on caffeine to compensate for the general deficiency in his nightly sleep. He identified double espresso as his drink of choice, and he mentioned that effects of the caffeine are magnified during the stress reaction in his body caused by cutting weight. These additional dimensions of involvement-related challenges, attributable in part to his own motivation never to be outworked and in part to his need to adapt to the cultural norms of the various communities he has joined, are noteworthy in an understanding of Matt’s experience with the phenomenon of over-involvement.

**Rania**

“As long as you’re alive I think you should be able to do as much as your body allows. That’s kind of more from a religious standpoint and just from growing up. I believe we are put here to serve others.”
Rania is a third-year Neuroscience and Biology major, who commutes to campus from her mother’s nearby home. She is a Muslim woman of Middle Eastern descent, and she is the eighth member of her extended family to attend this university, including two sisters, one of whom is her twin. In part because her father played soccer for the Egyptian national team, participation in sports was emphasized in her family, and she recalled being engaged in multiple sports year-round from the age of four until she graduated from high school. She described a great deal of encouragement, particularly from her mother, to experiment with many different activities so that she could define her preferences and interests. An extraordinarily outgoing young woman, by middle school, Rania had developed a desire to join every club her school had to offer, not because she was interested in every purpose on which they were based but because she simply wanted to be as involved as possible. She described her older sister as an impeccable ideal of well-roundedness, and she recalled some feelings of competitiveness with her twin sister that may have fueled her to add more and more to her plate. Those feelings, she explained, later gave way to more selfless motivations when she realized that vying for attention was causing her not to be the person she aspired to be.

In college, Rania estimated that she devotes 75% of her time to a set of extracurricular activities that includes serving on the executive committee as comedy chair of the university’s programming board (an organization that plans more than 300 events annually), giving tours of the university, steering the member selection process of a class honor society, and taking a leadership role within her scholars program. Amidst the rigors of two very challenging majors that were chosen to prepare her for a career in dentistry, Rania fits meetings, events, and other work related to her out of class commitments into almost every minute of the day. She described a typical busy day of
involvement beginning at 6:45am to prepare for her commute to campus and classes running from 8:00am to 2:00pm. Immediately afterwards, she balances work and student organization meetings until after 10:00pm, when she either stays in the student union to study until 1:00 or 2:00am or goes back home to study and relax until she falls asleep. This routine is typical at least three days a week and often more. She estimated that she gets an average of four hours of sleep on weeknights and 11-13 hours per night on the weekends.

In addition to insufficient sleep and the exhaustion that ensues, Rania attributed challenges with poor diet, stress, anxiety, loss of connection with family and friends from high school, and less than optimal academic performance to her high levels of involvement. In spite of these challenges, however, she expressed an intense devotion to these activities because of the relationships she has forged, the responsibility she feels to stay committed, the passion she has developed, and the opportunities they provide for her to serve others. Rania has realized that her performance in some of her most difficult classes has left her at a competitive disadvantage for graduate programs, and she has questioned her career trajectory as a result. Among the factors exerting influence on her performance and the resulting career considerations are the minimal time she reserves for focused studying and the large disparity between her academic motivation level and the enthusiasm she has for her activities. Rania described herself as being over-committed, “in too deep,” and sometimes unsure about how to relieve the pressure of so much involvement, but she has little to no regret about how she has spent her time in college. She said she would rather be known for living up to her commitments than for taking care of herself, and she believes very strongly – even spiritually – that she must devote herself to the service of others.
Rhiana

“So trying to find ways where you can kill two birds with one stone is something that I am very good at, finding ways to multitask and get two different things done at once. It’s what I have to do or there’d be no way. I wouldn’t have enough hours in the day to get everything done that I needed to if I focused on one thing at a time.”

Rhiana is a fourth year Health Information Management Systems major from a different Midwestern state, who identifies as bi-racial. The importance of her African-American ethnicity is evident in her primary extracurricular involvements – vice president of a student organization built to support Black students and co-chair of an event for a university-sponsored African American cultural celebration. The oldest of four sisters, Rhiana naturally assumes an almost maternal style of leadership in almost every aspect of her life – at home, among friends, and certainly in her involvement outside of class. She spoke of the importance of the responsibility she feels to be a role model for younger students and to serve as an ambassador to the Black community on campus, working constantly to break down stereotypes and barriers that exist for fellow African American students. Members of her student organization must live in the residence halls, so because of her investment in the group, she has chosen to live on campus all four years. Rhiana credits her involvement in the leadership of this group as critical in developing many of her skills, strengthening her identity, pushing her to manage her time better, and getting her connected with the group’s advisors, who are “everything” to her both personally and professionally. Prior to her senior year, during which she has taken on a 15-hour per week internship with an off-campus healthcare company, Rhiana also spent many hours each week (an average of 10 her first year and 28 in her second and third years) working on-campus, first with the alumni association,
then with the university housing office. During her third year, a time when she realized she was overcommitted, she switched jobs to a 24-hour per week student assistant position at the university’s cancer hospital. She explained that she did not work so many hours for any current financial necessity but perhaps out of fear of having to go without in the future.

Rhiana recalled always being very good at multitasking. She participated in a travelling basketball club from a young age and continued to play year-round until the sixth grade. In middle school, Rhiana was diagnosed with Chron’s Disease, a digestive condition exacerbated by stress that she still manages through treatments and medication. That medical condition halted her athletic involvement until she could learn to manage it. She played basketball again during her first year of high school, then competed in cross country for her last two. She served as president of two clubs at her high school, including the National Honor Society, and she was the vice president of her student council. Because of her ability to handle multiple commitments at the same time and her confidence in her mastery of the academic material, this involvement never caused her to feel overwhelmed. It was not until she got to college that she felt like she may have taken on more than she could handle, but her desire to get involved and remain involved at the university – even to a point beyond what was healthy for her – was tied very strongly to her need to serve others and her interest in being “relevant” on campus.

As Rhiana talked through her average daily schedule, which begins at 7:00am, includes classes for four hours, work for five, and student organization commitments for another two to four, she realized how little time she takes for herself. Her previous campus work environments allowed her to complete homework and student organization tasks during down time on the job, but her current off-campus internship does not afford
such a luxury. This has cut even more into the time that she might take to spend with her boyfriend or simply relax. She maintained, however, that she does not deal well with idle time and that it is important to her to stay busy. Her struggles with healthy choices around diet and sleep have everything to do with her busy schedule, but her stress, anxiety, and difficulty in maintaining some relationships may have additional layers.

Rhiana described a lack of patience, mood changes, and crying fits as a reaction to stress that began during her junior year. Even though she has always been one to fret over a to-do list and to have anxiety over deadlines and a large workload, her emotional reaction intensified as a result of her over-involvement. She described breaking down in tears in the shower or in other places where she could be guaranteed to be alone, feeling particularly unable to show vulnerability to others in her world. This pressure for Rhiana not to burden others with her stress comes in part from her feeling that those who are not as involved as she is would not understand her circumstances and partly from a desire to be a role model of strength, particularly for other Black students. She has observed that those who do not wear their stress well are seen as less capable, and she feels that for others to have that perception of her would compromise her ability to do the work she feels responsible to do, particularly helping other Black students gain confidence in their identities on campus.

**Vikas**

“I don’t know if you’ve ever seen that triangle. It’s like good grades, sleep, and then social life. It’s like pick any two...I guess I’m like trying to choose three, and I feel like I’m not improving on any of this at all.”

The youngest of the study participants, Vikas is a male second-year student from the East Coast whose parents emigrated from India. With aspirations to attend medical school, he is majoring in Environmental Public Health and minoring in Humanitarian
Engineering. In just a year and a half of college, Vikas has immersed himself in campus involvement, including a leadership role within his scholars program, a deputy director position on the student government’s sustainability committee, a campus job, intercollegiate competition with a Model UN organization, at least 10 hours a week of undergraduate research, and a number of other recurring service and social opportunities that have helped him personally and professionally. This list represents his current set of commitments – a slate of activities to which he has narrowed down after an even more active first-year agenda that he said he could not sustain. He spoke frequently of a strong personal need to serve others and attributed many of his involvement choices to the responsibility he feels to help people, much of which has come from a cultural impetus to interrogate his privilege and live humbly and gratefully. He said he would sacrifice food or sleep to keep others from not doing well. However, he also acknowledged a “subconscious push” to do the most he can to set himself apart in a “cutthroat” competitive environment for medical school admission. For Vikas, this pressure is a continuation of a dynamic he described in his college search, during which his guidance counselor – competitive with another counselor at his school to see who could help more students get into schools and earn scholarships – strongly encouraged him to be well-rounded.

Vikas’ interest in having a résumé of diverse experiences came quite naturally in part because of his involvement from a young age with the Boy Scouts. In the process of progressing through the promotion-oriented stages of that program, he developed an incredibly wide range of interests and abilities. His commitment to scouting was time-intensive all the way up until his achievement of the Eagle Scout award in high school. During his primary and secondary school career, he also engaged in the arts with guitar,
choir, and theater activities, played youth basketball and soccer, competed in a math/science league and Model UN, served as president of his high school student council, ran track, and worked as an athletic trainer. Before college, Vikas also managed to work as an assistant in a cell biology lab at a major research university, coordinate four statewide volunteer service events for youth leaders, and participate in two separate medical service trips to India. We discussed the constant push he got from his immigrant parents who want more for him than what they had and how he draws a lot of inspiration from his understanding of the sacrifices they have made to keep the family together and put him in school. He also described a pervasive “spirit of involvement” at the institution that helped him to understand from the very beginning of his college career that engaging in co-curricular experiences was beneficial to him and expected by the university. Vikas has no shortage of motivation, drawn from within himself, from others, and from his idea of future success that necessitates a high level of involvement in the present.

Vikas expressed having involvement-related challenges with his diet, sleep, stress, and anxiety. His mother was concerned when he lost ten pounds from his already-slight frame during the first two months of school, mostly because he was too busy to remember to eat. He explained his typical day beginning at 7:00am to prepare for 8:00am classes and work commitments that are “intense” until his student organization meetings, which run from 6:00pm to 9:00pm on average. He ends each day exhausted, finding it difficult but necessary to shift mentally into a studying mindset and goes to bed quite late. Weekends are used for catching up on work and sleep, but, as is often the case during the week while in class, he becomes distracted thinking about his co-curricular projects. Vikas described stress and disappointment that comes from being too involved to make good on his commitments. He vividly recalled occasions of reaching his lowest

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points when he beat himself up over letting someone down or not performing well academically because he had allowed non-academic commitments to take priority. More than any of the other participants, however, Vikas seemed in tune with his vulnerability. He did not appear to be as reluctant about telling friends, advisors, or family members about his struggles, nor did he shy away from positioning himself as a supportive confidante for his friends. As he prepares for the second half of his second year in college, Vikas has begun to come to terms with his limitations and is able to articulate some authentic strategies for keeping himself from becoming more overwhelmed by his involvement.

Table 2. List of High School and College Activities of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>High School Activities</th>
<th>College Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bobby</td>
<td>Varsity tennis, club tennis, theater, piano, National Honor Society president</td>
<td>President of fashion org., VP of marketing for service org., student employee in business college, business learning community, foreign exchange network volunteer, 3 study abroad programs, professional internship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briana</td>
<td>Interact (service org.), Leo Club (service org.), Environmental org., Animal shelter volunteer, Spanish Club president, National Honor Society</td>
<td>VP of service org., Secretary of academic honorary, VP of class honorary, member of intensive leadership program, undergraduate research, peer leader for Diversity &amp; Inclusion mentoring program, medical center volunteer, 2 study abroad programs, scholars programming board, second-year cohort, alternative break trip, limited involvement in 4 other student organizations, animal shelter volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabby</td>
<td>Student Council, National Honor Society president, Dance Marathon co-director, Cheerleading, Competition Cheerleading, Basketball, Softball</td>
<td>Exec board member of university programming board, RA, residence hall programming board, second-year cohort, Homecoming Court, dance marathon, alternative break trip, study abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan</td>
<td>Marching Band squad leader, Theater, Chinese Club president, Fencing, Youth Orchestra, bassoon and piano lessons</td>
<td>Co-president of a cappella group, officer in identity-based org., regional conference executive, identity-based cohort coordinator, community church activities, beatbox and piano performance, dance club, undergraduate research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
(Table 2 Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Activities and Leadership Positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Varsity wrestling, club wrestling, Retreat leader for HS campus ministry and youth ministry, Service coordinator for Neighborhood House Project (tutoring and mentoring), Football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Varsity wrestling, cabinet position in fraternity, intensive leadership program, undergraduate research, President of Greek honor society, second-year cohort, religious student org., Latino leadership development institute, various leadership programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rania</td>
<td>Soccer, Varsity Tennis captain, Basketball, Drama Club, Freshman Focus Leader, Spanish Club, Science Olympiad, Chemistry Club, Student Council, Local Youth Council, Renaissance (events committee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exec board member of university programming board, exec board of college’s student council, exec board of junior class honorary, scholars program exec board, tour guide, dance marathon, alternative break trip, leadership program, community service, student employee at Alumni Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhiana</td>
<td>Basketball, Cross Country, National Honor Society president, Student Ambassador Club president, Student Government vice-president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exec board of identity-based org. (secretary then VP), cultural celebration event co-chair, student employee in Housing, student employee at Alumni Association, student employee at medical center, community service, professional internship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vikas</td>
<td>Boy Scouts, Athletic trainer, Soccer, Track, Math League, Science League, Model UN president, State Model UN officer corps, French Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student government, Model UN, various university policy committees, scholars program, student employee at student union, undergraduate research, elementary school tutor, med center volunteer, service student organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Pre)Viewing the Essence of Over-Involvement

Before delving into the rich description that constitutes the majority of this chapter, it may be helpful to preview the results of the data reduction of this study – the essence of over-involvement. Based on the commonalities of these study participants, the essence of over-involvement can be described this way. Compelled into competitive habits by a lifetime of pursuing activities and achievements that would help them get...
admitted to college, over-involved students remain on a track to keep pushing themselves in order to excel throughout their undergraduate careers until the next step in their career path has been achieved. They are so committed to their responsibilities that they prioritize involvement over their own well-being. They adjust to the rigors of a schedule packed so full from morning to night that they cannot relax when they do have free time. On top of all the inherent challenges of their deep involvement, they navigate an environment in which they are discouraged through cultural norms from showing any indication that the stress may be too much. The results are inadequate sleep, unhealthy food choices, debilitating levels of stress, and isolation from many healthy relationships because they are convinced others would not understand – or they do not want to be confronted – and yet they remain extrinsically motivated to endure because of the various rewards they can envision and intrinsically motivated by making a difference and proving to themselves that they can overcome the challenges. This is what it means to be over-involved in college. The path to over-involvement forms long before their undergraduate careers begin.

**Habits Forged and Fortified**

One of the primary research questions guiding this study was posed to explore how students are motivated to become so deeply or broadly involved in college. This motivation, it was discovered, began to form at a young age. For each of the study participants, high levels of involvement in college were preceded by many years of a similar pattern of engagement. Although each followed a different path, the consistency among the participants in their recollections of constant extracurricular involvement in their youth was most definitely a prevalent theme. Examples of the specific activities in which each student engaged were cited in their participant profiles, but some additional
context for their pre-college involvement is provided here. Of particular interest is the gradual development of over-involvement as a habit or a norm and the influence of parents, siblings, teachers, and mentors in the establishment of expectations for constant engagement.

(Baby) Steps on the Path to Over-Involvement

During the first interview with each participant, I asked the students to conjure some of their earliest childhood memories of extracurricular involvement. Some of the students seemed to have anticipated this question, as they were able to launch immediately into an exhaustive list. Others meandered backward and forward along their personal timeline as one recollection sparked another. Each recalled these details fondly and proudly, but several remarked that it was only at that moment that they had ever connected the prevalence of involvement in their youth to a pattern that has expanded in college. As Jonathan noted, “Yeah, basically been overcommitted for my whole life. That’s really bad to realize, but I tell you what, I learned a lot, so... [laughter] I regret nothing!”

Students explained that involvement in activities began as experimentation, sometimes at the behest of their parents, who wished to help their children become well-rounded, discover their aptitudes, and refine their preferences. Some of the students committed very early in their lives to a considerable level of depth in certain aspects of their involvement. Bobby recalled his involvement in music starting as young as five. Matt, who began wrestling when he was five years old, spoke of a year-round commitment to training and competing that continues today as a varsity wrestler. Gabby’s earliest memories of involvement were immersive, as well:
When I was very young, I was really involved in dance. So dance was my primary focus when I was younger. I started dance when I was four. I did every style that was offered at our studio, so I was in tap, jazz, ballet, lyrical, hip hop, I did it all. So I lived at our studio. I loved dance from the time I started to the time I stopped.

Until she was diagnosed with Chron’s disease and had to scale back on her athletic involvement, Rhiana was deeply involved with travel basketball from elementary school through sixth grade. As she stated, “It was every weekend I was going to stuff. Maybe one weekend off each month, but we were traveling all the time. Me and my mom were just always on the road.” Others, like Briana, approached many of their activities with no expectation of long-term engagement and bounced from one opportunity to the next until something would stick:

When I was really little, I quit everything. No, I would love to get involved in it, hate it, quit it. So like Girl Scouts, soccer, like I had a bunch of little sports. Tennis I did for like a little while. I would literally try everything and then just quit if I didn’t like it enough to go back.

Several participants’ experiences represented a combination of these two approaches—great depth and consistency in one or two activities while other involvements cycled in and out. Two students’ comments provided representative illustrations:

_Vikas:_ I was in the scouting program for 11 years then got my Eagle Scout…My parents put me in Scouts, they put me in guitar lessons, played soccer, played basketball for a bit, I did choir. I did like theater for a bit, I think that was a thing, wow going back. I think I did like, my middle school was very small so I did like Word Puzzle Club or something, math league, science league, things like that.

_Rania:_ [Rania’s twin sister] and I started sports when we were four. We played soccer all year round. We picked up music in seventh grade…We had a small window of things to do just because we were a charter school. So there wasn’t a lot of opportunity present, but I think we were in every single club they offered. We were in running club, both of us hate running. But I think that’s actually that point in seventh grade when I realized I just like to be in everything, whether I’m good at it or I’m equipped to be in it or not.
For each of the eight students, high levels of involvement began at a young age, and that registered as normal partly because of expectations communicated by parents and partly because of the commonplace nature of such behavior among their peers. Although we did not explicitly discuss socioeconomic status or the privilege inherent in these families’ ability to prioritize and afford such an array of activities, some of the students did explain that college attendance was an expectation, readiness was an important value, and that their parents were willing to make sacrifices to ensure they had exposure to many facets of well-roundedness. As Rhiana put it, “Oh, I’d been told I was going to college since I was born. They were probably telling me when I was still in my mom’s stomach. Yeah, my family was always telling me I was going to school.” The influence of parents and family on involvement decisions is the next area of exploration.

**Imbued with Family Values**

As noted above, obedience with their parents’ wishes was commonly cited as the impetus for these students taking their first steps with extracurricular activities. The influence of parents, siblings, peers, and mentors was also evident throughout the development of the participants’ pre-college involvement decisions. Every student was able to recall some measure of encouragement they had received from one or both parents to try certain activities, though they described varying degrees of gratefulness for the push. When remembering how his mother would enroll him in activities without asking him first, Jonathan reflected:

She wanted me to be well-rounded. She’s definitely told me, like, “I wanted you to know how to do these things because these are things you should know how to do.” I’m going to do that – well I won’t do that to my kids. I will probably do a more relaxed version so they understand that self-care is important, as well. But I agree with my mom with what she did. It pushed me to the limit, but like, it was a good limit.
Similarly, Rania attributed the diversity of her interests in part to her mother:

My mom for as long as I can remember has always been the person to say, “Try everything because you never know. Something you think you might not like you’ll end up maybe loving, or you won’t realize the impact it might have.”

Gabby very fondly described an embrace of support and commitment from her parents when thinking about her activities and those of her sister:

My parents were always involved with us, too. They were really great about taking us places and doing those things with us. We had a student council event, like an auction, they were there. If we had a game, they were there. So I had a really great support system with them keeping me involved, too.

Gabby also recalled having the freedom to explore different avenues but being expected to invest enough time into an activity to make an informed decision about continuing or discontinuing.

Many of the students articulated values held by their parents had that had a profound influence on their involvement decisions. According to Matt, “My father always pushed me to do the best I could in as many things as I could.” Matt, who dabbled in a number of spiritual, sports, and service activities but really devoted himself to wrestling year-round, also shared some important perspective that shaped him and guides him now in college. In his words, “My father had always emphasized that you’re going to be using your brain for the rest of your life, and wrestling isn’t the end-all-be-all.” Further, the drive that fueled Matt’s commitment before college and continues today is related directly to a value communicated by his family and reinforced by his coaches. This value provides a glimpse into a mindset that may even have contributed to his over-involvement in college: “From everything growing up, I’ve been raised that there is no quitting and that you’ll never be outworked by anyone.”
Both of Bobby’s parents and his older sister had been very involved in activities as children, then as high school students, and he understood the emphasis on involvement as a family value. As Bobby explained:

I feel like that’s just what was like ingrained in me to, you know, always be doing something. And like a full schedule kind of helps you be timely and efficient, so I just wanted to continue that in college.

Briana and Vikas connected with a strong value their mothers had placed on service, and they recalled participating in activities together with their mothers that helped them internalize that value. As Vikas stated:

It’s kind of been ingrained in me since I was a kid. I remember my mom always used to tell me things in Hindi. Whenever we’d go to India or when we’d come back she’d be like, “Yeah, we should be thankful that we have all of this.” It was always that cultural aspect of yes we need to be thankful for what we have, all the time. Things happen for the reason they happen, but we should never flaunt it, and we should always help others. That’s how I’ve been raised.

As I discussed the influence of family with the students, I was struck by their frequent use of the word “ingrained.” From its earliest use in the 14th Century, the word meant to “dye (a fabric) red with cochineal,” originating from the French phrase en graine, meaning the seed of a plant or a berry (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The literal use of the word, i.e., “dyed with grain,” gave way to a more figurative use to describe a “deeply rooted” soaking into the fiber of a thing around the 16th Century. Historical linguists documented a figurative definition of being “thoroughly imbued (of habits, principles, prejudices, etc.)” in the mid-19th Century (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.), and it is this usage that serves as a revealing etymological footnote to the “fast-dyed” nature of the students’ attitudes about involvement. “Ingrained” was always used in the context of parents or others with influential authority in the students’ lives making a deep impression on them about the importance of a value, which
contributed significantly to involvement motivation they adopted as their own – as if absorbed into the fiber of their being.

Not every student experienced unequivocal encouragement to engage in multiple activities at a time throughout their pre-college years. Although Briana’s parents did want her to find outlets for her interests, she described a shift in their thinking as she got older and more involved that moved from encouragement to acquiescence to resistance. As she recalled:

I feel like when I was younger my dad really wanted me to focus on my school work…I think my mom really just wanted me happy…For me, all that pressure just came from myself. Like my parents were the opposite. They told me not to be involved in all these things and they told me that I was just going to stress myself out, and I was going to burn out too early and that I shouldn't be – there was no point in being involved in all these things. They’re like, “You just pick one that you like and do it and don’t do multiple stuff.” But I felt like I needed to be well-rounded and, in a sense, wanted to be more well-rounded in my head.

In Briana’s case, the influence and support of her parents got her started on a path to being involved, but as they started to associate her involvement with her stress and feared that the activities would serve as a distraction from her studies, they began to discourage her from taking on more. This dissonance, and Briana’s reaction to similar advice she has gotten from friends in college, will be explored in more detail below. However, because this attitude from her parents stood out as a potential disconfirming case in comparison with the descriptions of complete encouragement all the way through primary and secondary school coming from the other participants’ parents, I wanted to mention it here.

**Developing Agency and Solidifying Habits in High School**

Each of the eight participants described a slate of high school activities that clearly tested their ability to balance school with other commitments. Table 2 provides a
quick reference on the high school and college activities listed by each student. The motivations they cited for taking on so much in college, many of which are closely related to high school influences, will be explored in the next section, but a few reflections on the leap they experienced during high school into a new level of investment of time and energy are shared here. Vikas, Bobby, and Jonathan recalled their high school activities being constant when they were not in class:

*Vikas:* My parents would generally get aggravated with me that I wouldn’t sleep, but that was just because of course load, and I would get home like, before I got my license I would get home by like, actually even when I had my license I would get home at like 7 or 8 after practice or club meeting or something.

*Bobby:* I was on the varsity tennis team, and I played club tennis year round. We practiced like four days a week for multiple hours and everything, so that was a really big thing for me. I was also really involved in theater, which is also year-round and long rehearsal hours.

*Jonathan:* In high school I ended up over-committing myself in music, so at that time I was taking bassoon lessons, piano lessons, I was a squad leader in the marching band. I would play in the pit for theater productions or be in the production, and theater takes up tons of time. Especially during hell week it’s like 3:00 to 9:00 you have rehearsal. Then sometimes, and then in high school I also picked up – I did Chinese club, I led the Chinese club, I fenced. I joined the youth orchestra. I wanted to win a concerto competition. I did lots of music stuff on the side.

Several of the students indicated a shift in high school where they could really focus on what they wanted to do, rather than to be involved in activities they felt compelled to do because of urging from their parents. The development of some agency in their involvement choices is noteworthy, particularly since they voluntarily pursued an agenda of extracurricular activities, those sponsored by their schools and otherwise, that left them with little free time after they worked in time to study. As high-achieving students, however, several of the participants noted that success in school came easily, leaving more time for involvement. According to Rhiana:
National Honor Society was huge. That and the ambassadors took up a lot of my time. But it was high school, so high school is easy. So I was never really stressed out or anything, not that I remember. I don’t ever feel like I got overwhelmed with involvement until I got to college.

Although we focused in our conversations on their extracurricular involvement, each of the students described school work as their top priority in high school. In Rhiana’s words:

School is super important in high school. I graduated top 25 of my class. There were 700 people in my class, so school was super big. I knew if I was going to college that’s how I was getting there. It had to be academics because sports wasn’t happening, realistically it wasn’t. So school was always really important, and then the involvement was great, too, but it was nice to put on my résumé that I balanced that.

Rhiana hinted here at the topic of competitive norms around college admissions, a subject that will be taken up in the discussion of motivation below, as it proved to be quite relevant to the progression to over-involvement in college. She also described a sense of purpose in her high school involvement that mirrors values she now applies to her undergraduate activities:

I wanted to make the most of my experience. I didn’t want to be that student who just went to class and then went home every day because like, what do you take away from high school? What did you do? How did you make a difference? That’s important to me, how did I leave my mark in high school?

Similarly, Rania was aware of the ways in which her involvement defined her reputation among her peers:

My high school had 2,000 kids, and I knew everybody, and that was kind of what I was kind of infamous for. That’s what I wanted to keep just because I like to know everyone everywhere.

High school involvement started to blur the line between what the students did and who they are, as their activities began to define aspects of their identities. In sum, these students’ high school years served as an important transitional and habit-solidifying time
between the constant but parent-driven involvement of their youth and the autonomously motivated over-involvement of their undergraduate careers. Their motivations for beginning their involvement in college is the subject of the next section.

**An Abundance of Motivation to Start College Involvement**

As was documented in the previous section on how involvement habits were formed and fortified, norms for high levels of involvement in the study participants’ lives had already been established by the time they matriculated to college. However, up to that point, their high level of activity was constant but free of the involvement-related challenges that are crucial to the definition of over-involvement – in other words, highly involved but not over-involved. So that I could understand more about the students’ experience with the phenomenon, it was imperative to explore their motivations not only to get involved in college but also to remain involved well beyond the point at which challenges began to set in.

Every one of the study participants connected their expectations for getting involved in college to the prevalence of extracurricular activities in high school. As Gabby said:

> It’s just innate. The motivation was just kind of natural. I like to put my hand into everything. I loved being involved in high school. I think that was maybe a big part of it was that I was really involved when I was in high school, so trying to make that translate over into college was really important for me.

Vikas captured the sentiments of several students who initially sought out involvement that resembled their specific high school activities but then moved on to new opportunities:

> I was student council president in high school and so kind of wanted to do it again just to give back to the school community and do what I can do to fit the needs of whatever the students want. So that was the initial I guess – initial backing for me
to join. Then I realized it’s much, much more than that. So I guess it’s just me just climbing up the ladder and just sort of working my way to one thing from another to another.

The upward mobility along a “ladder” that Vikas mentioned was cited in a number of different ways by the participants, who recognized that a progressive absorption of responsibilities and achievement of leadership positions was an expectation they had for themselves to reach their post-college goals. This motivation will be explored in more depth below, but it is noteworthy to the discussion of motivation that merely joining an organization is the lowest, most basic form of engagement the students described. Rhiana reflected on her dissatisfaction with starting at the bottom of that ladder as an involved student without any specific responsibilities, especially compared with the prominence she held as a leader in high school:

So I think the biggest thing for me is that I was so used to being involved like having a leadership role in high school that for my first two years to kind of be here and just be like a general member wasn’t enough for me.

The progression from a lifetime of extracurricular activity to a college experience defined by involvement may have been captured best by Briana, who said, “I guess I’ve never really known a way not to be involved.” That phrase for me really captured the essence of the extent to which high involvement had become so habitual and like second nature for these students. It was not until we engaged in this conversation that many of the students had stopped to consider the years and years of foundation they had built for their motivation and expectations for college involvement.

Creating a Web of Interconnectedness

The desire to build upon their success in high school involvement was cited on several occasions, but the students also articulated a strong motivation to fit in, find
friends, avoid isolation, and develop a sense of connection to others. Briana recalled the value of a peer connection program run through the university’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion in helping her find community:

So I guess really my motivation was just I wanted to keep busy and that I wanted to feel involved. But say like the [inclusion program], like I joined that out of fear of being an out of state student and not having a group to be part of. So I think that was like my first drive.

Briana went on to emphasize the particular significance of peer connection as a motivation at a large institution. Some of the students, like Vikas, Bobby, Rania, and Matt, started their undergraduate careers immediately with membership in scholars groups, living-learning programs, or varsity teams that instantly surrounded them with likeminded peers and structured advising that enabled them to build bonds with others.

As Vikas said:

My scholars program was basically what set [university] off for me. Since it was a living-learning community, that’s how I made my very first friends. You know, coming out of state knowing only one person who’s a junior and lives off-campus, it’s, it was kind of tough, but once I got here, I was like, oh wow, this scholars thing made it really easy to meet everyone.

Others, like Gabby, developed a strong interest for a particular organization while at summer orientation and were motivated to connect with that group as soon as possible to seek their fit. Gabby recalled her initial experience and the relationships to which that involvement has led:

So right off the bat, [programming board] has definitely been my number one most meaningful involvement. I would say it was my first time meeting people who had very similar interests as I did outside of the classroom. I felt very welcome there. When you got there, you were greeted with smiles and got a lot of awesome information, and from that day forward has just been a wonderful experience for me.

Jonathan, explained how the lack of belonging led to his decision to leave his first
in favor of his current university:

When I did try to get involved on campus, I tried to get affiliated with Christian groups, but I didn’t really fit in there. So, you can say, I was involved academically but not really for my own enjoyment. I found myself mostly on Saturday nights just kind of doing music theory homework and studying because that’s what I enjoyed doing, but again, that probably led to me not being able to be socially active at [previous school], so I left.

Once involved, the students spoke of peer connection as profoundly important to their adjustment to college, their on-going success, and their ability to cope with challenging situations. They frequently used words like “family,” “community,” and “tight-knit” to describe the nature of their connection. As Rania put it, “I never worry. If I have to fall, I have like an army to fall on, which is really, really nice.” Matt recalled the unexpected support he got from his peer network when essentially confined to his residence hall room as he recovered from a concussion sustained in a wrestling competition:

It felt great to have that, and it was great to know that should I have something of that nature happen to me, I know I have people I can count on – which isn’t something I necessarily feel day to day because I feel most of the time I’m doing the opposite. I’m helping other people as much as I can.

With this comment, Matt hinted at an interesting dynamic that contributed to over-involvement for several of the participants. The interconnectedness became so great that these students’ commitment to serving others in their smaller communities frequently exceeded the emphasis they placed on their own care. This theme will be visited in more depth below in the exploration of reasons why the students remained so involved.

**The Promise of Future Rewards**

As compelling as the second-nature continuation of high levels of pre-college involvement and finding one’s fit were for each of these students as motivators, there were certainly other strong and significant reasons they cited for getting started. Some
students were very attuned to the connection between their involvement choices and their fitness for career opportunities during and after college. Vikas acknowledged the existence of this motivator:

I guess there’s kind of like a subconscious like, push for me to be involved because I want to go to medical school, and nowadays I'm sure you've heard how super competitive it is you know with kids coming in with 4.0s, president of their university, doing this and this research, going to this and this symposium. It’s pretty much like, the competition is so cutthroat, it’s becoming insane. So I’m absolutely sure that’s motivated me, too, just to be as diverse as I can for applications to med school.

This career-focused motivation was expressed more strongly by most participants as a reason to remain involved in spite of the challenges or expand their involvement, but other students, like Bobby, mentioned it as a motivator for almost all of their involvement decisions. Briana referenced this career connection as she reflected on the rewards of being involved:

When I’m applying for med school, I’m getting rewarded for doing so much, and I know I am because one of the questions they ask sometimes is like, “So being an MD/PhD takes up a lot of your time, can you give me an example of a time in your life that used up a lot of your time and how you responded to that?” So they want to hear that. They want to hear that you stressed yourself out and you were over-involved.

Jonathan raised a point about the status and social capital that accumulates from lower levels of involvement and is ultimately necessary to attain leadership roles. This planful acknowledgement of the stepping stones that exist in student leadership was referenced by Bobby, Rania, and Vikas, as well, as they discussed the beginnings of their co-curricular careers. These sentiments related to a statement Rhiana made, which was similar to her previous assertion that she wanted her high school involvement to mean something:

I think just wanting to be, to have that leadership experience and then also
wanting to be relevant on campus and make a difference especially in my community. Like be a role model for younger students you know.

Rhiana’s desire for relevance on campus was echoed in the comments of students who did not articulate it as directly but who inferred that the status they had as standout leaders in their high schools was a valuable part of their identities.

**Moved by a Spirit of Involvement**

Extrinsic motivations for starting college involvement that stemmed from the environmental press of the institution were also prevalent in the participants’ comments. Each student recalled messages they heard within their first days on campus that helped them to understand the university’s expectations for their participation in co-curricular activities. As Gabby, who is a resident advisor (RA), stated:

My ears are more inclined to hear the encouragements, but I do think the university is big on involvement from the time you go to orientation until move-in day of your first year. You hear get involved! Get involved! Get involved! Your RAs tell you, get involved! Get involved! Find something to do. You meet your friends, your friends start doing things because they heard it from so and so, or so and so said, “This is great, we should go to it together.”

Rhiana also recalled the pervasive messaging early in her career, and she realized that the advice came from formal and informal channels:

I think that [university] does a good job of encouraging people to get involved. I think that [university] does such a good job of it that then students then reinforce it with each other. Especially the older students who have been here and kind of know how beneficial it is to be well-rounded and not just go to class every day and that be it. So I think that’s just like a domino effect. Faculty and that kind of thing are like enforcing it, so then students are understanding why it’s so important and passing it on.

Every student referenced the university’s student involvement fair, an event held during the first week of each semester that showcases student organizations and other opportunities for engagement. Some reflected on the statement made about the centrality
of involvement by the massive event, which attracts several hundred organizations and nearly 15,000 attendees. Others commented on just how overwhelmed they felt by all the choices. Briana shared her feeling that the event could actually be harmful for students with personal expectations for a lot of involvement:

That’s going to hit anybody who’s interested in anything basically. And the way it throws it all at you is that it really hits the people who would normally only get interested in one thing. It hits them well because everything’s available to them to see, and so they’ll find that one thing they want. But to the people like me who are *intending to get over-involved*, it is like getting shot with like a bazillion arrows, you know. Like you just sign up for everything. So I mean, it’s good to reach other people who don’t involve, but it kind of hurts the people who want to get too involved. Like it is basically hitting them where they’re weak.

Similarly, Vikas recalled putting his name on numerous sign-up lists at the event and then taking quite a while to discern which organizations would get his focus. Bobby echoed other students’ sentiments about the student involvement fair, but he also shared thoughts about the environmental press within the business college for not only getting involved but expanding that involvement over time. In his words:

They really push for you to like, you know, your first year figure out what you want to do, like get involved with a student org. And then your second year, you need to become on the exec board or pick your student org that you would move forward with. And then your third year you would either be president of that student org or have an exec position within that student org. And then your fourth year you would reflect on basically your stuff which would coincide with your senior capstone class at [business college] that you take.

Like Rhiana, who suggested that institutional encouragement of engagement was promoted by staff and faculty, Bobby commented on the various sources of messaging about the university’s expectation of involvement:

I would say the faculty are aware and supportive because I think a lot of the faculty are advisors for student orgs. I feel like [business college] kind of has a united front in being for it, though. Even our deans and everything.

Students like these study participants, who came into the institution with norms of high
involvement, are attuned to the various ways in which a culture of involvement is perpetuated. Vikas captured this idea in a statement he made:

So I mean you have that thrown at you on the first week of school, and it’s just like, “Woah! I have to do something here.” I previewed what I wanted to do and checked out a few new things, but I guess it’s just I always hear, you know whenever people talk to each other, it’s like, “Are you involved with something on campus? Oh, what do you do in your spare time?” I mean the whole community and I guess the whole spirit everyone has of involvement and being connected to everyone else is what [university] does to you.

Vikas, like several others, went on to discuss the ways he no longer just consumes these messages but now promotes this spirit of involvement to his friends and new students he meets.

In sum, the students were very thoughtful in their identification of the ways they were motivated to start getting involved. Continuing their lifelong pattern of involvement, seeking connection in their new community, identifying with an intrinsic need to serve and an extrinsic need to reap career-related rewards, and adapting to the institution’s cultural expectations around engagement were all identified as compelling motivators. Once firmly on the path to a high level of involvement, these students were reinforced in various ways to keep adding as much as they could. I will return to the research question related to motivation when examining the reasons why the students said they remain involved in spite of the challenges they encounter. The next section explores the participants’ utter devotion to their activities and their specific experiences with the phenomenon of over-involvement.

An Obsessive Level of Involvement

In addition to learning more about motivations, I intended to find out what it means to be over-involved and to understand how students describe the impact of high
levels of involvement on their lives. What I discovered was a co-curricular commitment so pervasive and interwoven into the fabric of their lives, their involvement could, at least at times, be considered an obsession. Below, I will discuss the lived experience of these over-involved students, including their management of their daily schedules and the challenges they have encountered as a result of their high levels of involvement.

**Organization and Multitasking: Keys for Adding Pieces to a Completed Puzzle**

In each of the participant profiles that began this chapter, I shared some generalizations about a typical busy day, based on information the students provided in our interviews. I was astonished as one student after the next described a routine that began early in the morning, proceeded at a frenetic pace that barely left time to eat, then concluded with exhaustion late at night, only to wake up the next day and repeat. By the time of our interviews, most of the students recalled this routine as typical of a past experience with over-involvement from which they had emerged with some important perspective on how to keep it from happening again. However, even the older students, who thought of their busiest time as some period in the past, spoke of present-day challenges that seemed to indicate over-involvement was more of a way of life for them than a moment in time with a finite beginning and end point. A few specific comments help illustrate the scope of the students’ challenging daily schedules:

*Bobby:* I usually go to bed never before midnight, and I wake up at 5:45, and I’m on campus by 7:00am every day. And then student orgs, you know, pretty much keep me here in the evening, since most of our student org things are in the evening. All my student orgs conveniently meet on the same night, but it’s from like 6:30ish until like 10:00pm. That’s like a solid four hours that I will not get anything else done other than like the meetings and doing things related to the student orgs.

*Matt:* So treating college like a 9 to 5 work day is almost humorous to me because I’m getting up before 9. We have 6am lifts Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, so
I’m getting up at 5am, and I don’t stop until I go to bed. I was staying even though I finished up everything going to chapter for [fraternity] and running chapter for [honor society], I finished all that by 8:30. I didn’t get to bed until nearly 11:00 because I was going through e-mails, sending stuff out for [honor society], making sure everyone got a hold of the minutes, had links to different forms. And then I started working on an application for [experience abroad]. So, even when I’m “done,” I’m not really done.

_Briana:_ I had a lab report due at 10:00am on Tuesday, and I had an 8:30 to 12:30 class. So I had to get the lab report done by 8:00. So I got home at 9:30 from an org, and then I had to eat, and then after I ate I could finally start on the lab report, and I thought, you know, I can just stay up as long as I need to, but I didn’t account for getting a migraine. So then I had to still do the lab report with a migraine, which meant I didn’t go – I went to bed at 3:30 to wake up at 5:30 to take a shower and finish the lab report. And then you still have the rest of the day. You know, like I had to come home and take a nap at one point because I just could not keep going.

These examples are typical of statements the other participants made about their schedules during the time they considered themselves to be over-involved. In our second interviews, I asked the students to comment more specifically on an hour-by-hour description of a busy day. Most of them went from memory, but some, like Jonathan, pulled out their laptops or tablets to look back on their calendars in order to be very specific. In the process of doing so, those students made statements about how they could not believe they had run themselves so hard, and seeing the blocks of time on their calendar was a powerful visual reminder. The importance of being very organized was mentioned frequently, as with Gabby:

_I am a very organized and planned out person, so if you saw my agenda book, it’s madness, like color coded post-its and half post-its and notes about writings and pen colors. It’s just like crazy, but I do love to be planned out because if I don’t, I’ll get very stressed about like what I have due when, as far as school work is concerned. What time events are, when they are, if I’m going to get to go to events and even outside of involvements, things with family._

Jonathan revealed his reliance on technology to help him manage his time as he extolled
the virtues of Google calendar. However, he recognized a troubling by-product from becoming “obsessed with organizing things” that influenced the nature of some of his relationships:

I compartmentalize people, and other people who don’t compartmentalize like they see that as, “Oh, I’m just this slot in your schedule.” It’s like, no, if I’m spending time with you I really want to do that, so it’s really trying to be genuine while at the same time knowing my limit, like I can’t talk with you anymore. So finding that fine balance and then being flexible.

Though most of the students commented on how their involvement had improved their time management, Rania was candid about her struggles with developing an effective system to organize her less-structured commitments on her calendar:

I’m very bad with time management. Unless I have like I said on Tuesdays where I’m back to back for like 15 hours straight, if I don’t have that kind of thing, I’m really just kind of all over the map. Whereas I see a lot of people will purposely write time to study, I don’t. I don’t do that. To me studying is not a chunk of time. You just do it when you do it.

Rania also spoke of the stress of not having a good system being compounded by the perception that those around her were handling their schedules much better.

The students reflected on the magnitude of keeping such a busy schedule and made a few revealing comments about how they conceived of the challenge. Bobby explained how rigidly structured his schedule had become:

I didn’t have time to add something to my day. Yeah because I do plan – everything fits in its spot. It’s like a puzzle. So with that also I can never stay longer at work, so I have to have everything done so I can leave for class or for my meetings. If things come up I really don’t have an option to adjust my schedule.

Briana conceived of this challenge in “employment” terms:

I feel like going to classes is a full-time job, and then I have a part-time job for my research and I would say maybe sticking volunteering with that. And then I would say it’s another part-time job doing all of the student orgs. So I feel like I’m working one full-time, two part-times, which is basically another full-time.
A strategy mentioned by all the students for simultaneously managing multiple commitments, or “jobs” as Briana thought of it, was to multitask. The availability of smart phones, tablets, and laptops, especially when permitted for use in class, opened up the possibility for students to do several things, albeit none with complete focus, at the same time. As Gabby recalled:

I’ve gotten better at finding the time to do homework in different settings. So instead of needing to go home to do my homework or needing to go to the library to do my homework, I would maybe do an assignment while I was in class. Or I would do an assignment while I was responding to e-mails, or watch a film that I needed to watch while I was having a one on one with a committee member.

Bobby spoke of being distracted during class by the student organization social media account he was responsible for monitoring, which was up on his computer “24/7.” Rhiana recognized this multitasking strategy as her ultimate method for handling the demands of her schedule:

Sometimes I’m able to get homework done at work which is really helpful since my days are so busy. So definitely something that I would recommend is getting a campus job where it’s okay to do homework because sometimes when you are so busy, that time to do homework is late at night, and then you are tired and you don’t feel like it. So trying to find ways where you can kill two birds with one stone is something that I am very good at, finding ways to multitask and get two different things done at once. It’s what I have to do or there’d be no way.

These comments helped me to understand the degree of priority the students placed on their co-curricular commitments. The out of class involvement was at least equal to, if not greater than classes in importance for many of the participants. Some, like Matt, emphasized the supreme centrality of academics in the hierarchy of their time management values, but even these students were frequently kept from living out that value because of the demands required of them. Briana, who has been an exceptional student at every level of her educational career, described the internal conflict:
I feel like I’ve always had to choose between academics and some kind of organization or something I’m doing. I think what usually happens is I choose the organization or something up until the point where I get results back like grade-wise. Then that will make me shift back, but like recently I’ve been getting bad grades, but I don’t know how to shift back anymore. So like with my lab work, I just feel so much commitment to it, and feel like this has been the project I’ve been working on for months at a time, and all that effort is going to go to waste if I don’t take care of it because no one else will. So that’s been really hard. Then right now I’ve also been arguing with my parents because my parents want me to drop everything and study on my grades. Then I’m like well there’s nothing I can just drop. My orgs are the only things that has me happy right now, and then my lab is something I feel committed to. So then like I don’t know what can – I don’t understand how you just drop things. Just pretend they weren’t part of your life or pretend you’re not worried about them.

With these descriptions of a typical schedule, the students’ philosophies about time management, and insight about their fractured attention as a foundational context, I will move next into a description of the profound challenges these students faced as a result of their involvement.

**Good Grades, Student Involvement, and Self-Care: Pick Any Two**

The working definition of over-involvement for this study is participation in co-curricular activities for students who experience involvement-related challenges to their achievement of positive outcomes. Potential participants were asked to indicate on the demographic survey which broad categories of challenges they had encountered. As shown in Table 1, all eight participants chosen for the study selected multiple categories. Our conversations about their specific struggles constituted the largest portion of the data corpus, as the students had much to share. In this section, as I continue to provide a description of their lived experience with the phenomenon, I will explore the struggles the students described.

**The physical toll.** All eight of the students self-reported sleep-related challenges caused at least in part by their out-of-class commitments. Sleep, as a fundamental
element of self-care, was frequently neglected because the students felt as though the
emphasis they placed on it was largely in their control and that the physiological
consequences of not getting enough were secondary to their responsibilities. As Bobby
and Rania said:

*Bobby:* I usually don’t like ask for help. I’ll usually just like sleep less. That’s
basically my only thing is that I’ll just like stay up and like power through it.

*Rania:* I would rather get no sleep and have some type of studying done than
sleep and then wake up and say, “Oh, sweet, all I did yesterday is a bunch of fun
stuff.” I usually get like four hours of sleep on a good night.

Gabby provided an example of how sleep during the week was a luxury she did not often
afford herself:

Sleep is hard. I catch up on sleep when I can. So like weekends, I’ll sleep until
10 or 11, which is great. During the school week, I get like five hours of sleep a
night. A lot of that is because I will go all day with classes and involvements and
events and then I’ll come home, and I live where I work. So I will get home at
9:00 at night, but then I have a resident I need to check in with, or residents will
stop by, or I have a staff meeting, or my co (RA) who I’m very close with will
need something. We’ve gotta plan a program or make a bulletin board. I live
where I work, so I’ll go home and be up until who knows when depending on
what’s going on.

Vikas inferred a degree of normality and acceptance of minimal sleep for highly involved
students, but for him, this struggle did not begin in college:

I don’t know if you’ve ever seen that triangle. It’s like good grades, sleep, and
then social life. It’s like pick any two…I guess I’m like trying to choose three,
and I feel like I’m not improving on any of this at all. I don’t think – if you get
enough sleep in college that’s insane. I don’t think I’ve pulled off eight hours
aside from a weekend maybe, but that’s been throughout high school. I haven’t
slept a lot throughout high school and college.

Jonathan and Rania both shared that they often postpone their bed time even beyond what
they have allowed their busy schedules to dictate because of a tendency to procrastinate
or engage in mindless activity like watching movies on Netflix or playing video games.
Sometimes, however, even though these hobbies might cause the students to fall asleep later than they know they should, they help the students to decompress a bit, which could help to improve the quality of their sleep.

Many of the students acknowledged their human limitations and conceded that their lack of sleep or inconsistent patterns eventually had to be addressed. A common “remedy” for a relatively sleepless week was an attempt to “catch up” on the weekends. As Gabby explained:

I catch up eventually. That sounds bad, but I do. I mean, no it’s not good for me. I definitely feel the effects of that, but they accumulate, so I can do it for like a month and then I’ll have a day when it like hits me. I’m like, okay, nothing this weekend, no one talk to me, lights are off. I just seclude myself for like two or three days and do nothing but sleep and watch Netflix. So it does catch up. It’s not good for me physiologically, and I can feel it accumulating, but I just ignore it until I have time to recognize that I’m very tired I guess.

In our second interview, Gabby described times when she could not wait for the opportunity to binge-sleep, and the physical exhaustion would catch up with her:

I was getting up at 7:00 and probably going to bed at 2:00. That’s about average for me. So during the daytimes then, if there was a 10-minute break where I could take a second and either I could go grab something to eat maybe, I would probably take a 10-minute nap in the office or take a 10-minute nap in the library. I sleep everywhere. I sleep outside on park benches, that is, if I have 10 minutes, I’ll take a nap on a park bench.

Rania had already described her Tuesdays as being particularly intense with her student organization commitments, so the ensuing Wednesdays frequently included skipping class to recover. She disclosed that skipping classes was becoming a more frequent occurrence:

It happens often enough that I’m starting to want to show up to those. I just hear alarms, and I’ll just fall back to sleep. So, yeah, I would say I skip quite a few classes. Not due to other obligations just usually because I fall asleep. So I don’t skip to do something else. I’ve done that maybe once…Usually I skip a lot of classes because most of them have on-line (components).
The need to skip classes to catch up on sleep was not mentioned by other students, but questions about that behavior were not specifically asked. However, the chain reaction of busy days balancing class and co-curricular activities forcing studying into the late evening or early morning hours, resulting in fatigue and difficulty concentrating the next day was a strong theme common to the experience of all participants.

Over-involvement also had a significant influence on the participants’ ability to meet basic physiological needs around eating. Challenges with diet were cited by all eight participants on the pre-interview survey. Some students lamented the unhealthiness of the specific food choices they made due to a lack of time to prepare or seek out better options, as with Briana, who explained she often only eats peanut butter sandwiches in a given day, mostly while walking. Others described habitual adjustments made necessary by their packed schedules that frequently resulted in having only one balanced meal per day, if that. Still others discussed a chemical dependency they had developed on caffeinated drinks to help them stay attentive throughout the day. Comments from Matt and Bobby help illustrate the depth of their struggles:

Matt: There are times when I forget to eat, and then I have to eat closer to practice time, and I prefer not to do that, but it happens. I get absorbed in my work, and that fuels me, and I don’t even realize that I should be eating. So, taking the time to step back, chill out, and eat is something I forget to do.

Bobby: Basically I’ll go straight from class to meetings, like student org meetings or other events that we’re doing a lot of nights of the week and those are usually through dinner. I also don’t usually eat lunch or breakfast really. I kind of just like drink coffee all day and then go to bed. So I really only eat like one meal a day. It’s usually in the evening. And I did lose like seven pounds last year from not being able to eat. And I’m pretty skinny to begin with, so I don’t really have that much to lose, mostly just lost muscle mass, which is sad… I guess most days I usually have between like four to seven shots of espresso, probably would be the equivalent. Freshman year I would drink 12, which I think is like really unhealthy probably. Also just like being – I mean, you become like addicted to caffeine,
too, so, you know, I’d probably get a headache if I, you know, didn’t drink coffee in the morning or whatever.

Jonathan and Rania shared many of these sentiments, but as commuter students, they mentioned an interesting advantage over residential students in having a parent at home who could feed them breakfast and help prepare meals for them to take to campus. Several of the students recognized that their diet issues began in college and might have emerged from their busy high school schedules if not for routinized meal times at home and school and the watchful eyes of their parents.

Of all the diet-related struggles I heard the students describe – Bobby sipping constantly on coffee or water, Matt’s combination of caffeine consumption and cutting weight for wrestling, Gabby consistently failing to realize that she was hungry, Vikas losing a significant amount of weight while already very thin – I was most concerned about Briana’s. As with good sleep, healthy eating was something she was willing to sacrifice consciously in deference to classes and involvement. In her words:

For me like health is such at the bottom of my spectrum so then they are like, have you eaten? The only reason I ate today was because I called my mom and she was like, “Put it on my card,” and I was like, “Okay then, I’ll eat.” But otherwise there’s just so much to worry about. Either I choose food or studying, and now I still have homework to do because I chose food, so I’ve been feeling guilty about that all day. So honestly after this is done I’ll probably do the homework before I eat. I’ll probably eat around 9.

The feeling that her responsibilities were more important than her own wellbeing was more pronounced with Briana than with other participants, but the underlying sentiment was present in all the students’ comments and characteristic of the phenomenon of over-involvement.

**The academic toll.** For this group of high-achieving students, it would perhaps be more appropriate to categorize academic-related challenges as “academic,” rather than
with the moniker of “lower grades,” which was the name of the option presented to them on the demographic survey. Six of the eight participants selected “lower grades,” but all eight described academic challenges created by their co-curricular involvement. It bears mentioning that “lower grades” is a relative term that should not be equated with “low grades” in the broader sense. The average cumulative GPA of these eight students at the time of our interviews was 3.507 on a four-point scale, and none was below a 3.1. Even those with the highest GPAs conceded that a more singular focus on classes and studying may have resulted in even higher grades and that their high levels of involvement often kept them from putting forth their maximum effort. That said, “grades” are only one measurement or dimension of academic involvement and achievement. For this particular sample, a casual attempt to correlate over-involvement with low grades would not result in much concern. On a deeper level, however, the academic challenges these students described illuminate a tension between perfectionism and the desire to be well-rounded. Vikas recalled this very tension leading to his most trying times in college:

I guess I reached a super low point whenever I would get a bad grade or if I let someone down. I would beat myself up over, “I didn’t do the best that I could’ve done. If I had not gone to this thing or if I had gone to this thing then I could have done that.” It would just be like small things like that that would add up, and I would beat myself up over it. If I had promised someone I’d do something, because I was saying yes to everything, and if I didn’t do it as well as I could, or if I kind of half-assed it, then it would be like, “Ah, I feel terrible!” and I would just beat myself up over it.

For some of the students, these challenges also represented a realization that the out-of-class involvement, and the fulfillment, fun, social status, and other benefits it created for them, was authentically more important to them than their studies. Gabby captured the idea that co-curricular involvement had risen to a much greater level of priority for her than she initially expected:
I do attribute the lower grades my freshman year to my being involved and my trying to get involved because I stopped caring so much about my school work, and I put that time into things outside of the classroom. So if I had a paper to write, I would go to an event instead because I just wanted to be there and see my friends and do something fun and do the things I loved to do.

Rania reinforced the idea that out-of-class activities can take first priority, especially when more success and gratification is found in them than in schoolwork:

I definitely over commit myself extracurricular-wise. I still do it. I’m aware that I’m doing it. I still – I wouldn’t say I ever really did much about it. I just put too much time into organizations I’m involved in just because to me, I like to think I’m compensating by having fun, and I can study later. Not always the case. But on the flip side, definitely while that’s a mix of the two, my classes are extremely difficult, so I think it’s a mix of the class is already hard to begin with, and I don’t put in as much time as I should. So that’s probably why I’m getting lower grades.

All of the students referenced time spent on co-curricular activities being time subtracted from what they had available for studying, but there were other implications of the expansion of activities time in their schedules. As mentioned above in the discussion of how the students managed their time, fractured attention while multitasking was common. Gabby described this aspect of the phenomenon in more detail and its impact on her academic performance:

I do it a lot, where I’ll do an assignment for one class when I’m in another. Something is not going to be 100%. Usually my assignments are what I’m focusing on, and the lecture is just kind of going on in the background, almost like music. You know, you’re listening to music and you’re studying. So that’s just kind of, I’m there, I’m listening, it’s around me. I’m absorbing second-hand but not really devoting my attention to it, and I’m not getting the best bang for my buck academically, paying for classes and going and not really paying attention fully. The split attention definitely does not produce the best academic work.

All but one of these students’ cumulative GPAs exceeded the cumulative undergraduate average as of the term in question (3.208 for females and 3.039 for males, according to the University Registrar), and, as such, they may not be identified as struggling academically by any sort of red flag indicator or early warning system.
However, each of the students described their academic goals as compromised in some way by their involvement. In some cases, as with Bobby and Gabby, the opportunity to take advantage of something on campus was missed because they did not qualify academically. Others, like Jonathan, Rania, Vikas, and Briana, worried about their fitness as applicants for graduate programs. Rhiana and Matt had been accustomed to near-perfect grades in high school and felt that they could have gotten closer to that standard in college had they spent some more of their involvement time on their studies. Although the students rationalized their compromised academic goals by considering the myriad benefits of their co-curricular involvement, each of them in their own way conveyed some feelings of guilt and regret for not performing to their capability. It should be noted that in spite of the academic challenges they faced, none of the participants ever considered dropping out of school, even when they were at their wit’s end and the peak of their frustration.

**The interpersonal toll.** In our discussion of motivations for getting involved, the quest for peer connection emerged as a consistent theme, and each of the students described the powerful influence of various family relationships and friendships in their lives before college. As we explored together the health of relationships in their lives and the connections between those relationships and their high levels of involvement, each participant was able to identify ways in which some bonds had been strengthened and some had been lost. In spite of the communities they found by virtue of getting involved, some of the students experienced isolation because of the feeling that those who were not involved at a similarly high level could not relate to them. Others felt that the lack of depth in their relationships was due simply to the lack of time available to cultivate them.

Relationships with high school friends and family members were frequently cited
as the first to suffer. Although the same could likely be said of many students who find it challenging to maintain such close connections from their past while growing in college, the over-involvement dimension made this tension particularly acute. As commuter students, Jonathan and Rania commented on the guilt they feel for living with their families but not seeing them enough to maintain the close relationships they once had. Even though their parents are able to help them with things like preparing meals and doing laundry, the students often get home after everyone has gone to sleep, and they cannot attend to their relationships. According to Rania:

I just don’t see them at all because usually I would say I’m at school from 8am to 1am. So I do nothing but go to classes, then I go to meetings, then I’m usually just studying in the union until I just can’t really look at the book anymore. So I would say that just because since I live 15 minutes away from here, it’s kind of more or I should say less tolerant to have not seen my family in comparison to other people, since they live in like Cincinnati or Cleveland. But mine is more of a poor excuse just because when they’re that close, I just sometimes get kind of bothered by where I’m letting my priorities lie.

Rhiana explained a fading high school friendship that was typical of comments made by other students:

There was a girl I was really good friends with in high school, and we just recently stopped talking or kind of lost connection this past year just because I’ve been so busy I haven’t been making that additional effort to reach out to her and make sure I’m keeping that like friendship. I tend to get so caught up in what I’m doing, sometimes I forget about those relationships from back home. That was something on my end. I just kind of like got so involved with what I was doing, I forgot about her.

In college, many of the participants commented on having a broad base of acquaintances due to their involvement but only considered a small number of people to be close friends. As Bobby stated:

I know a lot of people and a lot of people know me, but I don’t really have that many friends. I would say I probably have like three or four people who I actually really enjoy seeing. So those are the only people I do see. So I mean,
just like not having the time to give. And then I also do have a boyfriend who isn’t in school. He graduated a while ago. So like balancing that relationship, too, with evening meetings and extracurricular activities like fitting all that in how I want to and devoting enough time to everything is challenging.

Even with a smaller circle of friends or a romantic partner as the focus of their most important relationships, the students spoke of struggles to invest the time they thought was necessary. Gabby reflected on the way she feels about choosing to prioritize her involvement over her friendships:

That’s very stressful, so personal life things and knowing I have friends I should see, even on campus – knowing that the only time I’ve seen a friend is in a meeting is stressful because then you think – I want them to know I appreciate them and I love our friendship, but I don’t have time. Maybe I’m just not making the time.

Over-involvement developed into a relationship barrier greater than the obvious challenge of finding time in their schedules. Gabby expressed the feeling that some of her friendships had suffered because her commitment could not be understood:

I have honestly lost a few friendships, not strong ones, but people that I considered friends because they don’t – they aren’t involved, or they don’t have those experiences outside of the classroom. So when I’m busy or I have meetings or I can’t have a three-hour dinner or sleepover, they don’t necessarily understand that. And it’s hard for me because I take that personally because I feel bad, and then I try to – okay, I guess I won’t do my homework tonight, I’ll come over. And then I’m stressed the next day because I shouldn’t have done that, like I should have just done my homework. Then it’s like, “What, I’m not worth it?”

So those friendships with people who don’t necessarily understand what involvement life is like, honestly suffer depending on the people, I think. So I think that’s part of the reason why the four to five people that I am very much invested in are also people that I’ve been involved with. They get it.

Many of the students acknowledged that their level of co-curricular commitment was uncommon and that the disparity between their involvement and that of those around them made it challenging to relate. I will return to this concept below in an exploration of the influence of peers who “get” their over-involvement and those who do not.
Finding kindred spirits within their co-curricular groups seemed to be an effective strategy for managing the dissonance they experienced with others. However, as will be discussed, unreasonable comparisons they made between themselves and other highly-involved students led to other issues central to the phenomenon.

The psychological toll. The most frequently mentioned and thoroughly discussed challenges resulting from high levels of involvement were related to stress and anxiety. Despite being listed initially as separate issues on the demographic survey, stress and anxiety are discussed together here because of how intertwined they were for several of the participants. Many of these challenges related to the incredibly high expectations the students had created for themselves with respect to their involvement, their academics, and their balance of the two. I attempted through our discussion to discern which aspects of the students’ stress and anxiety were not simply related to the volume and difficulty of their classes – that is, those aspects that implicated their involvement. That was a task easier stated than undertaken, as the students described doing homework at work and doing e-mail for their student organizations during class. The very nature of the seamless integration of all their commitments together at all hours of the day was the source of much of stress for those who had been less successful in compartmentalizing their responsibilities. The level of stress and anxiety the students described was no trivial matter. Some were overwhelmed to the point of debilitation, and because of the cultural norms in the over-involved milieu in which they operated, they convinced themselves they had few viable options for processing their issues. The reluctance or outright refusal to be vulnerable in anyone else’s presence is an essential aspect of the phenomenon that will be explored in more depth below, but its relationship to the stress and anxiety can be seen in many of the excerpts shared in this section.
My understanding of the specific aspects of the students’ co-curricular involvement that led to stress was helped along by some particularly descriptive examples. Several examples related to the seriousness with which the students took their responsibilities and the importance they placed on not letting others down:

Bobby: With my [student organization] involvement, doing social media and everything people do sort of ask me to like drop everything and immediately like create a flyer or like go print something or, you know, like post something immediately. And that’s pretty stressful because I know that they’re like relying on me to do it, and like do it well without any mistakes or typos or anything and to also do it like immediately even though I’m like in class or something. So like I kind of constantly have to like be on the lookout for that.

Gabby: Is all of this work I’ve done going to produce a great event? Are students going to like it? Is all of the time I’ve put into their bulletin board, are they going to appreciate it? I do get really anxious about those things.

All of the students described their schedules during the height of their over-involvement as having reached a point of complete saturation where any unexpected issues or additional commitments created a great deal of stress. Rhiana revealed how her packed agenda of activities contributes to her never truly being at rest:

I guess a lot of my stress comes from never really being able to sit down and not taking that me time...I was working 28 hours a week plus [student organization] plus [different student organization] plus being in class taking anywhere from 16 to 18 hours every semester, so you know, just like that me time was nonexistent unless I made myself have it. But then I felt bad because there was probably something else I could have been working on...Even when I have free time, I think that there has to be something that I should be doing that is productive. My to-do list is like a million things. It never fully ends. I’ll cross stuff off which is great, but then something else is constantly being added on to it. So I am never at a point where I have nothing to do.

An important aspect of understanding the lived experience of over-involved students is having some insight about their thoughts on down time. As has been previously discussed in this chapter, the participants rarely find a significant amount of unscheduled time in their calendars on weekdays. Some of this phenomenon is due to the back-to-
back, structured nature of their commitments, but I found a few of their comments about not knowing what to do with downtime to be particularly revealing:

*Rania:* I like to be busy. I’d rather be busy than bored. Just because I feel like being bored is more emotionally taxing because you think about stuff. I love spending time with myself, but there’s only so much Netflix you can watch, so many runs you can go on before you just go nuts.

*Bobby:* Basically, if I have downtime, I either like forget to do something or get tired or, you know, unfocused and then it’s hard to get back into that routine.

*Briana:* I think I’m a little afraid to not be involved. Like I’m afraid of what I would do with that free time and how I would feel if I wasn’t always being busy.

Even during the built-in semester breaks, during which classes do not factor into the students’ schedules, some described finding it difficult not to be engaged. Not making time to relax for any significant amount of time and clear their minds contributed to the feeling that they were overwhelmed. Many mentioned weekends as a time when they could get more sleep and do things for themselves, but the nagging task list from their classes and involvements often encroached upon their relaxation time.

Some of the students described physical and emotional symptoms of their stress that may have been due to the extent to which they were spread thin and not in control of their own schedules. Physical issues with appetite and sleeplessness that were discussed above were mentioned by students as stress-related, but other manifestations of stress were common. As Jonathan recalled:

I actually broke out in shingles my freshman year in school, so that was a thing. Then my fourth year, I had a similar incident where it was clear that I was not taking care of myself. I showed up to rehearsal one day, either super dehydrated or something. I was concerned I had shingles. It broke out again, but that was an indicator I was probably doing way too much with what I had on my plate.

Jonathan learned from his bouts with stress-induced illness that he had a degree of control in preventing it. However, he acknowledged that he prioritizes his work over himself and
often ignores his health until he has no other choice:

I feel commitment to those things. It’s like, do it! Go do it now! Jonathan, you’re committed to this, do it, do it, do it! Basically, because like, I can get over my body. My body will get over it eventually. Maybe not today, but if I push myself hard enough then I can do it. It’s basically testing your limits, when will X approach – when will you approach Y. “How close can you get til you break?” is the philosophy I go with, which is a horrible philosophy – actually not horrible. It’s okay in controlled consumptions.

Rhiana, who has dealt with the symptoms of Chron’s disease since her youth, recognized a connection between her stress and her physical health as stomach pain accompanied stressful situations. Her emotional health had also been affected greatly by her high levels of involvement and her reluctance to discuss her frustration with anyone:

I mean sometimes I have mental breakdowns but I don’t think that’s – I mean that might be anxiety. I don’t know. Sometimes I cry. Sometimes everything is just overwhelming, and you just need a good cry. Last year the crying got insane. It was happening every other week, but I’ve only cried twice this year so far so, so I guess that’s good. Yeah, sometimes I feel like it’s too much, and I’ll just be laying in my bed at night, you know, or maybe during the day, but never around people. Always in the privacy of my own space. Like every other week I was probably crying. But like last year was horrible. I mean it was a great year, but the involvement was just too much. It was way too much. That’s why I was like, I can’t do that to myself this year.

I was grateful for Rhiana’s candor, given her admission that she prefers to deal with her stress very privately. Rhiana also recognized that her stress levels were finally starting to cause her to lose patience with others and act out:

I’ve struggled with it forever but now I'm finally like, “I can’t.” I’m just getting too stressed out. I’m having too many nights I want to break down because it’s just too much. I think everybody can tell because sometimes my attitude, I can bring that. If I’m having a bad day or I'm stressed or have a problem, like bringing that into the space sometimes you know, when it has nothing to do with anybody who’s in that space. I think this year has been so crazy I just have a really hard time with not taking my frustrations out on other people.

The tendency Rhiana mentioned to withdraw from others when stress became too
overwhelming was evident from several of the other students’ comments. Rania summarized these sentiments well:

I think I’m always stressed. I don’t know if there’s ever been a day since I got to college where I was not stressed about something or something in the future. So I think I notice when there isn’t stress rather than when there is because I’m always stressed – always, always, always. There’s always something I have to get done or something I need to go do with other people. It’s more like a heavy burden in the back of my mind. There are no physical symptoms I would say, but usually if I’m at my very worst level of stress, I just kind of do my own thing. I don’t really reach out to people like – I basically stay off of social media, or I purposely do not socialize, so I’ll put in ear buds and stuff like that. I don’t like to talk when I’m stressed because I don’t want to lash out or make people feel like it’s their problem that I’m stressed because it’s not. It’s all me.

Some examples of how pre-existing tendencies toward stress, anxiety, or other mental health concerns were exacerbated by over-involvement were shared by the students. Rhiana and Gabby spoke of pre-college struggles with anxiety that had continued and gotten more intense as they managed deadlines and expectations. Briana remembered her sophomore year of college as a time when she had “hit rock bottom” and was “freaking out” because of the stress caused by “doing everything.”

So I’ve been thinking about this a lot actually because I’m feeling a lot of the same feelings I had then, which is really scaring me because I remember how horrible it was. So what I meant by rock bottom is I got to this point where I was so involved, and I was just literally I’d come home and just study. I didn’t have any time to like talk to anyone or do anything. I remember just spending all these hours in what we called “the closet” in [residence hall], which is basically just a storage room they converted into a study room.

Briana disclosed that she had dealt with depression since she was young and that her high level of involvement mostly helped her to stave off those episodes of sadness but sometimes served as a trigger when she got too overwhelmed. When I asked her if she thought of her involvement as a coping mechanism, she responded:

I think that’s why I try to stay busy. So like, if I stay busy, that’s less likely to happen because I’m just going from thing to thing to thing. But the problem is
that once it starts, I can’t even do my student orgs anymore. So I’ve had more than one occasion where I’ve had to come up with an excuse where I can can’t go be like, “I’m sick” or you know “I have too much homework to do,” which are excuses I never use normally. If I was sick I’d probably go, but if I feel like in this mood I know I’m just going to end up sitting there and crying, and I don’t want to like show up and cry at something. I just feel really weak at that point. I think that's kind of, like I keep busy so I don't have time to think about what’s wrong or what bad is happening in my life because I’m afraid I’ll trigger one of those little depression things.

It is worth noting that stress was not unilaterally presented as a negative. Dealing effectively with stress certainly gave students a feeling of accomplishment and self-efficacy in working through their challenges. Vikas mentioned a revelation about good outcomes of stress after watching a TED Talk on the subject. Jonathan stated:

I love this. Do I love the stress? Part of me likes it. It keeps me on my toes, and it keeps me aware of what’s going on. It helps me function. If you live a stress-free life, things aren’t going to go well, and if you live life with too much stress then that’s bad. But I’ve learned to build up that tolerance toward high stress situations, and I need a healthy amount of stress.

Although several of the students made comments that reflected a “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger” sentiment, which suggested a bit of a dependency on the stress, the primary nature of our conversations dwelled in the difficulty and challenge it caused. Students astutely recognized that their involvement probably helped them to deal more effectively with their stress and anxiety but that the intensity of their investment of time and energy actually limited the benefit that their involvement could have had.

Finding Ways to Cope

The students described a number of different ways they attempted to manage the mental and physical challenges of over-involvement. Some of their coping mechanisms were healthy behaviors, and some were not. Matt engaged in examples of each. His use of wrestling as a coping mechanism was very important to him:
Wrestling is a chance to completely forget the world, to go in, just grind out a workout for two hours to, in essence, leave the world behind. You forget everything. It’s just you and your opponent, you and your workout partner. The world melts away. You’re in the zone. You’re in flow. And, that ability to escape from all my commitments, involvements and all these things that I ought to do for a few hours each day is something I really couldn’t do college without. So, in an odd sense, wrestling is my relaxation.

Matt’s less healthy strategy for addressing the effects of over-involvement is to rely on caffeine. Similarly, Bobby had developed an unhealthy caffeine addiction that developed in response to his challenging schedule:

I guess now sort of like the constant all day sipping on coffee is definitely a survival mechanism. And I mean, like that also kind of like disrupts your like digestive system. So like I do have to like drink a lot of water during the day and stuff. But yeah, I just don’t feel like it’s overall healthy but somewhat necessary.

Gabby, who started her undergraduate career wanting to be around other people all the time, recalled a shift that resulted from anxiety related to her over-involvement:

I started needing more time alone to decompress my thoughts, whether that was to cry or to watch a movie or to like binge eat a pint of ice cream or call my mom and go ballistic on the phone to someone. I need more time by myself. So that’s how I deal with my anxiety is I seclude myself from other people…which is another challenge with being RA. You’re never really by yourself.

Finding the time and space to be genuinely emotional in private was a strategy Briana and Rhiana also described. Similarly, Jonathan sought separation from other people, so that he could engage in variety of coping strategies. In his words:

I’m silently freaking out on the inside – very silently, but I realize if you freak out about this you’re going to waste more time, so you should probably calm down and methodically work through all of this, or you’re not going to be able to work through any of it. So that’s what happens most often. Sometimes I will spend the time freaking out, so I’ll do that by playing piano, writing down my list frantically. But most of the time it’s like you cannot freak out, you need to be in control of the situation and know what you’re doing.

Jonathan talked about playing piano and video games as a way of diffusing his stress, but
his top coping strategy was to attack the source of his stress head-on and immerse himself in the work until it was done. When that approach has not been as effective, Jonathan has looked to his faith:

Recently I’ve started to look more to my spiritual life to handle that kind of stuff. Like God it’s gonna be – if this is what you really want, if you want it to fall to the ground, that’s fine, God! I know you don’t want that to happen though, so help me! So I look to my spiritual life a lot to help me through those kinds of situations.

So many of the coping mechanisms the students mentioned were strategies they felt they could not employ in the presence of others. The pressure of maintaining composure in public and struggling to find those private, vulnerable moments to cope emerged as one of the most salient challenges of over-involvement.

**Masking Vulnerability: Wearing a Persona of Having It All Together**

One of the strongest themes and most compelling areas of concern I came to understand from these students about the phenomenon of over-involvement was the inability they expressed to let anyone know they were struggling. The participants described cultural norms in the community of highly involved students that made them perceive vulnerability as weakness, resulting in a constant battle to suppress their struggles and wear a persona of calm and composure. The idea that other highly involved students always seemed to be handling things better than they were was communicated strongly and in a variety of ways. Many of the students found themselves in a conundrum in which they thought that people in their lives who were not as involved as they were could not understand what that was like, and those who were as involved would respect them less if they knew of their struggles. As a result, even on rare occasions when the students felt like there was a moment within their frenetic schedules
to process with others or seek help of some kind, they discouraged themselves from doing so and postponed dealing with the stress until they could not bear it any longer. In this section, I will present some of their experiences with the duress of image management and discuss the response they described getting from people in their lives. During our first interviews, enough students hinted at the pressure they felt to keep a smile on their faces that I made sure to ask about it specifically in our follow-up conversations. This became the subject of large segments of the interviews with each student and emerged as a salient theme. Bobby felt particularly influenced by the cultural norm of keeping his struggles to himself and portraying composure, especially because of the competitive tendencies of fellow business students. In Bobby’s words:

I feel like that is by far the hardest thing – is to maintain the image of having it all together. I know that I pride myself, and this is very ego mindset, but I definitely pride myself in knowing that other people think I have it all together. I can’t really think of a specific time, but I would say that’s almost like a constant feeling. I’d say that’s something that like personally eats away at me a lot is feeling like I have to always be on top of everything, and whether it’s with knowing all my stuff for school, being prepared for student orgs, or just physical appearance-wise, it’s something that’s also very important to me, maintaining that image… It’s probably one of my triggers for like getting down on myself, I guess.

Like Bobby, Jonathan had been influenced by his perception of the environment to keep his challenges to himself. According to Jonathan:

I’m a staunch believer of fake it ‘til you make it. If you fake that you’re put together, yeah you’ll be put together…ish. But you’ll be more put together than if you’re telling yourself, “No, it’s not okay.” But I tell myself “You’re not okay” in private. I don’t do that in public.

Jonathan’s comments suggested that he may have been trying to convince himself he was on top of things as much as he was attempting to persuade anyone else. The strain of portraying oneself differently in public than in private was mentioned by others, as well. Rania felt a great deal of pressure to maintain a put-together image for the sake of
younger students who might aspire to the leadership positions she holds:

The Rania they see is organized, has everything together, is always on time, loves agendas. I’ve had people in my committee call me like the perfect involved person. But like if you’re involved, there’s no way you’re leading a perfect life because you’re too busy to have everything in order. That stresses me out, but I’m not going to tell them otherwise because if they’re looking to be on exec, I would hate for it to shatter that dream just because it wasn’t my perfect picture.

Rania was particularly conflicted about the pressure of her image because she did not think of herself as organized. She noted missed classes, forgotten deadlines, and other examples of failures in her personal life to actually be the flawless person she thought others saw in her.

Similarly, Rhiana had a strong conviction to shield people from her vulnerable side partly because of her awareness that she was a role model for younger students. She described her image management as a skill she called upon to conceal the crying she sometimes did when she got overwhelmed by her involvement:

I’m just pretty good at holding it together in front of other people for the most part as far as not wanting to cry. People will be able to tell I’m frustrated and stuff, but I just, like, I don’t know, I’m just not going to cry in front of somebody I don’t know. Maybe that shows a sign of weakness. I don’t know. And not that it is a sign of weakness, but maybe that’s why I don’t do it in front of other people or it’s kind of like embarrassing to start crying in front of somebody. So it’s always in the privacy of my room or in the shower because the water just hitting your face and you can’t tell that you’re crying in the shower.

In addition to her concerns about appearing to be weak in front of others, Rhiana had misgivings about burdening anyone else with her stress – a feeling mentioned by other participants. As she stated:

So I think because I was keeping so much inside, people didn’t know what was going on with me, and then I just had these attitudes or be in a bad mood in the privacy of, or by myself, just mad at the world. I wasn’t telling anyone what was wrong with me or getting it out in a healthy way. I was just keeping it in. I think that contributed to me starting to have bad moods. I just feel like everybody has
their own problems, so who am I to tell somebody else what I have going on when they have their own stuff? I just don’t like being a bother.

Gabby connected the idea of a composed exterior façade with her continuing opportunities to be regarded well by others and involved on campus:

If I ever have emotions pent up, or I need to get something out or talk about my frustrations, I’ll call my mom. A lot of that’s because I don’t ever want to jeopardize the things I’m involved in because I have an irrational response to something.

Gabby realized that the positivity she portrayed had become a major aspect of her identity on campus and felt pressure to maintain her persona even when that was difficult for her:

I like to keep things light in the workplace, and so for me in my involvements, I like to be happy and excited and to seem relatively put together, even if that’s not the case mentally, going crazy. I like to appear that everything is fine, like we’re having fun, this is good, the experience is great, like let’s enjoy it. And so I don’t ever want a bad day to ruin that kind of energy that I put a lot of effort into creating.

Matt, who maintained that the physicality of wrestling served as an outlet for his emotions and allowed him to navigate the rest of his involvement with an almost robotic, emotionless demeanor, made an interesting observation:

I have some friends in the ROTC, and one of them is always talking about how she is told to never show vulnerability, and that’s the best way to lead. I’m like, that’s dead wrong. No one is going to view you as a person. No one is going to be inspired to follow you if you’re this unattainable goal. So making yourself human and showing others that you are human is important in order to truly rally people around you.

However, Matt went on to explain that although he is in touch with his feelings, considers himself an open book, and has no problem telling people about his challenges when he is asked, people are not likely to know when he is struggling because he likes to “remove emotions from the equation entirely” because “they cloud decisions.” Matt is very well-educated on leadership development and embraced the idea that authenticity and
vulnerability could make a leader more effective, but his efforts to confine his emotional expression to the wrestling mat had the net result of contributing to the cultural norm that composure in the highly involved student milieu wins the day.

Briana spoke of the pressure to remain composed not just coming from peers but from advisors to her student organizations, as well. She recalled a time when she was battling depression and not wanting to be around others, but she did not get the empathy she sought:

During sophomore year I was like, “Hey, [advisor], I really can’t come to this meeting right now. I know it’s kind of a big thing, but like I’m not okay right now.” She’d be like, “Briana, sometimes I need you to just come and be the best person you can be, and if you need to fake it, fake it. But I need you to come.” So that was really hard for me because like I was going to her and telling her all this stuff I was really stressed out about, and I thought she was understanding where I was coming from. But then when I try to be honest and be like, “Hey I need a day off,” no. So I think that’s really hard, and I think it’s still a stigma in our society. If I said, “Hey, [advisor], I was sick” – I have before and she’s like, “Oh, no, it’s fine. Don’t come in. We don’t want you if you’re sick.” But you tell someone, “Hey, I am super depressed and super overwhelmed, can I not do this right now?” And they’ll be like, “No, you still have to do it.” Overwhelmed is nothing you know? I think that’s really hard because I think overwhelmed is usually worse than sick. Sick you can just take some medicine and move on. Overwhelmed you can’t. You can’t get back that time. There’s no time medicine, so when you need time off, I think it’s really hard to get it unless you lie and say “I’m sick.”

For Briana, this tough love approach to pushing her to get through her difficulties was counterproductive. In a related dynamic, Rania mentioned consequences that might come from confiding in her advisors that she was struggling. When asked about a time she may have felt unable to share her feelings, she responded:

I don’t think there’s a specific moment. I think it’s actually 24/7 because if you tell anyone – anyone I tell, if I tell an advisor that I’m not doing well in school, they’ll make me cut back on things, and I don’t think that’s their decision to decide for me. But they have that power, and I don’t want to grant that to them in any of the student orgs I’m in. I just, I feel like me talking about my feelings is
just complaining, and I just don’t think that’s appropriate to complain about – things I’ve already set myself up for.

Some of the students shared comments that indicated they were not just victimized by the cultural norms that caused them to mask their vulnerability but that they were contributing to the norms themselves. According to Bobby:

We have a couple people in both the exec boards I’m on who will just like, you know, say, “Oh, I’m not going to be there tonight. I have an exam to study for,” or even like our members of the actual organization say that, which always just like infuriates me because I’m like if you decided to be part of this and give your time to this, why aren’t you here? So I think that’s more like a personal thing where I don’t like when people are like, “Oh, I have too much to do even though I signed up for it and said I could do it.” That just makes me really mad when people do that, so I try not to.

Jonathan recalled a fellow student he considered to be too involved for his own good who was looking for even more:

Last year before I left my presidency as co-president, in particular [student], I said you cannot be the photographer anymore. You are doing too much, and you need to like get everything else in line before you do this. If I’m following that train of thought, it would be if you don’t have your life in order why should I give you any more responsibilities? If your goal is to excel then you better be put together. Or at least seem put together.

Briana did not mention how she might be complicit in making others feel the way she does, but she did share a related observation:

Have you ever heard that thing that like people are more likely to be meaner if they’ve lived through it themselves? That was a recent study where like a person who struggled is less likely to give back to the people who are struggling because they are like, “I made it through, you can make it through.” I feel like that’s a big mindset with students right now. I think that’s just not the community you want to set up, and I think it makes it harder for having real connections and for – it’s really hard to be vulnerable. It’s teaching people to have this tough outer shell and pass that on.

The concept that even those most encumbered by the pressures of the environment perpetuate the norms through their judgments and interactions was not something I
explored in the depth it may deserve. As students who suffer through over-involvement and ascend to leadership roles become more capable of defining the environment in their own organizations, it would be interesting to investigate their tendencies around maintaining a status quo that causes students to struggle and conceal their challenges.

**Outlets for Processing: Who Has Time for That?**

During our conversations about the pressure the students felt to wear a composed persona, most indicated that they shared their vulnerability with peers only very rarely—and sometimes with damaging consequences. Several of the students mentioned they were aware of professional psychological counseling resources on campus and could even tell me they knew they could get up to ten sessions each year free of charge, possibly indicating they had looked into a counselor for themselves. However, none said they had actually met with a counselor. In one of the most ironic statements I heard in these interviews, Briana explained why:

> I’ve talked to people about me wanting to go talk to (a professional), and they’re like, “Do you have time?” And I’m like, “No.” So then I never do. I don’t see how that would fit, and I don’t know how I’d feel after doing that because then I would feel like that would just worry me more because then I’d be like, “Oh now I’ve used that time. Where did that time go? I didn’t have that time.” So if I have time, I’ll just sit there and let me be sad, and if I do that I usually feel better. So then I don’t feel the pressing need to go see anybody anymore so it’s like again the chicken and the egg. If I had the time to just relax and enjoy myself I wouldn’t feel as bad as I do when I’m overwhelmed. And then at the same time maybe I do need to see someone because the times I’m too overwhelmed, I’m way too overwhelmed.

Rhiana, who described herself as very guarded about her personal issues and commented that she did not want to burden others with her stress, had resisted her mother’s insistence that she find a therapist on campus but was starting to consider it more seriously as her undergraduate career was coming to a close. I thought our conversations for this study
may have contributed some encouragement in this regard when she told me, “I feel like we’ve talked about a lot of stuff that even I haven’t even truly thought about until talking with you.” The trust we had built as virtual strangers in a short amount of time led to processing she may have found therapeutic and might have made her more willing to consider the benefit of talking more regularly with an unbiased professional.

Those who still needed to find outlets for discussing their frustrations often looked to adults in their lives, particularly mentors and parents. Vikas and Gabby talked about frequent phone calls to their mothers as their best sounding boards. Rania stated that she did not find the act of processing out loud with another person to be therapeutic, and, although she was quick to point out that she did not discuss her personal issues with her mother, she found her mother to be a frequent consultant on academic issues. Bobby, who had not previously confided in his parents about his vulnerability very much, had recently started to seek their advice, and he got guidance from a staff member in his college – a former supervisor who remained a mentor for him. Vikas and Rhiana also lauded professional staff members at the university for making themselves available and being very genuine, effective partners for processing their frustrations.

Matt engaged in a number of self-reflective activities within an intensive leadership development program, but, as was previously mentioned, he regarded the physical demands of wrestling as his best way of working through his frustrations:

I see wrestling as not just something to do and compete in but also as my release from everything else I do. Wrestling is a chance to drop everything, forget the world, let it all melt away, and just brawl for two hours. There is nothing but me and my opponent, and it’s completely different from everything else I do. It’s a real good chance to forget about everything and just physically release everything.

Matt did not describe his wrestling teammates and fraternity brothers as confidantes, but
he did indicate a transparency he enjoyed with them if someone asked him about things going on in his life. Although peers were mentioned by several of the students as trustworthy outlets for processing during the time they were over-involved, almost all of the students mentioned being measured in the ways they shared, even with their romantic partners or those they considered to be their best friends. The perceptions of others about the participants’ over-involvement is the subject of the next section.

You Just Have No Idea: Negotiating Others’ Perceptions of Over-Involvement

The participants talked about the response they got from others in terms of those who “get it” and a much larger category of those who do not. Their feeling that others could not understand their circumstances was at the root of reasons why they were reluctant to give people many opportunities to do so. Bobby considered the possibility of commiserating with peers and utilizing a network of support:

I guess I don’t really reach out to other students. It’s weird because everyone is like, “Oh well, we all have problems.” You know there’s that real stigma where if someone complains, it’s seen as bad, even if it’s just trying to verbally say it so you’re not thinking about it all the time. It’s really hard for me to reach out to other students in classes. I don’t feel like they can even relate to what I do and everything I’m trying to do. They probably can, but I feel like they would think I’m being an idiot by like saying things.

Rhiana commented on this dynamic with respect to her friends and family:

So sometimes it’s also hard for me to talk to people because I really don’t know if they would understand or if they would just think that I’m being dramatic or whatever. Because a lot of people would be like, “Why do you take on so much? That’s an easy fix,” but if you don’t really understand why I do it then our conversation at that point is pointless. That could be why I don’t really share, because I don’t feel like many people would understand it… My mom didn’t graduate from college, so she doesn’t really understand how busy I am, and so I don’t get into detail.

Like Rhiana, who bristled at the thought of getting well-intentioned advice from ill-informed people to simply cut back on her activities, Briana encountered a tension with
her closest friends and family over their lack of understanding:

I have no problem sharing with them that like, “Hey, I feel overwhelmed. I really don’t want to do this. I really can’t handle more stuff in my life. Can you not pressure me to like go hang out? Can you not pressure me to come to a meeting today?” I just think it’s much harder to hear the response. Usually they are just like, “You’re over-involved. You’re doing too much. Stop doing it.” Or they are like, “We really need you here. I need you to come in to do this. This is not something you can just shake off your responsibility for,” and to me that’s just really hard. I don’t bring it up unless I’m really struggling, and I feel bad for like people like my boyfriend who has to hear it all the time, but the problem is I don’t bring it up when it’s not actually going to be a problem in my life. So it’s really hard to hear him or my parents be like, “Just drop what you’re doing, and you’ll be fine,” because that’s not an option to me. It’s not constructive, and I don’t need your criticism or your solution. I need your support, and I need you to be like, “Oh, okay, then I’m going to take care of this for you since you have too much on your plate.”

Reflecting on her reluctance to complain to her peers when she was at her most overwhelmed, Gabby spoke about the feeling that no one else could understand:

So I didn’t feel comfortable showing that vulnerability until about halfway through my junior year, I would say. Yeah because sophomore year I was – and even before then, I was self-absorbed in the sense I felt like I was the only one who was doing all of these things, and I was the only one who could really understand it. No one else could possibly know how stressful this is, so I was very self-absorbed in that fact. I think I let myself get very carried away with everything going on, and so I was just like let’s keep this here. I don't need to let anyone else in. If I let anyone else in, that’s just another thing to add on my plate, like I don’t have time for friends. Who has time for friends? Like they don’t know what it’s like to not have time for friends.

The guilt of not making time for friends combined with the frustration of thinking those friends could not understand why was a powerful source of stress for these over-involved students. Layering a lack of productive conversation about their challenges on top of these stressors made the inherent challenges of managing a very busy schedule even more exhausting. Some students, however, discussed how they were finally able to able to move past the limitations they imposed on themselves based on the perceptions of others.
and begin to release some of the pressure of holding all the stress in.

Jonathan reached a turning point when he met a kindred spirit – his girlfriend, a student at another college who had been on a very similar trajectory. Bobby also spoke of the relief that came from his relationship with his boyfriend, a self-employed college graduate who was not putting pressure on Bobby to be available all the time because he had also been involved when he was a student. However, finding trust and comfort in an intimate, non-judgmental interpersonal relationship was not the only way students had found to shed the persona and share their vulnerability. Gabby described the façade breaking down as an eventuality in groups that work closely together once a certain amount of trust has been built. Gabby had a vivid recollection of the moments during her junior year when she finally decided to share with other student leaders that she was having a hard time staying afloat:

I got very upset and let that guard down with my co (RA) and had a very genuine conversation with him about frustrations and kind of let that guard of “I’ve got it all together” down and for the first time expressed what I had going on in my life outside of just being an RA. So that definitely broke the walls as far as me being candid in my residential life, and now in my senior year I guess I’m much more open with my other staff because I know how valuable that relationship can be if you just like admit “I have a lot going on, I can’t even handle this right now.” In [student organization], my turning point was middle-ish of junior year because I was now on the executive board with a close friend. She was one of the first people that when we got very overwhelmed, there was a lot going on, I saw her break her wall down, and so I was like, “Oh!” And mine came down.

Gabby was inspired to turn a corner after she had a trustworthy colleague to help her through a moment of frustration that boiled over and after she observed a respected peer with similar commitments finally show her vulnerability. She noted the necessity of the influence of others to share more genuinely. Briana, however, made progress on that front more individually. Over time, Briana grew weary from the strain of trying to hide
her challenges and became more comfortable being honest:

When people ask me how I am I will literally tell them I’m doing bad. I think that throws a lot of people off, and they don’t like that. But I’ve just come to terms with I’m tired of just lying all the time. So like in my lab especially I think I’ve gotten them a little worried because I’ve told them, you know, this is not good right now. But, you know, I feel like I shouldn’t have to lie all the time, and I don’t want to lie all the time. I used to lie all the time in high school, and I think that just made matters worse.

Taking this more candid approach around other highly involved students, however, got her into conversations that wound up competitive:

I feel like all over-involved people tend to be more competitive, so when over-involved people you tell them you’ve had a long day, they go, “Me, too” and then start listing off. Like I did everything they had done that day, and then you list off everything you did, and then you have this kind of standoff, like who did more? I’m not going to admit you did more, and you’re not going to admit that I did more. So I do think that’s a problem because then you’re not having a real conversation about your life and what’s going on.

These comments from Briana illustrate the wear on over-involved students that comes from navigating a cultural environment that makes them feel it is inappropriate to share openly about their challenges. For those fortunate enough to find a friend, partner, parent, or mentor with whom they can be genuine, the intensity of over-involvement can be mitigated to some extent. Others who may encounter reactions that continue to inhibit their authenticity may find themselves unable to break free of the pressures that magnify their stress. In the next section, I will turn from a description of the lived experience of over-involved students to a presentation of the motivations the students gave for remaining involved in the face of overwhelming struggles.

**Why Keep Doing This to Yourself?**

Earlier in this chapter, I provided examples of the motivations the participants shared for getting involved in college in the first place. Some of those motivations
related to habits formed throughout their youth, values held by their families, and the
drive to become well-qualified for college admissions. Others could be tied directly to
their search for belonging, intrinsic needs to serve others, extrinsic needs to emerge from
college career-ready, and the influence of pro-engagement norms of the environment at
this institution. Having provided co-constructed descriptions of these initial motivations
and the experience of being over-involved, I wanted to return to a question of motivation
– why remain so involved in spite of the considerable challenges? The students’
responses were varied but very much interrelated. From a sense of duty to a desire to
avoid the stigma of quitting, the participants spoke, sometimes emotionally, about the
drive to stay engaged. Self-comparison with other highly involved students and the
competitive norms that developed as a result were also described as compelling motives,
but my understanding of their persistence began with their acknowledgement of the
benefits of being involved.

**Understanding and Reaping the Rewards**

One of the most significant motivations to persevere through difficult challenges
was a recognition of the myriad personal benefits of engagement. The aspects of their
lives made difficult by the overwhelming nature of so much activity were often
secondary to the existence of countless favorable outcomes. I asked each of the students
to talk through the benefits they had experienced as a result of their involvement, and
they shared with great enthusiasm about what they had gained. In almost every instance,
the social integration they described in terms of friendships, mentors, relationships, and
networking was their first thought, as with Rhiana:

I couldn’t imagine going to class and then that’s it. I couldn’t imagine. I’ll take
the stress over sitting in my room doing nothing because it’s also the relationships
that have been created. The other students I’ve been in the organizations with,
most of them are my closest friends because I’m with them pretty much all the
time when I’m not in class. So I think I’ve made really good friendships. They’re
a lot different than the friendships I made in high school, so that’s really
important to me.

The students’ comments about interpersonal relationships reinforced the importance of
belonging, not just as a motivation to start getting involved but also as an incentive to
continue. In addition to the importance of peer relationships, the students specifically
mentioned the significance of supportive connections with faculty and professional staff
members as reasons why they stay engaged. At some point during our conversations,
every student mentioned an advisor or mentor, either generally or specifically by name,
and I could tell just how essential they felt those relationships were to their success. As
Rhiana said, “My advisors for [student organization] are everything. I don’t know what I
would do without [advisor]. He’s been really important in the last two years that I’ve
been here.”

The structure of a busy schedule continued to help these students bring all of their
commitments into focus, allowing them to contemplate the ways in which they were
developing as people. The participants provided some very well-articulated examples of
how their involvement contributed to their development. Self-confidence and efficacy
with expressing themselves were among the most salient aspects of development they
mentioned, as with Briana:

I would say personally the reason why I stay is to help me develop as a person
because I would not be having this conversation with you if it weren’t for
[leadership program], like at all. I never shared my feelings, and I never shared
what I thought. I was very reserved and kept to myself and even if I was being
nice and loud to people, I wouldn’t be sharing who I was.

The appreciation the students developed for their involvement contributing to their
opportunities to improve as people and reflect on what they learned was also expressed as
a compelling motivator to remain engaged. According to Gabby:

I think for me the biggest source of encouragement with staying involved is how much I learn about myself and how much I grow within those involvements. I learn something new every day because of the things that I get to do and the opportunities that I have with those experiences and those involvements. And within those new learning moments, I almost always take something away about myself – good and bad. I get to see a lot of growth, and that I love.

In addition to the intrinsic rewards of personal development and skill-building, a few students spoke of motivation they took from the pursuit of recognition – in the form of formal rewards offered by the university as well as status and social capital conferred by peers, staff, and faculty. These tangible rewards were mentioned less frequently, either because of a humility the students possessed or a desire to portray humility. Bobby and Jonathan acknowledged the attractiveness of university awards:

_Bobby_: We have certain awards that are given. I just applied for the Pace Setters Award for [business college]. So I feel like that has been a really big reason why I’ve been involved, because I wanted this acknowledgement, and it’s actually kind of sad because there’s one for junior year and then there’s one for senior year, but I won’t be here the whole year, so I can’t apply for it the following year and get the scholarship.

_Jonathan_: I enjoy being recognized. Actually at the Asian graduation they have an award for outstanding – like being highly involved, and to be honest, I don’t strive for awards, but I enjoy being acknowledged in doing the work that I have done. I’ve been kind of eyeing that and waiting until I graduate. So I would say in a way I’m an awards chaser, but it’s because I enjoy those things and they just come with it. The reward comes second to the skill that I’m learning.

Bobby also relished the affirmation he got from astute faculty, who recognized the balancing act he worked so hard to maintain:

I mean, like so professors – well, not all professors, but I’ve had a few who have always been like, “I’m really impressed with how hard you work” and things like that. I mean, like they know that I’m involved in all these other things. That’s always just like really like gratifying, I guess. But they always, you know, like think highly of me and express that to who they know, and they’re always really willing to help, whether it’s a letter of recommendation or something or just, you
know, introducing me to one of their colleagues, which I think is just really important to network.

The status Bobby described having with the faculty in his college was echoed by other students in various aspects of their college experience. Jonathan recalled accumulating social capital incrementally based on organizations he joined, positions he held, and things he had done to gain recognition on campus. Recognizing the obstacles of being a commuter and a transfer student, he described his movement along a continuum from his first days on campus without status to the present day, during which he was respected as a leader to whom others will listen.

Matt took great personal satisfaction and found motivation in the status and uniqueness of his combination of co-curricular activities:

I know there are 70 honors students that are also student athletes, and that varies from year to year, but that’s pretty much a constant number. That’s 70 out of 1,160 that there are this year, so there’s a very, very small percent of student athletes that are taking an academic course load even remotely similar. There are probably less than a – probably about a dozen athletes that are in Greek life. There aren’t many...As you start narrowing it down you start realizing that this pool of people with similar to analogous experiences starts dwindling from just over 1,000 to 70 to a dozen, to two or three. And then you start tacking on one or two more things, and then you’re the only one left, at this university of 50,000.

Whether or not he received awards or adulation for it, Matt was aware that others knew of his circumstances. He was bolstered by his success in mastering a slate of activities that could seem incomprehensible to other students. The benefits of involvement for these students were numerous and highly meaningful to them. To disengage from their activities could mean relinquishing important relationships, opportunities for personal development, social status, and tangible rewards. Briana, however, framed her understanding of the benefits of her involvement as something far simpler and more fundamental to her success in college – her happiness:
So I mean it’s like little things you know, little things that make you smile and make you happy, and you can just kind of ignore how crazed it is. So when I was arguing with my mom where she’s like, “Drop it. Just drop all of your stuff,” I’m like, those are literally the only things in my life that are making me happy right now. How can I drop it? I think that’s the big reason I stay involved.

**Beyond the Résumé: Building Personal and Professional Identity**

Just as they had done in high school with college admissions as the object of their aspirations, these students maintained a significant career-oriented focus as a guiding principle in their involvement decisions. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, ideas the students had about their need to be fit for a competitive job market or graduate admissions process provided some motivation for their initial decision to get involved. This career connection only intensified and became fuel for maintaining and expanding their involvement as they got deeper into their commitments. Some of the students, like Bobby, Matt, Vikas, and Briana, had very clear ambitions for their post-college lives, and the types of organizations they joined and opportunities they sought aligned very strategically. Others simply knew they needed to stand out in order to succeed, and their deep and broad involvement was their vehicle for doing so. Jonathan expressed this concept well:

You gotta build your résumé somehow and everyone starting off with a college degree like, just because you have a degree doesn’t mean you’re going to get hired. You need that extra oomph, so you need to be in those orgs. Now those orgs also have other connections, as well. You have that social connection to the other person, so if you want to get a good job and you want to like really, really excel, like it’s built into the system that you have to have that choice because we keep raising the standard of what you need to excel. So I think it’s more of a need to like find a job in the future. Basically that’s what’s driving me.

It was abundantly clear that the students were mindful of what constitutes a “good” résumé in their chosen fields. However, these students had not chosen involvement opportunities superficially with the sole intention of documenting something impressive.
on their medical school or job applications. The extreme level of effort they gave – and the resulting challenges they endured – were evidence that they were motivated by something far more important to them than the mere ability to say they did something. Gabby explained how meaningful her college involvement had become to her career development:

I’ve changed my life path because of these involvements. The things that I have done have inspired me to follow a dream I didn’t know I had… I didn’t realize that I could make a career out of doing the things that I loved, and so for me I stopped looking at it as involvement, and they were just part of me. There’s not really a separation for me between me and my involvements. My involvements are me.

Gabby’s declaration that her involvement was inextricably linked with her identity and her career development was a concept reinforced by other students, who made deep connections between the significance of their co-curricular contributions and their future plans. Achieving career readiness through involvement was also referenced by the participants in relation to how they compared themselves with others, a topic explored in more detail below. Some career-related motivation for involvement connected with a strong desire to help others – the subject of the next section.

**Altruistic Values as an Engine of Motivation**

Each of the eight study participants commented on the importance of serving other people as a motivation for their high levels of involvement – at least initially. With at least one of them, it was difficult for me to discern whether this desire to help others was a deeply-held intrinsic motivator that connected with their core values or if they knew that helping was a means to an end. In general, however, altruism emerged as a catalyst and a sustaining fuel for over-involvement for these students. Several students, like Matt, Briana, Gabby, and Vikas referenced volunteer service as an important type of
involvement they began well before they came to the university, and the servant nature of their college involvement was a natural extension of their values. Whether through structured mentoring roles, hands-on service, or a general philosophical approach to all their involvements, the need to serve was evident. According to Matt, “I was told that you truly are a servant of others, and that really hits home with what it says about me.” A few other comments provide a glimpse into the significance they held for helping others:

*Rania:* I would hope, and this is something I think about a lot, that I’m here purely to make a difference in others’ lives. I have no personal intent or anything to gain from all the involvement that I do.

*Gabby:* I love doing things that make people happy, and that is what all of these organizations really kind of boil down to. Doing things that give back to others and give back to the community and really touch people in many different ways. They really make a difference in people’s lives, and I love being a part of that, so that’s a big motivator.

The idea of helping others was so central to some of the students’ reasons for being over-involved, they were almost incredulous that any other motivation could exist:

*Rhiana:* I do think that we (over-involved students) do all share this common goal of wanting to serve. I don’t know why else you would put yourself through it if that wasn’t your ultimate goal because there are ways to make your résumé look good and not do as much work. It has to be because they care.

*Rania:* I think the right reasons are solely for the purpose of benefiting the student body. I don’t see it as benefiting me first at all. That doesn’t even cross my mind. I devote probably 75 percent of my time to extracurriculars, and then the next 25 percent is putting in some work in school and my job. But I would more than anything hope that people realize that I’m in it for them.

One view of the centrality of serving others is that the motivations are purely selfless.

Comments from Vikas and Rhiana reflected this perspective:

*Vikas:* I think it’s just mainly that I can’t stand to see someone not doing well. It just irks me sometimes. I always want everyone to be happy, which I know isn’t a realistic goal, but I am willing to lose food or sleep if I can make someone else feel better, which in turn makes me feel better.
**Rhiana:** I know that at the end of the day, the work that I am doing is beneficial and it’s making a difference. I think that if I were a part of organizations that I couldn’t see the benefits of it then I probably would have stopped, but I know that the work that I am doing is good, and I know that it’s serving students, and it’s making some student’s experience better. So I think that is enough for me, knowing that I am benefiting someone else regardless of how stressed out it makes me.

Another perspective I developed on why serving others was so important to these students was that their feeling that they are needed or essential to others is a vital aspect of their identities and their self-concept. This interpretation is absolutely not meant to diminish the importance of the contributions these students make to their various communities, but I found it noteworthy that such strong motivation to endure withering involvement-related challenges might come from the personal significance some of the students got from their service to others. Briana reflected on this idea:

In some ways it’s selfish because I like to be thanked, and I like the feeling of doing something good. But in a lot of other ways, I think it comes down for me as duty. Like I feel like you should be doing something for your community, and I wouldn’t feel right not doing something for a community when you have the opportunity.

In our second interview, Gabby also hinted at the affirmation she gets from the help she provides others:

I do love helping other people. There’s something about being able to take the stress off of someone’s plate, even if just for a moment, even if it adds more to your plate, that is so satisfying to me, and I don’t know why... Maybe it’s a validation thing, hearing from someone else that you’ve made an impact, or even just being able to see that you’ve made an impact. Because you’ve done something to help them, it’s almost validating that what you’re doing is good or what you’re doing is something that you needed to do.

Gabby went on to clarify the notion of being validated through her service to others:

Doing something for other people and being that helper, it always validates that you are good at that, I guess for me, like because of the professions I’ve always
seen myself in, the roles I’ve always seen myself in. They are very much helping roles, and so when I get that validation of, “Thank you so much, that relieved so much stress for me,” or like, “That was so kind of you to stay up and bake brownies because you knew they were my favorite.” Like getting those kind of validating remarks or being able to observe those kind of positive changes in others, almost validates that I am meant to help people, or that I am good at helping people – if that’s a talent or a skill.

Other students certainly received encouragement to persist through challenges from the affirmation they got from others that their contributions were important or necessary to the success of a group or an individual. Vikas experienced the importance of being needed in the form of expectations that had developed as his reputation for getting results had solidified:

I think it has a lot to do with accountability, if that makes sense. I think it has to do with if you have a good reputation for getting things done, then you might be expected to help out with something or be there. So for [student organization] for example, since I am pretty involved, and everyone else sees me as pretty involved, they always expect me to be at the next event. There’s always that sense of accountability once you’ve kind of established yourself.

Without the extrinsic rewards of being appreciated or earning a reputation among peers for being kind, thoughtful, and capable, it is hard to say whether these students would validate their efforts themselves enough to endure the challenges of so much involvement.

**Over-Involvement in the Name of Cultural Advocacy and Faith**

Another noteworthy theme related to the service of others as a motivation for remaining involved at a high level emerged from a number of the participants, particularly from some of the students of color. Several commented on the drive they felt to serve current and future students who shared their racial and ethnic identities. Briana and Matt had been involved in peer mentoring initiatives sponsored by the university’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion, both as mentees and mentors. Jonathan reflected on
how much his desire to serve the Asian American community had influenced his involvement:

I’d finished up an Asian American studies course, so I had this whole agenda of like, “I want to see this happen for our Asian Americans here – this, this, this, and this.” So I was really dedicated to helping other students engage in Asian American identity. That was my goal, so I was really pushing for that.

He went on to describe how he had felt limited by stereotypes:

People, me trying to build my identity as an Asian American, stereotyped like, “You're supposed to be good at math.” It's like, I’m really bad at math. How else do I define myself as an Asian? “You’re good at piano – you’re like a music Asian.” It’s like, fine I’ll take that, and I’m going to run with it. I’m going to run really far with it. And so, I did a lot of music things.

Jonathan spoke more specifically about how he rebelled against the ethnic stereotypes that he did not want to define him and why helping others to interrogate those stereotypes gave him so much passion and motivation:

My need to help people is coming from I don’t want them to feel that they are stuck. As Asian Americans we are portrayed as – or not even portrayed – the only career options that we have is a doctor, an engineer, but now business is also becoming more of a thing. So those are your three options. It’s never considered that you can go and be a performer. It is never considered that you can go into social sciences even though there is a growing number of prominent sociologists or social scientists who are Asian. So my concern for students comes through that. I don’t want them to end up in analytical chemistry their senior year and realize, “I hate this!” and go through the same thing I did. If I can help deter someone from going on that route by serving them, by teaching them about their identity, then by all means I will do that. I feel it’s important that the next generation of people after me don’t have to do the same process, and they can figure it out earlier and graduate on time.

Rhiana discussed similar feelings about the significance she placed on her commitment to her identity-based involvements:

I think that specifically now the organizations I am involved with now, like it’s very important to me to serve as kind of an ambassador for the Black community because I feel the representation isn’t always there, or like there’s just stereotypes that need to be broken. People assume certain things about Black people, so like
at this point I appreciate being in those roles so I can break those stereotypes and serve as that ambassador for that student group to show what we can do, what we’re capable of, you know, and like we’re just as great as any other student here on campus, so that’s really important to me. I appreciate kind of being that role model for the people in our community and knowing that they can come to me. I’ve had lots of younger freshman and sophomore girls tell me, “I want to be like you, Rhiana” and just like, it’s so nice to hear because you don’t realize that what you’re doing is actually making a difference for these people.

These students identified very strongly with the importance of serving others through the bond of their cultural identities. Their commitment to improving the lives of other students who share those identities was a powerful source of motivation.

A few of the students discussed how their devotion to the service of others was grounded in their faith and their religious identities. Jonathan, Matt, and Rania spoke of an intrinsic spiritual commitment they make to the world:

Jonathan: So you know Jesus served people. He died – I mean, I’m not going to die serving people, but surely if he can do that, then I can do whatever I can to serve in the way that I need to serve in whatever God calls me to serve. So whatever my calling is, and I believe it is in higher ed, it’s more mission oriented. Sharing God’s love with people and being able to show love rather than say love.

Matt: I have all the God-given gifts I have and I guess looking at it more from a faith perspective the idea that he who wants to be first, will be last and he who is last, will be first. I have been given a lot of gifts, and I want to do the best I can with them. So out of my desire to be first, I must put everyone else ahead of me. There are very few people that have been given the gifts that I’ve been given. So it’s not just my opportunity to do something around me, it’s almost my obligation with those gifts I have been given. At the end of the day I’ve been given what I’ve been given, and what’s really cemented it for me has been my faith.

Rania: As long as you’re alive I think you should be able to do as much as your body allows. That’s kind of more from a religious standpoint and just from growing up. I believe we are put here to serve others. I think that’s the extent of really how to explain it. I’ve never seen a reason to just be in it for myself ever since I was little.

Whether tied to deeply-held religious beliefs or not, the motivation to involve oneself
beyond the point of exhaustion primarily to serve others was described time and again by these students.

The drive to serve had begun to emerge as a theme I thought to be essential to the phenomenon of over-involvement, but a disconfirming comment from Bobby provided some important perspective. In our first interview, Bobby described his experience with an international student mentoring program that allowed him to serve by helping new students overcome cultural and linguistic barriers and assist them with some basic needs like getting moved in and completing paperwork. He also told me about a citizenship program within the business college in which he participated that gave him an avenue for mentoring first-year students and facilitating their transition. These types of mentoring roles were also undertaken by several other study participants, whose motivation to serve others had been articulated much more clearly. When I followed up with Bobby on this idea in the context of his service-oriented leadership roles and asked him if the desire to serve resonated with him as a primary motivation for his involvement, he responded:

It resonates with me a little bit. I – that was definitely something that I really valued during my sophomore year being on the [service organization] exec board because I’m finding it hard to relate to freshman as much now because I’m more removed from that experience, and I kind of forget what I know from learning from being in college for three years as opposed to what I came in knowing. So it’s probably like less of a factor for me now. I’ve never really had a strong like philanthropic desire I guess.

I knew from our conversations that there was no shortage of motivation for Bobby, but service to others was not a strong one for him. He clarified for me that the tireless commitment he made to his student organizations did not feel to him like “giving back” but that his efforts reflected an expectation he had for himself to excel. Bobby’s candor on this topic was an important indicator that although all of these students possessed deep
intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that drove their involvement decisions, the desire to help others was not a concept essential to the phenomenon. More common to the experience of every student on the topic of maintaining involvement was pressure from environmental norms around staying the course. These pressures are explored in the next section.

**Stigma of Quitting, Sense of Duty, and the Fear of Letting Others Down**

The students expressed strong opinions about the feeling of failure and the negative consequences of quitting something, particularly if the timing of that decision does not correspond with a natural, justifiable point of departure, like the end of a school year. These feelings were often expressed in the context of commitment, responsibility, and duty. Matt framed it as a fundamental intrinsic value:

> I don’t give up. I will never be out worked by anyone. I have been raised that way, both by my parents and by coaches growing up…When I commit to something, I’ve committed to it. I’ve given my word, and I take that seriously, and I also refuse to give up.

While recalling those times when they had decided to end a particular involvement for whatever reason, the students’ lips would often curl into a sneer, as though disgusted with themselves or ashamed to admit what they considered to be defeat. Whether the retired involvement in question was a major, a job, a leadership position, or a specific project within an organization, the disappointment these high-achieving students associated with stopping was palpable. On the topic of quitting, Bobby thought about the perception others might have:

> If I drop off now I feel like either recruiters or friends would basically question why I stopped, and I wouldn’t really be able to give like a good reason other than just being lazy. So I don’t feel like that would look good. I think because it’s kind of an image thing. I like people knowing me for what I’ve done.
Several students noted an extra degree of motivation they felt to remain engaged in opportunities that required an application or selection process. According to Jonathan:

I signed up for it. If I signed up for it then I would be committed to it. It’s just how it works for me. I know that’s not how everyone works, but if I signed up for this, if I interviewed for this position and you gave me these responsibilities then within my schedule it’s not your concern how I do it, but I will do it. I’ll find a way to do it one way or another and that’s just, yeah, felt obligated, I wanted to, needed to do it.

Vikas commented on the motivation of avoiding feelings of guilt if he quit something before he reached a point in time he thought to be acceptable:

I guess I just kept doing them because I would feel bad if I leave in the middle. I’ve already spent a solid amount of time with that organization already with how involved I was that leaving in the middle would just sort of feel like betraying or incomplete. I, for some reason, justified it that it would be better if I just leave at the end of the semester as opposed to just in the middle. I think that is a lot of the reason I stayed with a lot of the things.

Similarly, Rania noted the expectations she has for herself and others on seeing things through to completion:

I value commitment in general as a characteristic of others a lot, so if I were to start to bail on my commitments I can’t hold others responsible or accountable for their commitments. And I want to keep that two way street always visible, very transparent. So I think there’s appropriate times when you’re okay to cut off a commitment. There are other times when it’s not – mainly if you’re already in the middle of the position you signed up for whatever the term may be. Without a doubt I think the only professional way to go about it is to see it through unless there are circumstantial reasons that you just absolutely cannot.

Briana conjectured that the decision to discontinue an involvement becomes much easier and more socially acceptable if someone else offers an escape:

I mean, the big thing for me is that you’re committed at least for that time slot. Like if you gave them an out, I think several people might take it. Like, for example, [student organization], I hated it, but I stuck out the full year because I felt like I applied for it, so it was my position, and I’m going to stay in it. But then at the end of the year they ask if you want to come back and I was like, “No, I do not.”
Rania shared a recent experience that supported this idea:

I already have my letter of resignation for my scholars exec board that I’m submitting at the end of December, so once the semester is over…The advisor for that reached out and said basically, “You’re over-committed. You’re not putting in a lot of work. Do you still want to do this?” And I was like, “Nope, not really. Never wanted to.” Essentially I felt roped in, but I wasn’t going to say that since it was my decision. I was the one that committed, but I was kind of roped into the position…So actually I already knew I kind of wanted to quit, but this was a nice out to make it sound like I’m really committed.

In terms of finding the least objectionable time to withdraw from an activity, the students also referenced cultural norms related to the span of one’s undergraduate career.

According to Briana:

As a freshman you come into this brand new university, and they’re telling you that you should join things and you should join lots of things and get really involved and feel really passionate about it. So that’s when I think students don’t know they can quit. Freshman and sophomore year, you have no idea that you can quit something you don’t like. I feel like you’ve been told you should be in things and be very involved in those things. So they don’t tell you join a bunch of things and go to like two meetings for them and figure it out later.

The sense of duty and responsibility several students referenced was tied to a fear of letting other people down. Matt touched on his responsibility to others as he considered the priority one of his student organizations had to take because he had been elected president:

I am the one that is being looked to and the one that has made the commitment to run the organization, so it’s completely on me and to not give the best effort I could would take away from the organization, as well as others’ experiences.

Briana compared the pressure of academic assignments to what she felt as a member of an interconnected group:

In class, your grade is only affecting you, unless it’s like a group grade. So in general, it’s only affecting you, so if it slides or you didn’t study for that test, you’re only hurting yourself. Whereas if you slide and you don’t make something
for a club, like that whole club is suffering because they expected you to do it. So I had those expectations for myself, and I usually have those of others, and it’s usually a conflict if they don’t match up. I feel like that’s one of my biggest values in my value system – just the sense of duty and responsibility.

Vikas, who was only in his third semester of college at the time of our interviews had already started to identify issues of personal integrity with respect to honoring his commitments that had forced him to start thinking about the fear of letting others down:

I had made a commitment and said, “I’ll be here to help out with this event – XYZ event,” and then last minute I would be like “Oh, no I can’t. I have to study,” or “No, I can’t. I accidentally promised someone else I would do something.” I had a really bad habit of not keeping track of where I was committing myself to, and so that really got in the way of how I was conducting myself and sort of keeping my relationships with other people.

Connected to the fear of disappointing others was a difficulty some described with saying no to additional responsibilities when asked to take on something more. I was reminded of an old adage perpetuated frequently in my work environment: When you want something done, ask a busy person. The idea that those who show great capability managing multiple tasks should have the talent and time management skills to take on even more was not foreign to the study participants. These students had all had many opportunities to make a decision about assuming more duties, and some, like Rhiana, described their inability to refuse:

I am horrible at saying no, absolutely horrible, so for the most part, I’m asked to do something, I’m just gonna do it. Anytime somebody needs help with something, I’m just going to do it. But that’s kind of something I’m currently struggling with or trying to fix. I just can’t say yes to everything anymore without like pulling myself so thin in every single direction.

Rhiana described a specific example of when a fellow member of one of her student organizations had not prepared for an organizational event, and the advisors asked her to step in on short notice. She agreed despite being overwhelmed with three exams and a
paper and realized only after she had made considerable sacrifices to prioritize the event that she should not have done so. This particular circumstance made her self-aware about a tendency that contributed to her inability to say no:

Sometimes I’m just not very trusting of other people to get stuff done, which is why I feel like I say yes because I know if I do it, it will get done, and it will get done correctly. I mean like so I think that’s why I say yes a lot, but I need to stop doing that and let other people grow and develop because if I just handle everybody’s faults for them, there won’t be any room for improvement because they’ll never see failure.

It should be noted, though, that not all of the students conceded having trouble refusing new opportunities. To several, the fear of disappointing others came from realistically considering whether they would have time to do a good job with additional responsibilities. Matt thought logically about these situations:

Well, first, I have to ask myself what is being asked of me. I ask myself what is the purpose of me taking on this role or project or whatever you would call it and ask what the benefit for those around me would be. I ask whether it’s really developing me as a person or I’m just being asked to fill it as a body….At the end of the day, I would like it to be in line with my purpose, my goals, my aspirations, and my desire to serve others.

Bobby and Vikas also shared some of their reasoning when asked to do more:

*Bobby:* I don’t like to say no because usually if someone asks you to do something it means they chose you to ask. If it’s important to me, I’ll make time for it. If it’s something that I truly don’t think I could do and do it well then I would say no…I think it’s like well-respected to know when to say no and people appreciate that, especially if you know it’s something that they need done or whatever. They wouldn’t want you like to half-ass it.

*Vikas:* I feel like it’s definitely situational. So I actually got asked to take on a leadership role in [student organization]. I said no because my class schedule was too intense. So I’m definitely not just someone who says yes on whim like oh my God, leadership role, résumé! No, I definitely think about it. I’ve started to do that a lot better. I think about what I’m doing and what the main priorities are. Right now school is a huge priority.
When the Future Arrives: An Important Dose of Perspective

The reality of emerging priorities thought to be greater than the responsibilities of their co-curricular involvement was mentioned as a motivation that jolted several students into a new perspective. The day-to-day rigors of performing academically were generally taken in stride by these students. Vikas and Rania mentioned occasions when a disappointing academic outcome caused their priorities to change, at least temporarily. However, the realization that life after college required focused preparation as the end of their undergraduate careers approached was the trump card that finally made their co-curricular commitments secondary. When it came to evaluating the relative importance of grad school applications or job interviews and student involvement – even involvement they once considered to be their reason for being – those career steps immediately took precedence. According to Rhiana:

“I’m in the process of studying for the GRE, and that’s huge. So I just can’t – that’s important to me so I can get into grad school, so for this next month, I’m like, “All right, I can’t do anything outside of my normal job scope for this one month. After October is over, you can have me back, but right now I just can’t.” So this idea is recent, I think. It’s a lot more recent this year because there are so many more things at stake like figuring out what’s next. Even junior year like, “Oh I know I’m about to be a senior.” I just knew what was next. I didn’t have that additional stress, so now I have this brand new stress of what’s next, and that’s a big stress. It’s not little. So I have to figure out other ways to scale back, which is what I’m kind of like going through right now.

Bobby, who had begun an internship with a company he expected to offer him a full-time job after graduation had a similar revelation, which helped him to understand the sudden disappearance of seniors in his organizations:

Now I think one of the big changes is I’m focusing on things after college. College is temporary. You’re done with that after four years, and then it’s over, but you have to get a job and move forward for basically the rest of your life. I’m finding it hard to keep up the velocity of student organization stuff because like you got your internship full-time offer, and you’re like, “Woo-hoo! I’m done!”
and everyone’s like, “I don’t care about school anymore. I’ve already accepted, and that’s done. Now I can just kind of coast out.” It’s hard to continue with that same force in student org roles because you know soon it will be over. We have like no contact with the people who helped lead it last year. They just dropped off the face of the earth because it doesn’t matter to them anymore.

In spite of this realization, Briana still struggled with the need to shift her priorities:

I feel like once you get in your upper level classes and stuff and having to take the time to do grad school stuff and to take time to plan for your future and take time do GRE studying or MCAT studying or whatever it is, you’re having to put your time in a different place, and that’s what makes you think of your priorities. Your first thought is, “What can I drop?” So that’s why it’s hard for people who are over-involved because they’re over-involved because they didn’t have that option anymore. There was nothing they could drop. So when you’re a senior, and you have an org you’re not very committed to, you’re going to drop it.

Not every one of the study participants had reached the point in their undergraduate careers where they were confronted so directly by the real pressures of preparing for life after college. However, regardless of the particular commitments competing for their attention, the students all noted issues with letting go of their co-curricular activities and responsibilities. The motivation they took from the challenge of not quitting was related for many to the competitive norms that characterized their environment. Their comparison of themselves with others is the subject of the next section.

**Once and Always Ingrained: The Sustaining Power of Family Values**

In this chapter, I have referenced the students’ thoughts on the influence of their family members with respect to their early age involvement, their experience in high school, and, in some cases, their ability or inability to process their frustrations. Some of the students returned to musings about their families in our conversations about their motivations to stay involved. Though there were exceptions, the general sense I gathered was that parents and siblings continued to be supportive of their students’ plans to balance classes, involvement, and other commitments, trusting that their children knew
their own limits and were working toward specific goals that involvement helped them achieve. Having approval from their parents was both a relief and a source of encouragement for those who actually had it. The encouragement Jonathan received from his mother to be involved in high school continued in much the same way during college, in part because he commutes to campus from his parents’ home. He made a cultural connection between his motivation for high involvement and the influence of his family:

My mom is like, “Ahhh, go do more! Go do more! Why are you sitting around?” It’s like, “Mom! Stop, I’m tired!” Even on Saturdays now she’s like, “What are you doing here?” It’s like, “Mom, stop, I’m taking care of myself.” She’s like the bali bali culture in Korean. Bali bali means hurry, hurry, go, go, constantly going. You gotta be busy – maybe attributed culturally there. Might be just an Asian culture thing, as well.

Vikas cited a never-ending source of motivation to push himself that was related to his parents but was not due to their constant encouragement:

Another thing I guess that really always just motivates me is my parents because they’re always – their reasoning behind me doing anything or going to school is just they want me to have what they didn’t have. They’re both immigrants from India. They didn’t have much of an education... And so I guess that motivation from my parents is always, it’s in the back of my head. Am I doing the best that I can? Am I doing the most that I can to set myself apart and make myself the best that I can be? Because my parents worked so hard for me, and I want to work as hard as I can for them because they went through so much to put me in school and to just like, you know, just maintain a family. It’s been pretty rough.

Even Briana, whose parents’ concerns about her burning out in college have been a source of tension (as documented earlier in this chapter), described an overall level of trust and support for her constant engagement:

Obviously my parents are very proud of me, and they definitely brag about me, but my parents are very much of like – my parents take a holistic approach. So they’ve never been like you have to be the best at anything. They’ve never been competitive... They’re like pretty much like you can do what makes you happy as long as it fits with our overall set of values.
In addition to the compelling support and approval from parents the students described, some also mentioned the sustaining motivation of other family members. Rania spoke of her inclination to follow the path of her older sister and join the organizations she joined. Because her twin sister was engaged in many of those same activities, Rania felt even more committed to stay with them. Jonathan referenced a heritage of successful family members – military commanders, business owners, and other leaders – that made him feel as though he needed to perform well. He thought of the recent success of one of his cousins:

Yeah she’s a Fulbright Scholar. So that’s kind of like, ah I should step up my game. Her goal is to work at the UN. She can actually envision those things because she has the social connections to do that. I don’t know if that’s tied to me subconsciously being like, “I gotta do better than you.” I’m competitive, so I do have that…Yeah so there’s like a history of people in my family who have been successful and have those connections that I maybe feel the need to live up to those expectations. So I manifest that through the way I go through school.

Given the considerable influence of the expectations and approval of parents and family members on involvement choices throughout their lives, it was not surprising that the family dynamic continued to provide motivation for these students in college. It is notable that parents seemed to have more input for their students on academic matters, which, according to the participants, they understood more than the students’ co-curricular commitments. Even so, several of the students referenced their parents as their most frequent and trusted confidantes, and the encouragement they received to persevere was quite motivating.

**The Inspiration and Oppressive Force of Self-Comparison**

Earlier in this chapter, I detailed what the participants told me of the environmental norms around managing an image of composure. The constant
comparison of themselves with other students in which the study participants engaged was also a great source of motivation to remain involved. Comparison with students they considered to be less involved generally helped bolster their confidence and their view of their status on campus, as with Matt, who, as referenced earlier, realized that his unique combination of involvements – honors student, varsity athlete, researcher, fraternity leader, student organization president – made him appreciate the difficulty of his balancing act. Rania was also aware of how her rare combination of high involvement and challenging major gave her some pride and satisfaction when comparing herself:

I know a lot of their majors, which are not as strenuous in their curriculum that they require. So we may be doing the exact same thing, but then I also have ten times the leg work to make up for academics when maybe they might not necessarily have that. Or anyone who’s in a major as tough as mine or has a curriculum that’s as hard, they’re not as involved. So I think people who look as involved as me have maybe a slightly easier out.

Comparison with those just as involved or more resulted in some cases in a healthy, competitive push and, in other cases, an immobilizing sense of inadequacy. Their thoughts on comparison with others were quite revealing.

Students who found genuine inspiration from their comparisons with others seemed intensely motivated by it. Gabby explained this dynamic:

That’s one of my favorite parts of being involved is that, the things you’re involved in, they can – it’s easy to let them consume you until you meet someone else who talks about all the things that they do. So you get to hear about all of the wonderful things they do on a daily basis, and it almost kind of gives you that little extra motivation to say like, “Okay, so-and-so nailed an O-Chem exam today, like I can go out and write this lesson plan!” I do think when I was younger there were definitely times I didn’t need to go after a position, or I didn’t need to volunteer for one more event, but I did it because someone else – you gotta get that. You gotta compete. Someone else will be there, so I gotta be there, too. I can’t deny that I did that because I totally did when I was younger, but now as I grow and have become the person that I am today, those people, those other people who do the things that they do, it inspires me.
Matt commented on his wrestling teammates as a source of inspiration:

Well, in wrestling, everyone else is giving their all. They come to practice regardless of how their days are going, regardless of whether they have a midterm, they’re coming in, they’re embracing the grind and really giving their all for the team. So, there’s no way I could let myself do anything but that.

However, Matt also recognized that his deep involvement in other things prevented him from giving the singular focus to wrestling that most of his teammates and competitors could commit:

It’s definitely an interesting balance. Wrestlers that aren’t as involved have more time in the day to go for a run, go get an extra workout in, and I don’t have that time. I spend it other ways. So, if they have time to get that extra workout in, get a sweat going, drop some weight, it’s definitely advantageous for them, and I know I’m giving up that advantage by being as involved as I am.

Matt found motivation not only from the inspiring level of commitment he saw from others but also from his realization that he had to work even harder during the time he could make available for wrestling in order to be competitive. Vikas had been motivated by the example set by his roommate:

He doesn’t sleep. I have no idea. He’s super involved with his fraternity, with [student government], with another student org. He has a part time job downtown, as well. He’s double majoring. It’s crazy. I don’t know how he does it. He doesn’t sleep. We don’t really see him too much. It’s kind of crazy.

Comparing to an Impossible, Impeccable Standard…That May Not Be Real

Other students also talked about the inspirational or aspirational influence of peers. Mostly, these comments were made in the context of how they compared themselves to peers they considered to be just as involved as or more involved than they were. Bobby spoke of the success of a good friend and how he tried not to feel threatened by it:

Bobby: She is probably the only person that I know well who is as involved as I am.
Me: Well then as you think about her, how do you perceive her?

Bobby: I would say it’s hard because, well she’s very smart. She has like a 3.9, so in some regards, I do view her as like better I guess than me, which is sometimes hard to be friends with people like that, but at the same time, she’s a different specialization so it’s not like directly competing. Which is I think how we can both celebrate each other’s achievements because it’s not like taking away from what the other one is doing.

Me: Her success doesn’t come at the expense of yours. You’re not vying for the same things.

Bobby: Exactly.

I came to realize that their comparisons were often not actually with other involved students but instead with the personas projected by those involved students. They were convinced of the existence of an impossible standard against which they failed to measure because of the effectiveness of their exemplars in portraying perfection. Little did they realize that they, too, were seen by others as bastions of well-managed student involvement. Briana reflected on her perception of other highly involved students:

I don’t know one person who doesn’t look like they have it all together. The problem is I know there’s no way this person has it together, but then I see them and I’m like, well I need to up my game because they have their life together…So it’s hard to tell whether or not it’s real, you know? Like it’s hard to tell whether or not they really are just happy and they really do have it together and they’re not wasting their life on other things and that’s where they get this magical other time or something. Or if they’re just faking it. I don’t know if this is just to make me feel better, but I just tell myself everyone else is faking it because if not, I don’t know how I’d live with myself knowing that everyone definitely has their stuff together and I’m just sitting here like…

Rhiana spoke about her perceptions of similarly involved students in comparison to herself:

I don’t want to say that I look at them like they’re better than me, but I feel like they know how to manage their time better or they have a stronger exterior. I never see them in a bad mood or you know what I mean? They are just better at
hiding their stress…One of my friends, she is just so calm, cool, and collected, and I just don’t know how people do it. I don’t know how you can be preparing for grad school and super involved and taking classes and still be the same you. They could also be those people who are really good at putting on that face and behind the scenes it’s a lot different. I don’t know what they do when I’m not around or in the privacy of their own home or whatever. They could be very similar to me and I just not know it.

In our discussion of the ways in which she compared herself to other students, Briana indicated that the most highly involved students had some interconnectedness, as though they were all members of an elite corps:

While everyone has these separate organizations that they’ve been a part of, you see that people already knew each other from some kind of common standpoint beforehand. So it’s like you keep seeing the same people over and over again. Like if you’re really over-involved, you’re going to know the people who are also really over-involved, and you’re going to end up – it’s really weird because you’re like, oh, how do you know this person? It’s like, I know them from this organization, and it’s like I know them from this organization. And so, yeah, if you know anyone who’s over-involved, you’re going to like know everyone else that is, too.

I followed up on this idea with Rania, who had a similar view but picked up on the competitiveness of those in that environment. Despite the common ground they might have from sharing challenges, this was not a place Rania felt she could go for empathy:

Me: I’ve been really interested in this idea that most really involved students know a lot of other really involved students…

Rania: I wouldn’t say it’s like a cult because there are a lot of them that I’ve never had the time to meet, but if you told me to list them or does this person look like they’re involved – yes, I know exactly who that is.

Me: But then even among that group of you who sees each other a lot at things it seems that it’s hard to be vulnerable to other people who are as involved.

Rania: Yeah, I would agree with that. If they’re not in the same org as you, it’s very competitive. There’s like unnecessary tension, like you have to prove you’re better than them and to me, honestly I laugh when I see those kind of people. It makes no sense to me. Who cares?
Interestingly, Gabby commented on feeling limited in this competitive environment from admitting to being overwhelmed, but she thought she would have no trouble accepting someone else’s admission that they had let the ball drop:

I think it’s interesting because I give other people that leeway, like – and I’m sure this is a lot more universal than I think it is, but I would say that about someone else. Like it’s just a bad day, like that’s fine, don’t worry about it. It doesn’t define who you are. But for me, especially when I was younger, I definitely would have been like no, I can’t be that person. I could forgive that person because like that’s them, but this is me, and I can’t do that. Someone else can, but I can’t.

The idea that highly involved students motivated to keep pushing forward in this competitive environment could show empathy but not ask for it was very much connected to the pressure the students felt to wear a mask of invulnerability. 

Society’s Prize Fight for Success

Competitive pressures that translated into motivations were also described in terms of societal expectations or understandings the students had about what was necessary to excel in life. Similar to the motivations they described for working so hard in high school in order to be admitted to college, the students commented on the forces of bigger picture competitive norms. As Gabby stated:

I can’t necessarily put my finger on it, but I do think a lot of the competitiveness involved with “Oh, you do more than I do” comes down to this pressure from the “real world” because at the end of the day, you make a résumé, and sometimes I think it’s a common misconception to think the more you have on your résumé the better you look, the more qualified you are. It makes you a better candidate for whatever you’re doing, and that’s not necessarily true. For me, I would rather have three things on my résumé that I can talk about really well. I think that mentality really does come from the fact that eventually you leave here, so it becomes this mindset of, “Oh, if I had to compete with that person for a job, they would get it because they do so much. I need to step up my game! I need to do more. I need to add more.” So I think it’s the pressure from real world jobs.

Jonathan brought his sociology background to bear on his view of this dynamic:
That will look good on a résumé, so you should probably prioritize that as well because that’s a lot of experience that you’ll need for grad school. So I prioritized things based on application for the future. I have to be very rational about things. I think it has to do with the meritocracy and having to overachieve to be anywhere, just because of the system.

Vikas was keenly aware of the push of competitive admissions and echoed Jonathan’s sentiments about needing to overachieve:

Vikas: So for the pressure for med school, it’s like you always hear that you need to be super involved. I think there’s always a stigma. It’s not like a bad stigma, which I guess has a negative connotation, but just to be super involved or over-involved and have an impact in what you do so that you can market yourself. It’s never put so that you can improve yourself. It’s always about that end goal. It’s not about what you’re intrinsically getting. It’s like whatnot on the surface that is more important than what it is. I think there is always that pressure that’s built up on a lot of students. It’s like I need to set myself apart.

Me: That’s been your experience for med school admissions. Do you see that existing for students who have a different career path?

Vikas: Yeah, definitely, if they’re – I know with a lot of my Poli Sci friends they are like, “Oh, I need to be doing a million different things so that I don’t look like another Poli Sci major.” I think everyone is out there just to set themselves apart from everyone. They find that by doing the most that they can with the little amount of time they have here. So I think there is a lot of push coming in from, not intentionally, but it might just be assumed that there is a lot of push coming in from the future and what you want to do in the future. You have to do a million things to get there.

Among many other sources of motivation for maintaining such fatiguing levels of involvement, the students all described the competitive pressure that came from comparing themselves to others they could observe and unknown others who might by vying for the same limited opportunities they coveted in the future. The rat race to get into college that pushed them to become as involved as they could tolerate normalized that view of competition and served as a sustaining motivation.
If They Had It to Do All Over Again

Before beginning the data collection for this study, I had hoped that one of the outcomes of our conversations would be that the students got valuable time to reflect on their experiences. It occurred to me that students navigating such busy schedules may not always make time to think deeply about what they had gone through or why they had undertaken such a heavy load. In fact, these interviews did serve as a medium for this kind of introspection, and I was encouraged to hear the students recognizing them as such and even thanking *me* for the opportunity to share, when it was I who was so grateful for their time and willingness to talk with me. One of the last questions I asked each student during our second interview was about what they would do differently if given the opportunity to restart their undergraduate careers. In some cases, I asked a follow-up question that borrowed from this premise— that being what advice they would give an incoming student about involvement based on everything we had discussed. I was interested to hear whether or not these students would think of their struggles with over-involvement as worth it for the rewards and outcomes they achieved. Whether the students were nearing the end of their undergraduate careers or they still had years to go, their comments were insightful.

Only a few of the students’ comments indicated guilt or regret, but most of the statements of that nature focused on academics. Some of the students reflected on the time they might have spent studying. According to Bobby:

I probably would have studied more. I think that’s—after every exam, I always say that to myself, but I wish that was something I could have implemented throughout my entire academic career here is learning how to study a little bit at a time sooner, further away from the exam date. That’s probably the only thing I would really change because I feel like student orgs couldn’t have gone any differently.
Rania felt that more of her time could have been devoted to academics, but as she continued to ponder the question of what she might have done to make more time, she was very protective of her co-curricular activities:

*Me:* So if you were doing this over again and you were deciding you would study more, where would that time come from?

*Rania:* Like what I would take it away from? Now that I think about it, I don’t know what the heck I was doing all of sophomore year. I didn’t even have a job. It wouldn’t be at [programming board] because last year I was not as heavily involved. Good question. Probably just take less classes because I’ve been taking 18 credit hours since I’ve been here, and last year I took 21 last semester. So probably sticking to 15 which would allow for less classes so more study time. I would definitely have done that.

There were far more sentiments expressed that reinforced the idea that the importance of the commitments the students had made was supreme. When asked about whether the daily 5:00am to 11:00pm commitments Matt had made were worth it, he simply replied, “Oh, yeah. I love everything I’m doing. If I didn’t love it, I wouldn’t be doing it in the first place.” Jonathan thought about his involvement and his decision to change majors together as his two main sources of stress and other challenges:

I honestly do not regret anything. I would have done everything the exact same even with all the stress. It was totally worth it…Even if it was difficult, it taught me to persevere and get through. I don’t know, a lot of people – even I see the issues with that, but like I picked healthy amounts of – that’s not going to kill me, so I am stronger. So I am stronger now.

Rhiana offered that not only would she have been just as committed, she would have done so earlier in her career:

This is going to sound so crazy. I probably would have gotten involved sooner. I probably would’ve started my freshman year because freshman year I was kind of transitioning and learning and not really knowing the benefits of getting involved… I think maybe if I’d been more involved, that would have helped me do better.
Vikas, who, as a sophomore had endured a difficult freshman year and was remembering his challenges much more recently, responded very quickly when asked what he would do differently:

Nothing. I think it was a learning experience for me to go through last year and experience everything. I think if I hadn’t done that, then it would’ve happened this year or maybe later on in life where it probably would have been much more critical or affecting on what was going on, and so I wouldn’t change anything really. I’d rather go through it in the beginning and learn from it and improve as I go then to have it not happen in the beginning.

Gabby viewed the hypothetical opportunity to go back in time as a chance to do even more but to approach it with the wisdom she had gained:

This is probably incredibly twisted, but I think I honestly would have done more if I could start over and know everything that I do now, because I see all of the opportunities, and I see how transformative they can be, and I love that. So but I guess as far as the things I do – did do, I would do them all over again, but I wouldn’t have gone to five [programming board] events a week. I would have gone to two and then taken time to learn how to study and go to the [study skills center] and really kind of utilize those other resources academically. Other than that, I guess going back to the relationship aspect, I would maybe be more open to letting my guard down to more people earlier on. Maybe there was some missed opportunities for friendships there that I don’t realize.

Briana was conflicted when she pondered this question because she recognized the benefits of so much involvement but could easily see how she could have made it more manageable. She commented on the volume of activities in which she engaged at the beginning of her career and how her inclination not to quit things contributed to her struggles:

I think if I was going to redo my career I’d just really think about what was important to me first. Figure out my values sooner. I would probably try to not get involved in things, but I don’t think I would be the person I was if I wasn’t involved with everything I’m involved in. I think what I was doing as a sophomore was I was involved in a lot of things and not putting my heart into them. Since then it’s been harder because now I put my heart into things without getting rid of all the things I needed to get rid of. So that’s what is causing my
stress now.

Earlier in this chapter, I referenced the motivation some of the students described having from a need to serve others who shared their racial or ethnic identities. Rhiana and Jonathan shared some poignant reflections on that in the context of what they might do differently:

*Rhiana:* I also think that I wish I would have gotten involved with different things, like maybe try to be in [programming board, student government] because I feel like those organizations don’t have a lot of representation of people of color. I think that I could have done a bigger justice on this campus by being in an organization like that and representing the Black community in bigger organizations like that.

*Jonathan:* The [identity-based organization] where I am this year, I think it might have been okay for me to drop it this year and pass on my responsibilities to other people. I would have pursued things – part of me, now I feel like I am qualified enough to get involved with [student government] as like, a person of diversity, so I would have tried to get involved in [student government] or other committees on campus.

The knowledge that these students got in so deep because of their genuine concern for others and that so much of their purpose and identity was tied to their advocacy made it especially interesting to me that they could now see a way of affecting even more students by engaging in organizations recognizable to more students.

The advice the participants would give to others about how best to approach involvement in college was also quite insightful. As referenced earlier, Rhiana’s pragmatic advice on finding a campus job that allows one to do homework while at work was something she felt was a key to her ability to multitask and stay afloat. Rhiana also made the suggestion from her own experience that purposeful involvement is very important:

Pick organizations that their purpose or their values or their mission align with your values or the difference that you are trying to make on campus. For
example, if you are in a major and that major is super important to you and is a passion that you have, then make sure that you are getting involved with organizations that serve people with those same passions – or not being afraid to join the bigger things or just putting yourself out there.

Briana’s advice was meant to help students understand that they can do themselves a favor by stopping an involvement when it’s the right time for them:

I would tell them to join quite a few things, but I think if I could give them advice, I’d say quit them. Don’t be afraid to quit. Because I think we have this huge thing in our society where you’re not supposed to fail or you’re not supposed to quit. You’re supposed to stick to things and get it done, you know? ...So I would say in your first year try a little bit of everything. Go to a couple meetings. Don’t feel stressed that you need to go to every meeting. And just you know like quit if you don’t like it.

One final piece of advice came from Jonathan, who had developed a concern that his middle school-aged sister was on a path to over-involvement that could have even more harmful consequences than what he experienced. His abiding concern for his sister reminded me of the concern I had that motivated this study:

The reason why I’m concerned is I did it when I was a freshman in high school. That’s when I started getting over-committed. She’s getting over-committed in sixth, seventh grade. She’s growing up like this. Maybe I guess if it doesn’t kill her, it will make her stronger, but I have no idea how it’s going to impact her in the future…I can see that the way she’s over-committed, she’s not balancing her time. So yes if I were to pass on anything, if it’s not even her – know what you’re getting into and prepare for it ahead of time. If you know you’re not going to have a social life, then account for ways you can talk with people still and be engaged if it’s really that important. If you’re over-committed, find time to study. Find ways to isolate yourself and do what you gotta do.

These self-reflections were helpful to my overall understanding of the phenomenon of over-involvement, as they indicated a bit about the learning that took place as a result of working through all the challenges. It was interesting to me that their comments only hinted at a cautionary tale. Most of them believed they were better for having gone through so much – and some thought they might handle even more if they
could start over – but timing is everything. These students had the benefit of thinking about the peak of their over-involvement in hindsight. Had I been able to ask these questions at the height of their feelings of being overwhelmed, it is possible that they may have responded differently – or perhaps not. If maintaining a façade of composure is as essential to the phenomenon as I believe it to be, these students may have been as guarded with a researcher as they are with their peers. In any case, their thoughtfulness about recommending purposeful involvement, not being afraid to step back when necessary, and putting appropriate emphasis on studying and staying connected with others indicated that they had made some important discoveries.

**Fit of the Term “Over-Involvement”**

One of the uncertainties I had when designing this study was the appropriateness of the use of the term “over-involvement” to describe the circumstances of these students. In Chapter Two, I provided an etymological analysis of “involvement” and its Latin root, *involvere*, meaning “to envelop, surround, overwhelm” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). More meaning is layered with the addition of the prefix “over-,” which has its origins in the Old English *ofer*, a word-forming element meaning, “above, highest, too much, above normal” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). “Over” and its Germanic cognates, were historically used as prefixes with negative force. As I indicated in Chapter Three, I worried that this term implied a certain value judgment that would not resonate with the students experiencing it and that I needed to be careful not to frame over-involvement as a problem that needed to be solved – at least until I could understand more about the lived experience. I decided to ask the students for their reactions to the term and to suggest more appropriate alternatives if they could think of any. At least initially (and consistent with the historical linguistic implications of the meaning of
“over-”), many of them stated they felt the term had a negative connotation with which they would not want to be associated, but as they continued to process through it, they provided some interesting revelations.

A few students, including Rhiana, Bobby, and Briana, remarked that the term “over-involved” made them envision someone who could not make good on their commitments – that is, someone who might have signed up for multiple activities but did not really apply themselves to those involvements. As Briana and Rhiana stated:

_Briana_: I think the term “over-involvement” actually overshadows when you’re really devoting yourself to stuff because I feel like when you say “over-involved,” people think that you’re just involved in a bunch of stuff but don’t do anything for any of them. It doesn’t hit the people, like me or probably other people in your survey, who are doing multiple things and devoting so much time to them that they lose other stuff. So I think that’s where the terminology falls short. I think it’s good for describing that it’s too much but not describing how much I guess.

_Rhiana_: When I think of “over-involvement” I just think of like you’re involved in too many things that you’re not able to dedicate the time to them. Like how we kind of talked about somebody being involved in six or seven things and not being able to put as much into it as if you were doing two or three really good things. So I don’t ever think of it as being over-involved because I’ve only been heavily involved in two organizations, and I’m giving them the time. I’m just spreading myself thin as far as my personal time that I have for myself. I don’t know what a better term would be, but I think my issue was maybe dedicating too much time to it.

Some of the students had perceptions of the term that more closely resembled the way I defined it for this study but felt like the negative connotation could be softened with use of another word. According to Bobby:

_Obviously_ I don’t think rewriting the definition of over-involvement or like not using the word would be better than using it. But I don’t know. I guess when I refer to myself, I guess I would more just say like “highly involved” because I feel like “over-involved” could also sound like you’re kind of like victimizing yourself and you know, “Don’t expect too much from me because I’m already doing so much.”… I think “overachiever” is probably like a nicer term, like one that doesn’t have – I think one that sounds more positive.
When thinking about the term being used to describe him, Bobby’s concept of it indicated that he was concerned about the perception of not being able to handle his commitments. Vikas also thought of the word in terms of being used by others to describe him:

I feel like “over-involvement” definitely gets like a negative connotation towards it. Like if someone were to tell you like, “Oh, you’re too over-involved,” you might associate that with something negative. So I don’t think it’s something negative. I mean the definite word would be you’re “really diverse” or you’re “really engaged” or something like that would be a better word for it.

Jonathan discussed how he initially reacted when being invited to participate in the study:

When I first got the email to participate in this, I was like, “I’m not over-committed! Like, you can’t tell me that!” It’s like, “Yeah, you are Jonathan. Stop lying to yourself.” So it’s almost like a negative, like, “This is a problem, and you should probably fix this” is what I get when I hear “over-commitment.” But there’s no other way to describe it, and it is a problem. Like it’s not – maybe it’s more of a lifestyle choice than a problem. You just chose to live an over-committed life. Because there are people who can manage it and continue to thrive. So initially, I think of it as an insult or like this is what’s wrong with you.

Other students embraced the term and, even if they thought the connotation was negative, felt that it described their circumstances:

**Matt:** I’ve never really found anything massively worthwhile in life that’s worth doing that also happens to be easy. So with anything important, anything worthwhile comes a challenge. I definitely would describe myself as over-involved, but it’s more the result of having passions that aren’t exactly small time commitments and caring so much about different organizations and having different requirements from my major, and all these things competing at once causing this phenomenon.

**Gabby:** I think it’s a good term. I would say – does it fit me? Yes. I think it’s hard because the term “over-involvement,” it almost insinuates that what you’re doing is negative. Like, “Oh, you’re too involved,” but I don’t necessarily think that’s the case. I just think it means you do a lot, which is just the reality.

**Rania:** I would say “over-involved” definitely describes me – not exactly how I envisioned a descriptor for myself, just because I always thought I was in that
healthy range of involvement. But this year especially I’m seeing how that is no longer really playing in my favor now, and I’m making strenuous efforts to keep up.

The subjective nature of the term was also something that kept Briana from thinking of it as complete. She touched on the concept that everyone has a different threshold, but those who reach an obsessive level of commitment may be unfairly compared to those who simply sign up:

I do think it does capture some of the ideas that you have like a limit and you’re going over that limit. So I think in those terms, over-involvement isn’t the same for everybody because, honestly, if I was just doing like two or three of those things, that would be cool for me. But I know some other people could only handle like one, you know, so maybe doing two things for them is over-involved. So I think it’s good at capturing that. But I don’t think it captures like how obsessed you get with your stuff because I think there could be people that were called “over-involved” because they’re part of a bunch of different things, but they never show up, you know?

Even for those whom the word was meant to describe, “over-involved” may be imperfect terminology. Alternatives some suggested like “highly involved,” “really engaged,” or “overachiever” may have more positive connotations, but they fail to capture the additional layer of involvement-related challenges that makes this phenomenon so unique. As I bring this chapter to a close, I will return to the essence of the phenomenon.

(Re)Viewing the Essence of Over-Involvement

Over-involved students undertake a non-stop agenda of activities that consumes almost every hour of every day – so much so that they charge through each week despite multiple skipped meals and insufficient levels of sleep. They may be able to recover from the sleeplessness to some extent on the weekends, but the cumulative effects of the stress of constant deadlines, people relying on them to be organized and visionary as a leader, fast food meals, and the feeling of never having enough time to do anything as
well as they can all leave them wondering occasionally whether or not the rewards are worth the effort. They forge ahead, though, because everyone else they know to be just as busy seems to be able to handle it well. They do not really talk about their struggles with their friends because they doubt others would understand, and they do not even feel like they have the time to explain it anyway. The relationships they have allowed to become superficial or non-existent, the grades that could have been better if they had been able to make time to study more, and the stress that has manifested itself in their bodies and minds in various, sometimes debilitating ways – a small price to pay for the promise of an advantage in the job or graduate school search. Is it not? They can never really be sure, but they are so devoted to their responsibilities for the benefit of others, they can barely imagine a different way of going through school. In fact, if they could do it all over again with the knowledge they now have, they might get even more involved because there are so many things they did not have time to try. This is the essence of over-involvement.

The participants in this study were not simply busy. Busyness does not begin to describe the depth of the commitment made by these students and the extent to which they think about their co-curricular involvement even while not directly engaged. Examples of an almost obsessive commitment that became more important at times than basic needs like sleep and food were recounted time and again: Matt’s drive to compete and his utter devotion to his wrestling teammates; Rhiana’s tireless commitment to the betterment of the experience of current and future Black students; Gabby’s responsibility to be the best possible resource for her residents; Jonathan’s neverending work to help Asian students confront stereotypes and develop their identities; Vikas’ numerous service ventures that undergird his desire to be a physician; Rania’s mission to provide
memorable community-building events for the entire campus; Bobby’s preparations for success in a fast-paced, all-consuming career; Briana’s endless giving of herself for research and service. These are just eight examples of the purpose-driven experiences of over-involved students, whose devotion to their co-curricular activities was supreme in their lives for significant amounts of time. The reality that they all knew of many other students who were dealing with the same challenges and the fact that so many students responded to participate in this study are indicators that these are the circumstances of an untold number of young people on our campuses.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have attempted to capture the most salient aspects of the experiences of eight students with the phenomenon of over-involvement. With the three primary research questions of this study as a framework, I have explored what it means to be over-involved, what motivates students to become and remain deeply engaged in co-curricular activities, and how students describe the impact of over-involvement on various aspects of their lives. Using a hermeneutical phenomenological approach to the design of the study, data collection, and analysis, I have investigated the participants’ experience as it was lived and have provided rich descriptions directly from our conversations. Through writing and rewriting, I winnowed more than 18 hours’ worth of recorded interview data to the most essential themes that emerged from the students’ testimonials. As I listened to the recordings, engaged in numerous close readings of the transcripts in parts and in whole, and broke the transcripts apart in search of meaning units, my commitment to the abiding concern that motivated the study only deepened. As the students described the details of their challenges with over-involvement, I experienced a visceral reaction that sometimes made it difficult for me to remain
composed, especially when they struggled to do so, themselves. These interviews were
in many cases among the very few opportunities the students had taken to process aloud
these issues with someone, and they represented the first time I had truly considered the
severity of involvement-related stress on our campus.

These eight students enlightened me in ways I could not anticipate about the
depth of their challenges. Through the process of co-constructing descriptions of their
perseverance, I became aware of how firmly entrenched their paths to over-involvement
had become. The development of habitual over-involvement as a norm had been
occurring gradually since their earliest days in elementary school. By the time they
reached college, the expectations they had developed for themselves for high levels of
involvement were met with a powerful environmental press at their institution that
resulted in student engagement so deep, they could not imagine an alternative despite the
toll it took on their bodies and minds. Motivated to find belonging, serve others, and
emerge from college supremely qualified for a competitive marketplace that resembled
their quest for undergraduate admission, these eight students plunged into their co-
curricular lives with all of their being. In spite of the resulting consequences, which
included an unhealthy diet, inadequate sleep, strained relationships, academic shortfalls,
and overwhelming struggles with stress and anxiety, they held fast to their commitments
because of the promise of a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. While they secretly
suffered without an abundance of empathetic confidantes, they wore a brave persona of
composure in order to navigate an environment that rewards those who appear to be
perfect and punishes those who quit, break down, or otherwise concede their
vulnerability. Only in retrospect were they able to see that healthier outcomes could have
been possible, but they maintained a great deal of personal pride in their ability to
weather the considerable challenges.

With the essence of over-involvement and the voluminous supporting descriptions from which it was derived presented in this chapter, I will turn next to a concluding chapter that considers the findings in the framework of existing literature and discusses implications for theory and practice.
Chapter 5

Discussion

This study was designed to address three research questions: (1) What does it mean to be over-involved in college?; (2) How are students motivated to become deeply or broadly involved in co-curricular or extracurricular activities in college?; and (3) How do students describe the impact of high levels of involvement on various aspects of their lives? Through the funneling process of data reduction, I was able to describe an essence of over-involvement that incorporates the insights gained from working through these questions. Over-involvement for undergraduate students begins long before college, as norms for high levels of activity in the pursuit of achievements that will distinguish them for college admissions are established at a young age. As students reach high school and engage in activities more voluntarily, habits for high involvement are solidified. Once in college, over-involved students are fueled by intense motivations to undertake an obsessive amount of co-curricular activity that infiltrates almost every hour of their day not already claimed by classes – and often even those hours are occupied in part by fractured attention devoted to co-curricular tasks. Their deep commitments take precedence over their own wellness, as they often neglect healthy sleep, diet, reflection, and relationship behaviors due to a perceived lack of time. Because they feel those less involved may not understand their circumstances, and those as involved or more may think less of them if they show any signs of struggling with their excessive load, they choose not to process with anyone about their vulnerability and decide instead to portray
a persona of composure – which contributes to a cultural norm that leads students to believe that others do not struggle with over-involvement. In spite of the isolation and often debilitating stress created by their experience with the phenomenon, they maintain their motivation to persist because of their belief that intrinsic and extrinsic rewards will accrue to them for their efforts.

This summary of the essence addresses the question of what it means to be over-involved. Even though they derive joy, fulfillment, and innumerable practical benefits from their co-curricular activities, students at that level of involvement are often jeopardizing their physical and mental health by not prioritizing self-care. As documented in great detail in Chapter Four, these students described the impact of their high levels of involvement in a variety of ways, including less desirable academic outcomes, insufficient levels of sleep, unhealthy eating habits, and an emotional toll that came both from the considerable stress of their own commitments and the feeling that they could not openly share their vulnerability. As for the question of what motivates students to become so deeply involved, there was not one concrete set of reasons that applied universally to all eight participants, but a certain quality of drive and intensity could be found in each of them. The belief that post-college success depended on their exceptional investment of energy into co-curricular activities was consistent across all participants, but there was great variety in the ways in which personal and family values and lifelong patterns of engagement fueled their college involvement decisions. Some motivations were characterized by an intense, intrinsic need to serve God and other people. Some related more to the extent to which the students’ success had earned them status and begun to define their identities. Still others connected with a fear of failure, a desire to avoid the stigma of quitting, or a duty not to let others down. Whether intrinsic,
extrinsic, or both, the motivations these students described were powerful – and had to be in order to sustain such an unrelenting agenda of activity that occupied almost every waking moment.

In this concluding chapter, I will discuss the understanding I developed as a result of my conversations with the study participants in light of the theoretical framework I identified in Chapter Two, including ways in which these findings support and challenge those in the existing literature. As I seek to bring closure to this study, I will also share the significant implications of an understanding of the phenomenon of over-involvement from the two perspectives I possess: as a student development researcher intrigued by this little-documented phenomenon and as a student affairs practitioner concerned about the strain many of our students experience from taking on too much of a good thing. Recommendations for future research based on emergent questions I could not address in the scope of this study will be followed by suggestions for practice and an acknowledgement of the limitations of the research design.

**Findings in Light of the Literature**

The literature review for a phenomenological study must necessarily begin broadly enough to connect with the research questions and inform a foundational understanding of constructs related to the phenomenon under investigation while not conforming too closely to the researcher’s presuppositions (Vagle, 2014). I attempted in Chapter Two to fuse multiple strands of student development research with the paucity of existing literature on over-involvement in such a way that I could subsequently layer in a fresh understanding of the phenomenon after developing a co-constructed description. Quite a bit of the curated literature proved valuable to a theory-enhanced understanding of the experiences the students described. That chapter began with a review of the
student involvement literature, to which I now return.

**Investment of Physical and Psychological Energy**

It was Astin’s (1984) foundational work on student involvement and the questions he posed for future research that first piqued my interest in the theoretical possibility that an upper limit for beneficial levels of involvement might exist. The results of this study indicate that there is an upper limit, though, given the nature of the testimonials shared in Chapter Four, a more appropriate concept of the extremity of involvement than its height may be its *weight* or its *depth*. It was not simply the high number of hours or activities in which the students engaged that contributed to their challenges but the ubiquity of their involvement at all times. However it is conceptualized, even though that limit is difficult to pinpoint or predict because of the case-specific circumstances that may define it for each individual who reaches it, there are ways to address the environmental factors that foster over-involvement.

As I considered the question of what it means to be over-involved, I thought about the ways in which the experience of *involved*, even “highly involved” students may differ from those who are *over-involved*. Returning to the postulates of Astin’s (1984) student involvement theory, I was particularly struck after interviewing the study participants by the notion that involvement implicates investment of physical *and* psychological energy. Certainly, the extraordinary investment of physical energy by over-involved students is a major factor in the challenges they experience. Anaya (1996) postulated that involvement in activities that consume time and energy that might otherwise be devoted to more direct pursuit of educational outcomes could diminish a student’s achievement of those outcomes. This dynamic was self-identified as problematic by the study participants, who all recalled times when they allowed their co-curricular involvement to...
take priority over studying – some more occasionally and some habitually. Guiffrida (2004) encountered this dynamic in his contrast of “actively involved students with high grades” and “overinvolved students with low grades,” the latter of which attributed their subpar performance to their lack of time and greater emphasis placed on their organizations. Interestingly, as it relates to the terminology Guiffrida chose, his lower GPA participants described themselves as “overinvolved,” while those with high GPAs perceived themselves as “actively involved,” even though he estimated their investment of time to be similar. Like Guiffrida’s participants, many of the students in this study described times when they simply did not have enough hours in the day to fulfill their co-curricular commitments and study as much as they should have. However, one of the revelations as a result of this study is a greater understanding of how detrimental an excessive investment of psychological energy can be. Several of these study participants initially objected to the term “over-involved” as a word that described them, but even these students eventually acknowledged that the depth of their struggles created a significant difference between their circumstances and those of “highly involved” students who did not experience such challenges.

As I stated in Chapter Three, one of the reasons for my decision to explore over-involvement with a qualitative methodology is that individuals may have different thresholds for when their involvement becomes problematic. Through my conversations with the study participants, I developed some perspective about the complexity behind the variance in how much involvement one person can tolerate compared to another. So many factors related to social identities, motivation, personal experience, work ethic, values, mental and physical health, and support structures could contribute to a very case-specific answer to the question of how much is too much for any given person. Simply
adding up the number of hours a student spends at meetings and events each week with their student organizations, at their workplace, or engaged in other co-curricular activities ignores the commitment of psychological energy students devote to those activities while not explicitly engaged in those ways.

In Chapter Four, I shared descriptions of students working on student organization projects while in class and other examples of how co-curricular activities had been integrated completely into every part of their daily schedules. Having enough time to devote to sleeping, eating, studying, maintaining relationships, and caring for themselves was made difficult enough by their scheduled time commitments (investment of physical energy), but the countless additional hours spent thinking about their out-of-class responsibilities, worrying about them while performing unrelated tasks, and otherwise allowing those thoughts and worries to invade their attention (psychological energy) were among the factors at the core of the distinction between involvement and over-involvement. A level of obsession with their activities was evident in many of the comments the participants shared.

**Over-Involvement as a Pre-College Input**

For these study participants, an excessive or even obsessive level of commitment to co-curricular activities could also be identified as a pre-college input in the framework of Astin’s (1977, 1993) I-E-O model. Consistent with the subjects of Gravelle’s (2010) research on over-involvement, a pattern of high levels of involvement while in school began for all of these students at a young age, continued throughout their primary education, and surged in high school as they did everything possible to prepare for the competitive process of college admissions. These Millennial study participants did not necessarily describe their experience as pressure to achieve in the way that Levine and
Dean (2012) characterized it, but the observation made by Levine and Dean (2012) and Pope (2001) that Millennial students have been pushed by societal competitive norms to take advantage of the opportunities surrounding them was exemplified by these students. With the attitudinal attribute of high involvement as a pre-college input interacting with a college environment defined by universal expectations for engagement and many attractive opportunities, it is perhaps not surprising that those accustomed to an over-saturated schedule continued that trend in college and got in deeper than they could control at times. Although none of the students said their over-involvement had corrupted their persistence to degree completion, the outcomes impacted negatively by this input-environment interaction included academic performance, physical and mental health, and relationships.

**Benefits of Involvement and Peer Interaction**

As indicated in Chapter Two, one of the most well-documented categories of the research on student involvement is benefits that accrue to students who engage in co-curricular activities (Astin, 1993; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Cooper et al., 1994; Fitch, 1991; Flowers, 2004; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Gellin, 2003; Hernandez et al., 1999; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). At times during our conversations, the study participants could well have been banner-carrying spokespersons for these studies – living, breathing paragons of involvement success stories. They spoke passionately of friendship, happiness, finding their life’s purpose, intellectual and leadership development, practical skill-building, and career-related outcomes that motivated them to stay involved even as their minds and bodies grew weary under the strain of so much effort. In effect, they gave compelling testimonials for the transformative potential of co-curricular involvement and the importance of the out-of-class experience to a holistic college
education. However, their struggles to lead balanced, healthy lives while juggling so much involvement could certainly be fodder for those who would assert that extracurricular activities can be more of a distraction than a boon.

In spite of the caveat offered by Harper and Quaye (2008) that concepts of involvement theory may not be as explanatory for students with non-majority identities, the members of this study sample who are also members of underrepresented groups on campus were every bit as resolute as their majority counterparts about the importance of their involvement to the success they had experienced. It is noteworthy that this study occurred in a PWI setting. As Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) and Harper (2006) discovered with African American students at predominantly White institutions, several of the minority student participants in this study sought the peer support of same-race ethnic student organizations and commented on the immeasurable importance of their participation in such groups and the benefits they enjoyed from their involvement.

As discussed above, peer interaction is the common thread woven through constructs like student involvement, social integration, and sense of belonging. Peer groups have long been found to be supremely important to cognitive and affective development (Astin, 1993, 1996; Hernandez et al., 1999; Terenzini et al., 1996), and more frequent peer interaction has been correlated with more favorable outcomes in college (Astin, 1996; Foubert & Grainger, 2006). The study participants talked at length about the positive impact of their involvement on their adjustment to college and their development of a friend base, but I was struck by a particular irony in the way they described their network of support. As I concluded upon identifying the essential elements of over-involvement, students at this level of engagement often find themselves stifled from sharing genuinely about their struggles. They said they discovered their
sense of belonging through their organizations and considered themselves as having a supportive network of peers, yet they did not utilize that network for deep processing and emotional support. Their sense that they cannot be understood by those less involved than they are, and that they would be judged harshly by other highly involved students if they admitted to being overwhelmed, resulted in more isolation than integration. Based on the literature, one might assume that students deeply and/or broadly engaged in activities characterized by high levels of peer interaction would not feel isolated (Hernandez et al., 1999; Kuh, 1995; Terenzini et al., 1996). These students found friends through their involvement but had few confidantes outside of their close family members. This isolation magnified the intensity of their stress and anxiety, perhaps more than that of moderately involved students who can find more relatable peers with whom to process.

**Connections with Millennial Context**

Many of my observations about how the study participants described the impact of high levels of involvement on their lives map onto conclusions authors have made about Millennial student tendencies. Wallis (2006) commented on the constant stimulation of habitual multitasking typical of Millennial students, and Small and Vorgan (2008) described a similar dynamic they dubbed continuous partial attention. Both are characterized by heightened states of stress fracturing students’ focus as they remain on alert for new information to which to react. Students like Gabby, Briana, Rania, and Bobby described norms of dividing their attention in class among the spoken words of their instructors, the continuous call of their organizational e-mail and social media, and assignments for other classes that could more feasibly be completed during time in a different classroom than during an extracurricular activity that might require more active participation. For many of the study participants, there was rarely a moment in an
average day when they were truly focused on only one task, even in their limited leisure
time. True relaxation and time to reflect were unfortunate casualties of the schedules
they kept and their strategy of constant multitasking to stay afloat. Consistent with the
stories these students shared about their lifelong patterns of high involvement, Shaw and
Fairhurst (2008) suggested that the Millennial proclivity for multitasking could have
developed in response to parents and educators providing an abundance of activities and
expressing expectations for constant involvement.

Another strong point of connection between the present study results and previous
research on Millennial students is the state of emotional health for traditional aged
students. All of the study participants described their struggles with stress, which they
attributed at least in part to their high levels of involvement. Douce and Keeling’s (2014)
sobering report on the sharp rise in college students experiencing overwhelming levels of
stress was in the forefront of my mind as I heard one student after another describe crying
fits, social isolation, mood swings, and debilitating self-doubt as reactions to their stress.
The prevalence of insufficient sleep, stress, and anxiety on the list of self-reported,
involved-related challenges shared by these students mirrored the National College
Health Assessment survey results identifying the most substantial obstacles to academic
success (American College Health Association, 2013). As I shared at great length in
Chapter Four, many of these emotional health issues were either initiated or exacerbated
by a pressure the students felt to maintain a persona of having it all together. Much like
the over-involved high schoolers profiled in Pope’s (2001) study, the students developed
a great deal of proficiency in concealing their vulnerability from peers, professors,
advisors, and family members for fear of consequences they associated with exposing
weakness. The constant battle to manage a public image of professionalism and

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composure was the source of great tension. The expectation about the need to mask the authentic expression of their emotions was one of several compelling perceptions of the environment described by the study participants.

**Application of Environmental Theory**

In Chapter Two, I explained how each of the four models of the college environment (Strange & Banning, 2015) could be useful in developing an understanding of the phenomenon but that the constructed model represented the best fit with phenomenological research and the most independently useful environmental lens. Even though examples of interactions with the physical environment (as with the comfort Rania felt to stay in the student union until the early hours of the morning or Briana’s challenge of running back and forth several times a day between her research lab and her home and classroom buildings) were cited by the students, they did not ultimately accumulate to any thematic consistencies that helped define the essence of over-involvement. Similarly, several of the students did share insights about how interactions from the lens of an organizational model influenced their persistence, as with those who recognized concepts of formalization, stratification, and morale. Some, like Rania, Bobby, Rhiana, and Matt spoke specifically about their acknowledgement of the organizational hierarchies in which they worked. Norms were set for them by older students who held higher rank and status, and they perpetuated the norms through their recognition of the role modeling potential of their own leadership positions and their aspirations for more responsibility. A few students, like Jonathan and Bobby, mentioned stratification that occurred through the conferral of awards. These organizational concepts, however, did not come through clearly for all the participants, nor did they offer a suitable position from which to assess the more psychosocial aspects of the
phenomenon that proved to be essential. Likewise, the size of this sample and varied circumstances of its constituents prevented me from adopting any sort of useful human aggregate perspective through which I could identify enough dominant characteristics to define the environment. However, further exploration of the phenomenon in a larger sample or across institutions could result in an illustrative typology.

Constructed environments are made up of the collective, subjective perceptions of those within them (Strange & Banning, 2015). Constructed concepts like environmental press and campus culture are interpretive ways of understanding student-environment interactions. They illustrate the mutual influence of perceptions and environmental behavior on each other that I heard so much about from these participants, and they place the lived experience at the center of an analysis. A great deal of what I heard the study participants telling me about their motivations to get and remain involved at a high level related to the environmental press at the institution. Briana spoke of her perception of the availability of co-curricular options as a deciding factor in selecting this university, and all of the participants referenced powerful messaging about expectations for engagement at orientation, from peers, and through the student involvement fair. As documented in Chapter Four, these students did not need a great deal of encouragement from anyone else to get involved because of the pattern of habitual deep involvement they had been developing from an early age. However, as Baird (1988), Strange and Banning (2015), and Weidman (1989) noted, congruence between the needs of an individual and their perception of the environmental press leads to growth and institutional fit. These students, who were inclined or even predisposed to seek deep involvement, were constantly validated in that mindset because of the powerful affective influence of the environmental press. Normative pressure from involved peers and other reference groups
helped to forge a match between inputs and environment.

The environmental press and campus climate for being involved was characterized by the study participants as wholly positive. Students were grateful for the beneficial aspects of their own involvement and enthusiastically described co-curricular engagement as a way of life on this campus. Truly, this institution typifies the concept of “Involving Colleges” (Kuh et al., 1991). The culture of student engagement at the university was referenced on a number of occasions as a defining characteristic of the institution and, according to the study participants, one that distinguished it from other schools attended by their envious friends. However, the normative pressure of masking vulnerability was an aspect of the campus climate that was quite challenging for the students and contributed detrimentally to positive academic outcomes. A collective perception described by the participants was that most other students were not as involved as they were – which gave them status on campus – but that those who were as involved, or more, were much more effective at managing their commitments – which caused them to doubt themselves. The perception that it is abnormal to candidly share one’s frustrations of being overwhelmed – even with those who may understand it the most – is an aspect of the constructed environment that sits at the foundation of over-involvement. The fact that even these students, who struggled so much at times with the challenge of keeping pace, were sometimes annoyed by peers in their organizations who complained about their schedules or prioritized studying over their involvement responsibilities was an indicator that the norms and rules of acceptable behavior are not conducive to self-care.

**Driven by Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations**

When framing the research questions for this study, I was curious as to whether
the motivation to get involved deeply or broadly in co-curricular activities was more intrinsic or extrinsic in nature. Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory originally positioned these two types of motivation as mutually exclusive on a continuum that also included the absence of motivation, but further research showed that an individual could possess and utilize both toward the same behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For these study participants, their various motivations for beginning and maintaining college involvement were incredibly strong. Although some mostly discussed goal achievement as their most compelling motivation for high involvement (e.g., career preparation, graduate school aspirations, status, and other rewards), I encountered these students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations not as an either/or proposition but as a duality that reflected Deci and Ryan’s later work.

All of the students described extrinsic motivations that contributed to their decision to choose certain activities before and during high school and in college. Pleasing their parents, building impressive résumés for college admissions, earning money, and getting valuable experience for a future career were common reasons the students gave for being involved based on an external locus of control. Once they gained more appreciation for the vast and various benefits of co-curricular involvement, pursuit of those benefits also emerged as a compelling motivator. Self-comparison with other students related to extrinsic motivation both positively, as with their desire to stand out in a competitive environment, and negatively, as with their desire to avoid being branded as a quitter. Intrinsic motivations were also cited frequently. As I documented in Chapter Four, all but one of the study participants described motivation that came from an intrinsic need to help or serve others. This altruism had roots in religious and spiritual values, deep gratitude for the sacrifices of previous generations of their families, genuine
commitment to social justice, or just an authentic kindness and compassion that defined their personalities. Students like Rhiana and Jonathan talked about the importance of using their gifts to improve the lives of others who shared their social identities, which was the source of much of their intrinsic motivation. Others, like Matt and Briana, described an intrinsic curiosity and drive to do as much as they could as well as they could for their own satisfaction. Whether the motivation to push themselves well beyond the point of exhaustion came from within or from external forces or both, these students were driven in compelling ways. They were not simply drifting through college, aimlessly adding empty activities without commitment to their résumés for the sake of improving their profiles. With these theory-enhanced understandings about the lived experience of over-involved students as a launch point, I turn now to implications and recommendations for theory and practice.

**Implications and Recommendations for Theory and Practice**

With each minute of my conversations with these students, I gained a greater appreciation for the distinct challenges of those who consider themselves to be over-involved. I also developed more curiosity about how and why their circumstances have not been the subject of more scholarly work. As I have stated previously, positivist quantitative assessments of student involvement may not ever signal to researchers that over-involvement is a critical issue or anything more than a narrow topic. In terms of the number of hours spent on involvement tasks, the students in this sample may be several standard deviations from the mean and therefore considered statistical outliers, unimportant to inferential conclusions based on central tendencies. However, their considerable difficulties are quite real, and I would hazard a claim that far more students struggle with similar involvement-related challenges than we as a community of scholars
have realized. The use of a qualitative design to address research questions that center the lived experience of over-involved students was important to help make the case for why this topic matters.

The questions I have developed about the lack of published scholarship on this phenomenon have caused me to consider my positionality and my dual perspective as both a researcher and a student affairs staff member with nearly two decades of close work with student leaders from which to draw. If my conversations with colleagues outside of the confines of this study are any indication, the perils of over-involvement are not limited to students of any particular institution type, social identity, academic major, or point of origin. In fact, since the time I developed a concern for this topic and started seeking feedback on it, I have not yet had a conversation with a student affairs colleague who works closely with students who could not readily call to mind at least a few individuals they thought could meet my definition of over-involvement. This topic may come more easily to the attention of scholar-practitioners than pure researchers, simply because of the position in which we often find ourselves to build relationships with our students and come to know them well. Further, anecdotal evidence from my innumerable interactions with hundreds of students over the years and the ease of my participant recruitment for this dissertation are indicators that there are over-involved students who want and need to share their stories if only to reflect on their circumstances in a safe space, free of the judgment they seek to avoid when they conceal their struggles.

After learning about the circumstances of over-involved students, a tempting conclusion could be simply to counsel these students to drop their activities in deference to the “true” priority of college – academics. I should reiterate that the participants in this study had experienced a great deal of success in the college classroom in spite of the
challenges they experienced in many other aspects of their lives. As the students explained from their unique perspectives, though motivation for their coursework sometimes wavered, academic commitments were considered greatly important, and their balancing act often hinged on their class responsibilities. The phenomenon of over-involvement creates concerns that should not be limited to a student affairs perspective. Although there are likely over-involved students who experience poor academic performance (by anyone’s standards, not just those of the students’ own perfectionist ideals) as a result of their deep commitments, the participants in this study remind us that this phenomenon can affect excellent students. An awareness and commitment to address the harmful consequences of over-involvement from professionals in both student and academic affairs – both of whom have influence in defining the campus climate – may give students experiencing the phenomenon the best chance to overcome the challenges.

As stated in Chapter Four, the essence of over-involvement for undergraduate students starts with commitment of such devotion, students will prioritize their responsibilities over their own physical and mental health. Whatever powerful motivations and life experiences brought them to that point, those who possess this commitment fill their schedules so completely with activities and their minds so thoroughly with all the accompanying details and worries, they struggle to find the time and capacity to care for themselves. The stoic and competitive norms of the environment occupied by other highly involved students cause over-involved students to fear that only they encounter these challenges and discourage them from asking for help or attempting to commiserate. Their stress, lack of sleep, unhealthy diet, and strained relationships resulting from so much involvement pose great risks to their achievement of the positive
outcomes to which they believe their involvement will lead. Like ducks on water whose
elegant visible façades hide furious paddling under the surface to stay afloat, these
students may be so skilled at portraying composure, even those closest to them may not
be aware of their struggles. So what can an understanding of this phenomenon allow us
to consider in new ways?

As Quaye et al. (2015) stated, the campus climate is a relatively flexible aspect of
the environment that can be shaped by institutions. As a proactive measure, institutions
can consider their role in co-curricular engagement and be more intentional about the
messaging they share with prospective, new, and returning students about the importance
of involvement. Rather than simply showcasing the diversity and excitement of available
involvement opportunities and stating the expectation that all students get involved,
specific encouragement for students to be thoughtful and selective about opportunities
they will find meaningful should be emphasized. Because many students have been
conditioned in the college admissions process to believe that running themselves into the
ground will be rewarded, universities can provide a counter-narrative that includes
evidence that students do not need to run the rat race in order to reach their goals. Given
the justifiable fixation students have on positive career-related outcomes, institutions can
emphasize depth over breadth and share important perspectives from the ranks of
employers in various industries who value problem-solving skills that can be developed
more effectively through sustained involvement with fewer organizations. Participants in
this study attributed some of their early difficulties to taking on too many different
activities and advised students to have the courage to quit when activities lost meaning or
importance to them.

In order to combat the detrimental outcomes of over-involvement, it is especially
crucial to debunk myths about the need for non-stop engagement and to provide resources to students to help them make thoughtful choices during their first two years of college. Many of the study participants described their freshman and sophomore years as the time of their college careers when they grabbed too much, then never learned how to let go until they were forced to do so either by a breakdown or by the stark reality of the job or graduate school search. Institutions that make a particular investment in first-year or second-year experience programming may have built-in opportunities to frame involvement messaging in more nurturing ways. Creating avenues for much-needed self-reflection to occur may result in more thoughtful decision making and greater efficacy for students to decide what really matters to their own development. This approach represents an opportunity for partnership between academic and student affairs. A curricular setting that resembles a senior capstone class during the sophomore year could be the ideal environment for students to commit themselves to this kind of beneficial reflexive activity. It may also be worthwhile to survey career services professionals on campus for guidance on whether students’ perceptions of the need to engage broadly are truly grounded in the reality of what employers and graduate programs value. Consistent messaging from multiple sources about pathways to career success might help to dispel the assumption that a lengthy résumé is the only way to distinguish oneself.

As another way of reevaluating the factors that can reinforce over-involvement behaviors, institutions can consider the reward structures that characterize their campus cultures. For example, do scholarships, awards, and other forms of recognition typically go to the students who have the greatest number of different activities on their résumés, or is the quality of the students’ contributions evaluated? What mechanisms can universities develop to constantly find and cultivate new talent, rather than relying on the
same small circle of high-performing student leaders for everything? Several of the study participants described the phenomenon of knowing many of the other most involved students on campus because they would see each other over and over again in different forums, receptions, recognition events, or elite leadership settings. These types of institutional gatherings, roundtables, and task forces can have the unintended consequence of conferring status on those whose involvement is most visible to the campus administration and perhaps marginalizing those whose efforts are more difficult to notice. That type of reward – social capital that comes from being relevant and mattering on campus – is a powerful incentive for over-involved Millennial students to keep pushing in an attempt to set themselves apart in a competitive environment (Pope, 2001; Robbins, 2006). If universities took different measures to identify and validate student contributions, and these opportunities were distributed more equitably among students – not just among the same cohort of student leaders already spread thin – there could be a shift in the way students work for those rewards.

For the subpopulation of over-involved students, adaptations to the campus climate can be made to help normalize the candid sharing of challenges and the supportive response of peers. Student organization advisors, student employee supervisors, and other staff and faculty can appeal to highly involved leaders and members by acknowledging the existence of this phenomenon, describing it, and creating a supportive climate for discussing the challenges openly. Just prior to the start of my data collection for this study, I had an experience in a meeting of a student organization I advise where I was invited to introduce myself and explain my role on campus. When I mentioned that I was doing research on this topic, several hands shot into the air, signaling questions about the nature of my study. The students were quite interested in
the idea that there may be others struggling with the consequences of too much involvement. The knowing looks on the faces of many students in that room with whom my definition of over-involvement may have resonated corresponded with a number of individual follow-up conversations I have had with those students since then. From that one experience, I began to get a feel for the appetite students may have to learn more about the phenomenon and reflect on the extent to which the essence I have described in this study may apply to their own circumstances. Carving out time to have interactive discussion with groups of students and then follow-up meetings with individuals about the challenges of their involvement experiences could be effective first steps in making vulnerability more socially acceptable.

The recommendations I have made so far with respect to addressing the intentionality of institutional messaging, building in time for reflection, examining the reward structure, and addressing the existence of the phenomenon head-on are not meant to suggest that colleges should attempt to eradicate over-involvement. As some of the study participants, like Jonathan, Matt, and Vikas suggested, some stress can be good. There are important gains to be made in self-efficacy by overcoming considerable challenges, and everyone’s threshold for how much is too much can be quite different. Some scholars who have examined over-involvement previously have made recommendations to impose limits. Nesloney (2013) and Gravelle (2010) recommended interventions to regulate involvement levels, specifically placing a limit on the number of organizations a student could be allowed to join or the number of executive officer positions students could hold. Zacherman and Foubert (2014) recommended monitoring hours of involvement and developing “involvement alert systems” similar to early warning protocols used to spot academic struggles. Rather than policies that save
students from themselves, based on the findings of this study, I suggest an approach similar to that described by Murray (2010), who recommended to help students discern their best opportunities for involvement, create more meaningful opportunities, and make space for solitude and reflection. As full partners in engagement, institutions can and should take measures to influence healthy norms in the campus climate, but the agency of the students in this partnership should also be respected. Recommendations suggested here are meant to help institutions examine the ways in which they may contribute to the competitive norms that drive students and to create awareness of the perils of over-involvement, so that students can decide for themselves whether the risks are worth the rewards.

One final implication of this study relates both to the stories the study participants shared with me about their lifelong patterns of high involvement and an aspect of my subjectivity as a researcher I had a particularly hard time disassociating from my interpretations. As I discussed in Chapter Four, every one of the students described a childhood filled with sports, music lessons, dance performances, scouting organizations, volunteerism, or other activities that kept them constantly engaged throughout their primary and secondary educational careers. During the conduct of this study, I coincidently had an experience with my own elementary school-aged sons and their management of their extracurricular commitments that helped me to reevaluate my thinking on the pathways to over-involvement. I understood how the implications of this study on over-involvement applied to my own approach to parenting. My recommendation to parents of young, future college-bound children would be to contemplate the reasons for their activities and to be thoughtful about the intensity of the schedule they keep. The benefits of extracurricular involvement for children are
unlimited, but if we can make taking some time for themselves in the midst of all their activities a priority for our children when they are young, they may stand a better chance of doing so while more self-directed in college.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Throughout the course of the data collection and analysis for this study, my mind briefly wandered down emergent paths that led me away from the primary purpose of this study. Reminding myself to stay true to the phenomenological research questions on which the entire study was based, I would satisfy my curiosity by journaling about those new ideas and placate myself by planning to propose some of them for future research. Often, these emergent paths wound up resembling the moving staircases of Hogwarts Castle in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series of novels. I ascended them with a particular destination in mind, failing to realize that they had shifted and led me to somewhere completely unfamiliar. In some examples, those ideas were shaping up as essential themes that were ultimately met by one or more disconfirming cases, as with the concept of over-involvement as a coping mechanism.

My first foray into phenomenological research came in the form of an assignment for a qualitative research methods class that served in my mind, even if not in actuality, as a pilot study for this dissertation. From my small sample of three graduating students, I learned that each of them had buried themselves in co-curricular activities as a mechanism for coping with intensely stressful or emotional situations. The significance and purpose those three students felt from constant engagement allowed them to delay dealing with the emotional toll of coming out, bouts of depression, and a horrific sequence of family tragedies, respectively. After my first conversation with Briana, I began to suspect that this could be more than a coincidence and could be an aspect of the
essence of over-involvement. Briana disclosed details about her own struggles with depression and ideation for self-harm that had affected her since high school. She described her involvement as her only vehicle of escape when depression set in.

Similarly, Gabby told me about a traumatic incident in high school involving a sexual assault that left her ostracized and questioning her standing with her peers. Involvement proved to be her road back to self-confidence, and I wondered if there could be more to the connection between this incident and her current attitudes about constant engagement. Because this concept was not conveyed by other participants, I did not pursue further exploration, but a separate study of how deep or broad involvement empowers students battling intense emotional issues to wear a mantle of purpose, cast aside their vulnerability, and postpone dealing with the chaos bombarding them could be very informative and could have implications for those who provide support for students.

Methodological changes to the design of this study could help determine the extent to which over-involvement and its characteristic persona of invulnerability is a pervasive phenomenon. I thought about a snowball sampling method in a continuation of the study in which the initial over-involved students nominated other highly involved students they perceived to “have it all together.” This would begin a second phase of data collection with a new participant group that could offer perspective on either how to manage high levels of engagement without the damaging consequences of over-involvement or on how they had been stifled by the same assumptions about others’ composure while they struggled. Asking this second group for nominations of yet more names could then provide an even more robust data corpus and possibly result in a far more complex understanding of the lengths to which over-involved students go to mask their vulnerability. This snowball sampling technique could also provide evidence for the
claim made by Rania, Briana, and others that over-involved students on a given campus all tend to know each other because of their high involvement and to explore their interconnectedness.

Another avenue for further inquiry relates to one of the puzzling norms of the climate for over-involved students. In Chapter Four, I documented the environmental pressure felt by study participants to prioritize and stay committed to their student organization tasks because they felt as though other leaders and advisors were not willing to accept their need to study as a reason for being absent. This was the source of significant tension, so I was intrigued by the fact that some of the same students encumbered by this norm were so complicit in perpetuating it from the other side of the equation. They described their resentment of students in their organizations who backed out of meetings and events in order to study. Sometimes, these judgments came from their perspectives as executive officers of their organizations, vantage points from which they could presumably challenge the status quo and create more sensitive and accommodating expectations. There could be some real connection between the façade of composure issue and the dynamic Briana described where people who have survived something difficult are unsympathetic to those who come after them in that same setting. More focused inquiry on the specific dynamics of these competitive norms could provide more insight on how to coach involved students through navigating them and maybe even shift the norms themselves.

Beyond the scope of the present study is a suitable analysis of the ways in which over-involvement is experienced differently by those possessing different social identities. The diversity of the sample for this study helped me to conclude that the essence of over-involvement was present in the students’ experiences regardless of any
single aspect of their identity or intersectionality of multiple aspects. In previous related studies, though, Zacherman and Foubert (2014) found that males were more susceptible to becoming overwhelmed by their involvement than females, while Nesloney (2013) concluded that females were more over-involved and overwhelmed than males. A qualitative comparison of sex and gender-based differences in over-involvement experiences could shed light on these disparate results. Similarly, several of the students of color in the participant group, especially Rhiana and Jonathan, referenced their racial or ethnic identity as a major factor in their decision to stay so deeply involved despite the personal challenges. Others mentioned spiritual and cultural values as significant influences on their commitment to their activities. A specific exploration of the influence of racial identity, religious expression, or cultural heritage on over-involvement could make an important contribution to the growing body of research on engagement experiences of diverse student communities in higher education. Inclusion of students from non-PWI settings could also do much to enhance an understanding of the influence of identity on over-involvement behaviors.

In this study, I made no attempt to interrogate understandings of the influence of socioeconomic status on over-involvement. As referenced earlier, all eight of these students (and I as the researcher) were privileged to have access to multiple forms of involvement throughout our pre-college lives. Habits and preferences related to involvement formed from an early age may manifest themselves differently in the behaviors of college students whose families could not afford sports team fees, club dues, or other activities as children. An analysis of the phenomenon of over-involvement in a sample of low-SES or first generation students could be particularly insightful. In a related fashion, examining over-involvement behaviors in students from other
populations usually thought not to be involved at a high rate could provide some vital comparison data. For example, the commuter students in this participant group, Rania and Jonathan, cited certain advantages they had over students not living with their parents, like time-saving help with meals and laundry. Further exploration of nuances of the experiences of over-involved students in groups not typically highly involved could unlock understandings of how to engage those communities more effectively.

One final suggestion for future research relates to the post-college trajectory of over-involved undergraduates. Not only would it be interesting to know if those former students found their sacrifices to be worth the toll taken on their physical and mental health in college, it would also be fascinating to find out if over-involved students go on to live over-involved lives. In my analysis of the students’ efforts to manage a busy schedule in Chapter Four, I noted that although many of the participants referred to their over-involvement in the past tense, as though it was a phase they lived through and learned from, others (and sometimes those same students in later comments) spoke of present-day challenges that indicated over-involvement was more of a modus operandi than a distinct era in their lives. Some of the motivations the students described were based on intrinsic values that would be unlikely to dissipate in whatever setting to which they moved on after college. A longitudinal approach to tracking changes in over-involvement behaviors over time after graduation could help scholars and practitioners understand the long-term impact of unhealthy involvement habits formed in college and whether overextended students perpetuate a cycle of similar expectations in their careers, with co-workers, and with their own families.

Limitations

Virtually any study, particularly those that rely heavily on the dynamic
possibilities of interpretive work with human participants, can be encumbered by limiting factors, both within and outside of the control of the researcher. There are inherent limitations in both the site selection and the sampling method employed for this study. It should be noted that the university selected as the study site is the school at which I am both a graduate student and a full-time employee. The peril in focusing on one institution, especially one so familiar to me, is intertwined with ethical considerations and limitations regarding the “backyard” nature of the research (Creswell, 2013). My familiarity with the institution had the potential to allow taken for granted attributes of the environment to go unexamined. It was incumbent upon me as the researcher to mitigate these effects by bracketing my pre-understandings and acknowledging my biases in the reflexive aspects of the analysis. However, it should be noted that the size and complexity of the institution actually helped ensure that the participants selected for the study had no prior significant relationship with me as the researcher and that there would not be any political ramifications for their participation or non-participation.

A design that incorporates students from multiple universities would do much to improve the transferability of findings. If casual conversations with my colleagues at institutions all over the nation can serve as any sort of reliable indicator, aspects of the phenomenon of over-involvement may be universal to students at any university who would meet the study criteria. However, the scope of this study called for the inclusion of environmental factors in the data analysis, and the time available to assess those factors at multiple institutions served as a significant limitation. My decision to focus on an institution I know well created other potential limitations, but the possible benefits gave me great confidence to move forward. The criterion sampling parameters I utilized caused me to have to consider my existing relationships with interested students and the
organizations they represent before proceeding with them as participants. That kind of a subjective evaluation would likely not be necessary if my research site were a different institution. Further, the snowball sampling method in this study caused me to have to rely heavily upon key informants being willing to invest time into the discernment of potential participants and understanding my explanation of the study. Those factors posed limitations, but the attractiveness of the strength and availability of this network to me was considerable.

Sampling methods and sample size represented another set of limiting challenges. Even though six to ten participants is within the recommended range for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2013), there existed the possibility that data collection would not reach the point of saturation with such a small group of participants. In this case, I was fortunate that my data collection did reach a point at which a sufficient evidentiary standard was established, at least for the questions I asked. Time constraints for the participants and for me influenced the number and duration of interviews with each student and the level of depth we could reach together, but I felt even after our second conversations like there were themes that were ripe for further exploration. I attempted to mitigate concerns about the transferability of the findings of the study by ensuring that, despite the small sample size, the participants reflected diversity in a number of important ways. Sex, racial and ethnic identity, year in school, academic major, and the nature of their co-curricular involvements were all considered in participant selection. Even so, the sampling method did not take into account socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, country of origin, or any of several other factors that may have differentiated the results. More complex and specific sampling criteria and a slightly larger sample size could result in an even greater understanding of the nuances.
of the phenomenon.

**Parting Thoughts**

In this study, I have undertaken a topic of considerable personal concern, which I know I share with student affairs colleagues throughout the country. Decades of research have confirmed the relationship between co-curricular involvement and positive, measurable educational outcomes. Involvement creates pathways to belonging, learning, and personal development. It not only aids in persistence and degree completion, it prepares graduates with problem-solving and relationship building skills that are invaluable to their professional careers. Grounded by the research, I have spent the entirety of my professional career promoting these benefits to students and advocating for significant allocation of resources to fortify the diversity and accessibility of involvement opportunities on and off campus. It took many years for me to realize that some students could actually be harmed by the availability of so many opportunities and that by doing too much, they may unwittingly be deteriorating their relationships and their physical and mental well-being.

The question of whether or not a student can be too involved has been addressed only occasionally in the scholarship of higher education. As college admissions continue to be more competitive than ever, and greater numbers of overachieving high school students matriculate to universities that offer endless attractive opportunities for engagement, the phenomenon of over-involvement may be experienced by increasingly higher percentages of undergraduate students. As college counseling centers see greater numbers of students burdened by stress and anxiety, implications of this study can provide some useful context for how involvement may contribute to the exponential growth of this issue. A high level of involvement is widely acclaimed by scholars and
practitioners as good practice in student development. Over-involvement, however, which includes the experience of involvement-related challenges to the achievement of positive academic, social, health, or wellness-related outcomes, is problematic, and many college environments are set up to reinforce harmful norms.

This study describes the phenomenon of over-involvement and compels scholars and practitioners to consider the ways in which cultural norms and reward structures on our campuses contribute to serious physical and mental health concerns among our most highly-involved students. Engaging our students in reflection about the importance of focusing on the involvement most meaningful to them and helping them build the self-confidence to show their vulnerability are two strategies universities can use to mitigate the harmful consequences of over-involvement. Students who fill their schedules so completely with classes, work, and co-curricular activities that they do not sleep enough or take time for themselves are struggling to find appropriate outlets for dealing with their stress. However, these students are hard to identify because of their mastery of image management. We must become more adept at building supportive environments in which students feel empowered to be candid with themselves and each other about the difficulties they face. We must also be mindful of the ways in which we contribute to students’ belief that life’s greatest rewards must be won in a Darwinistic arena of achievements. Only then can we ensure that the many virtues of student involvement can apply to those who engage the most.
References


Get Involved at The Ohio State University. (2014). (On-campus print publication)


Appendix A: Request for Gatekeepers to Recommend Participants

[Date]

Dear [Insert Name]:

I hope this letter finds you well! I am reaching out to you as a trusted colleague on campus who works closely with undergraduate students in the hopes that you can assist me with identifying potential study participants for my doctoral research. My research project is a qualitative study in which I am exploring the phenomenon of “over-involvement” in undergraduate students.

Over the years, in spite of my belief in the importance of student involvement, I have encountered a growing number of students who seem encumbered by their co-curricular commitments – very devoted either broadly to several activities or deeply to a few but also exhausted and overwhelmed. I am exploring this phenomenon so that we can better understand students’ motivations to pursue a level of involvement that may compromise their well-being and perhaps to examine the ways in which we as an institution may encourage such behavior.

Rather than to define over-involvement through a certain number of activities or weekly hours spent engaged in them, I have stated the phenomenon more subjectively as participation in co-curricular activities for students who experience involvement-related challenges to their achievement of positive outcomes. These challenges may be academic, social, health, or wellness-related.

The sampling methods used for the study rely on recommendations from staff members who know students well enough to know if they meet the study criteria, which are as follows:

1. Undergraduate students of traditional age (18-24) enrolled full-time at Ohio State
   - Students may be native to Ohio State or transfer students, but they should not be in their first year of college
2. Students experiencing academic, social, health, or wellness-related challenges as a result of their co-curricular involvement
Examples of challenges include low grades, loss of connection with friends or family, stress, anxiety, sleeplessness, or poor diet.

“Co-curricular activities” for the purposes of this study have been defined in accordance with descriptors from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Those activities include student organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternities or sororities, intercollegiate or intramural sports, on-campus employment, and volunteer community service.

3. **Consenting participants who would be available for two 60- to 75-minute time blocks for interviewing and who can articulate their lived experiences**

Would you be able and willing to recommend 1-3 students who may be good candidates for this study by sending me a very brief statement (a paragraph or less) for each name you submit? Your nominations do not in any way obligate the student to participate. Once I have collected names of potential participants, I will reach out to them to describe the study, gauge their interest, and explain that their participation is completely voluntary. If they are interested, I will then ask them to complete a brief questionnaire to ensure they have experienced the phenomenon I am researching. Students ultimately selected to participate will be offered a $20 gift card incentive to complete the process.

This research depends heavily on participants having experienced over-involvement, so that they can describe the phenomenon in detail. Identifying qualified potential study participants is a crucial step in the research process, and I would be most grateful for your assistance with this important task.

If I can answer any questions about the study as you consider students who may be a good fit, please call me at (614)657-8763 or e-mail me at couch.28@osu.edu. I cannot thank you enough for your consideration!

Sincerely yours,

Matthew M. Couch  
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education & Student Affairs  
College of Education and Human Ecology  
The Ohio State University
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Message

Dear [Insert Name]:

I hope this message finds you well! My name is Matt Couch, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program working with my advisor Dr. Susan Jones here at Ohio State’s College of Education and Human Ecology. I am contacting you because I am conducting interviews as part of my dissertation research, and you have been nominated by my colleague, [provide name of nominator], as a student who may be a qualified participant in this research project.

Through my research, I am studying the phenomenon of over-involvement in co-curricular or extracurricular activities among undergraduates. Over-involvement is participation in co-curricular activities for students who experience involvement-related challenges to their achievement of positive outcomes. These challenges may be academic, social, health, or wellness-related.

You have been nominated because [insert name of nominator] is familiar with your active involvement in activities outside of the classroom but also because [name] knows of some of the challenges you have experienced as a result of being involved at such a high level. If you would be interested in participating in a series of two 60-75 minute interviews as a participant in this project, I would be most grateful to hear your story!

If you agree to participate, your involvement in the study will be completely voluntary, and you can end your participation at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential through every part of the data collection, analysis, and reporting process. I am also able to offer a $20 gift card incentive for completion of the interviews.

I would be more than happy to discuss the purpose of this study and the details of the research design with you, if you would like to talk through any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to participate. We can discuss those details via e-mail, over the phone, or in person, whichever is most preferable to you. If you are interested in participating, the next step in the process will be for you to complete a very brief demographic questionnaire. Once I have collected responses from all potential study participants, I will select a final group of participants and schedule the interviews, which will all take place within the next 3 months.
So that I may know whether or not you would be willing to be interviewed, could you please respond to me via e-mail at couch.28@osu.edu by [due date] to let me know one way or the other? I cannot thank you enough for considering participation in this project!

Sincerely yours,

Matt Couch
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education and Human Ecology
The Ohio State University

Susan R. Jones, Ph.D.
Professor, Higher Education & Student Affairs
College of Education and Human Ecology
The Ohio State University
Appendix C: Participant Screening Questionnaire

Thank you so much for your interest in participating in my doctoral research project! To assist in the process of selecting a final group of students to interview, please complete the following brief questionnaire. It should take less than 10 minutes to complete. Once you have answered the questions, please return the completed form to me via e-mail at couch.28@osu.edu by [due date]. Your information will be kept completely confidential.

1. Name:

2. OSU E-Mail Address:

3. Are you a full-time student at The Ohio State University? Yes or No

4. Did you begin college at Ohio State or at another college/university?

   Ohio State or Another College/University

5. If you began college at another college/university, please list the name of the institution here:

6. Year in School:

7. Major(s)/Minor(s):

8. Gender:

9. Racial/Ethnic Identity:
10. Please list the top co-curricular or extracurricular activities (e.g., student organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternities or sororities, intercollegiate or intramural sports, on-campus employment, and volunteer community service) in which you have been involved since you began your college career (up to 5 activities). Please estimate the amount of time you spend (or spent) in an average week on each activity, and if you held any specific positions within each activity, please indicate that, as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Activity</th>
<th>Year(s) Participated</th>
<th>Avg. Hours/Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e.g., ABC Club, treasurer</td>
<td>e.g., 1st, 2nd</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

11. Have you experienced any involvement-related challenges to your academic performance, relationships, health, or wellness? Yes or No

If you have experienced challenges as a result of your involvement, please check all that apply.

- [ ] Lower grades
- [ ] Loss of connection with friends or family
- [ ] Poor diet
- [ ] Not enough or poor sleep
- [ ] High levels of stress
- [ ] Anxiety
- [ ] Other (please explain):
Appendix D: Participant Confirmation Messages

[For those selected to participate in the study]

Dear [Name]:

Thank you for your interest in participating in my doctoral research project on overinvolvement in undergraduate students. I have completed my review of all the questionnaire responses from potential participants, and I am pleased to invite you to be interviewed for my study.

As a reminder, participation in this project consists of two 60-75 minute interviews, which we will schedule for times and locations that are mutually convenient over the course of the next three months. With your permission, I will record our interviews with a digital audio recorder and transcribe the interviews for data analysis.

Your involvement in the study will be completely voluntary, and you can end your participation at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential through every part of the data collection, analysis, and reporting process. I will also be able to offer you a $20 gift card to Amazon.com or Target upon completion of our interviews!

Could you please respond to me via e-mail at couch.28@osu.edu by [due date] to confirm your participation? If you are no longer interested in participating, it would also be helpful to know that by [due date], so that I may plan accordingly.

I look forward to hearing back from you and spending some time with you to hear about your experiences. Thanks so much for your consideration!

Sincerely yours,

Matt Couch
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education & Student Affairs
College of Education and Human Ecology
The Ohio State University
[For those not selected to participate in the study, if necessary]

Dear [Name]:

Thank you for your interest in participating in my doctoral research project on over-involvement in undergraduate students. I have completed my review of all the questionnaire responses from potential participants, and I have selected a final group of students to interview. I was overwhelmed with a terrific response from the students I approached.

Because the sample size for this project is so small, I was not able to involve everyone who indicated an interest. That said, I have extended invitations to interview to other students and will not require your participation. However, I am incredibly grateful not only for your willingness to participate in this research but also for the commitment you have made to Ohio State through your high level of involvement.

Thank you again for being willing to help with this research! Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely yours,

Matt Couch
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education & Student Affairs
College of Education and Human Ecology
The Ohio State University
Appendix E: Dissertation Research Primary Interview Protocol

A Phenomenological Study of Over-Involvement in Undergraduate Students

Describe the purpose of the study and review key points in informed consent form
The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the essence of over-involvement experienced by undergraduate students who are deeply or broadly engaged in their university’s co-curricular or extracurricular culture.

Define over-involvement
Participation in co-curricular activities for students who experience involvement-related challenges to their achievement of positive outcomes. These challenges may be academic, social, health, or wellness-related.

Interview Questions
Confirm Year in School:
Hometown:
Major(s):

Generally speaking, how has your experience at Ohio State been so far?

You shared your top 5 out-of-class involvements on the survey you completed for me [recap their survey responses]. Are there more than 5 co-curricular or extracurricular activities you’ve been involved in since you started college?

Thinking all the way back to the beginning of your college career, try to list all of the co-curricular or extracurricular activities in which you have been involved.

- In what activities are you involved right now?

What motivated you to start getting involved in college?

- What motivates you to remain involved?
- In what ways were you involved in various activities at a younger age?

In what ways do you feel the university encourages co-curricular involvement?
What benefits have you personally experienced from being involved in co-curricular or extracurricular activities on campus?

What does your campus involvement say about who you are?

What is your reaction when you are asked or encouraged to take on another involvement, leadership role, or project?

On the survey, you indicated that you have experienced some challenges as a result of your campus involvement, including [recap their survey responses]. Could you tell me more about those challenges and how you attribute them to your involvement?

Please describe your experience with [lower grades, loss of connection with friends or family, poor diet, not enough or poor sleep, high levels of stress, anxiety, or “other,” depending on their survey responses]?

(If appropriate) Describe a time when you felt overwhelmed. In what ways did your involvement affect you during that time?

What would you have more time to do if you weren’t so involved?

- What does it mean to you to be a “balanced” individual?

Is there anything else you would like to add? Are there areas I didn’t ask you about but that are important to you?
Appendix F: Dissertation Research Follow-Up Interview Protocol

A Phenomenological Study of Over-Involvement in Undergraduate Students

When we met last, we discussed your extracurricular involvement, your motivations for getting involved, and the impact your involvement has had on your health and well-being.

First, I would like to share some of the notes I took from our conversation, so that you can have a chance to reflect on the themes I identified and correct anything I may not have represented accurately.

- Review themes with participant and provide opportunity for member-checking

Next, I would like to ask a few additional questions based on our first conversation. These questions are based on ideas you and I touched upon last time, as well as a few concepts that emerged from my conversations with other participants in the study.

(If applicable) Last time, you described challenges you faced as a result of your high level of involvement. What are some of the reasons why you remained so involved in spite of those challenges?

In what ways does the university reward high levels of co-curricular involvement?

Describe a time when you may have felt unable to share your feelings about the challenges and frustrations you experienced as a result of your high levels of involvement.

If you had the opportunity to restart your undergraduate career, what, if anything, would you do differently with respect to the ways you spend your time?

Anything else you would like to add? Areas that I didn’t ask you about but that are important to you?
Appendix G – Informed Consent Form

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: A Phenomenological Study of Over-Involvement in Undergraduate Students

Researcher: Dr. Susan R. Jones and Matthew Couch

Sponsor:

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose: This research study seeks to describe the phenomenon of over-involvement experienced by undergraduate students who are deeply or broadly engaged in their university’s co-curricular or extracurricular culture. Under the guidance of Dr. Susan R. Jones, Matthew Couch, a doctoral candidate in Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA), will facilitate this project and work to answer the following research questions:
(1) What does it mean to be over-involved in college?
(2) How are students motivated to become deeply or broadly involved in co-curricular or extracurricular activities in college?
(3) How do students describe the impact of high levels of involvement on various aspects of their lives?

Procedures/Tasks: Participation for students involves:

- Completion of a brief demographic survey used by the researchers to help make decisions about participant selection
- Participating in two one-on-one interviews, during which questions will be asked about your involvement experiences and challenges you may have encountered as a result. Each interview will be conversational in nature and will last approximately 60-75 minutes. The researchers will audio record and transcribe each interview.
Interview #1 will take place at a mutually agreeable time and location during the Autumn 2015 Semester.

Interview #2 will take place approximately 2-4 weeks later.

- Optional opportunity to participate in a 30-60 minute review of the interview transcripts and themes from data analysis to ensure their accuracy. You would be contacted via e-mail and invited to review the documents on your own time.

Safeguards for ensuring the privacy, confidentiality, and proper use of data are summarized below.

**Duration:** The research project will begin and conclude during the Autumn 2015 Semester. The time commitment for your participation will be a total of approximately 2 hours and 45 minutes spread across three research activities. This includes 15 minutes for the demographic survey and two interviews of a maximum of 75 minutes. You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

**Risks and Benefits:** By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your co-curricular involvement and the benefits and challenges you have experienced as a result. Such reflection can help you gain greater self-awareness and deepen your understanding of your experience. Moreover, this project can enhance educators’ understanding of the unique experiences of students who are deeply or broadly engaged in the campus co-curricular culture.

**Confidentiality:** Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

All information used in publications and other public forums will be kept anonymous to protect your privacy. Each participant will select a pseudonym for researchers to use for material prepared for all publications and other public forums. The researchers will be the only individuals with access to data containing personally identifiable information.
and will keep such information in locked file cabinets or on password-protected computers.

To ensure accuracy of the researchers’ interpretation of the information you provide, the researchers may ask you to review summaries of interview transcripts and/or observational notes.

**Incentives:** You will be offered a $20 gift card to Amazon.com or Target as an incentive for completing both one-on-one interviews. The gift card incentive will be made available to you immediately upon completion of the second interview. If you withdraw your participation after the first interview, you will receive a $10 gift card.

**Participant Rights:** You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. Likewise, you may decline to answer any survey or interview questions with which you are uncomfortable. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

**Contacts and Questions:** For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, or you feel you have been harmed as a result of study participation, you may contact Dr. Susan R. Jones (jones.1302@osu.edu or 614-688-8369) or Matthew Couch (couch.28@osu.edu or 614-688-5460).

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

**Signing the consent form**
I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

**Printed name of subject**

**Signature of subject**

**AM/PM**

**Date and time**

**Printed name of person authorized to consent for subject**

**Signature of person authorized to consent for subject**

**AM/PM**

**Date and time**

**Relationship to the subject**

**AM/PM**

**Date and time**

**Investigator/Research Staff**

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

**Printed name of person obtaining consent**

**Signature of person obtaining consent**

**AM/PM**

**Date and time**