DEVELOPING COLLEGE STUDENT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Higher education was founded on principles of civic engagement (Dorn, 2011; Thelin, 2011) and has seen a recent refocus on that central mission (Blackhurst & Foster, 2003; Campus Compact, n.d.; Checkoway, 2001; Dorn, 2011; Glaeser, Ponzetto, & Shleifer, 2007; Ostrander, 2004; Thelin, 2011). This study investigated the lived experiences and co-curricular activities of college students and how they developed civic engagement understanding, civic engagement motivation, and civic engagement skills as articulated by Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephen’s (2003) conceptual framework. Using hermeneutic phenomenology, the study revealed that recent graduates who participated in the research described the civic engagement development that occurred during their university years in the following ways:

- Identifying, participating, and shaping a community that was personally significant.
- Improving interpersonal, communication, and transferable skills through co-curricular experiences.
- Connecting learning, in and out of the academic classroom, through co-curricular experiences.
- Increasing self-efficacy, purpose, and career goals through co-curricular experiences.

*Keywords: civic engagement, post-graduate, civic understanding, civic motivation, civic skills, lived experience, hermeneutic, phenomenology, liberal arts, higher education, college, university, undergraduate, co-curricular, student activities*
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Chapter One: The Research Problem

Higher education was founded on principles of civic engagement (Dorn, 2011; Thelin, 2011) and has seen a recent refocus on that central mission (Blackhurst & Foster, 2003; Campus Compact; Checkoway, 2001; Dorn, 2011; Glaeser, Ponzetto, & Shleifer, 2007; Ostrander, 2004; Thelin, 2011). However, it is unclear in the literature how students develop civic engagement understanding and skills during the course of an undergraduate degree. Additionally, the impact co-curricular activities outside of the formal class structure have on civic engagement has not been thoroughly studied, particularly using qualitative methods. Therefore, this study examined the undergraduate experiences of recent college graduates with a focus on their co-curricular activities and learning. This study helps to improve understanding on this important subject and adds to the national conversation about civic engagement.

Statement of the Problem

College students engage in a host of activities during their undergraduate education (Astin & Sax, 1998; Boss, 1994; Gonzales, 2008; Johnson, 2004; Ostrander, 2004). College experiences include the curricular academic experience partnered with the co-curricular, out-of-class opportunities. All of these experiences shape students’ skills, interests, and goals. While many different co-curricular opportunities exist for students, not all contribute to the development of civic engagement (Lott, 2013). Adler and Goggin (2005) defined civic engagement as “how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (p. 241). Students who are active and engaged in out-of-classroom learning experiences during college - such as internships, research, service learning, clubs and organizations, student government, and many others - develop robust resumes, but do they also develop civic engagement understanding, motivation,
and skills? The available literature provides no answers for what out-of-classroom activities students engage in that promotes civic engagement.

Historically, education for a greater public good has been the foundation of many colleges and universities (Dorn, 2011), and democracy and civic engagement are central to the mission and values of many public universities as a result (Ostrander, 2004; Rhoades, 1998). American higher education was founded on educating future citizens who would contribute to the broader community as doctors, lawyers, and teachers (Thelin, 2011). After the industrial revolution, students had more personal reasons for attending higher education, individual gain rather than public service (Dorn, 2011). Returning to the historical foundation of higher education focused on public service and common good required a shift in teaching that instills civic engagement in university students, which included an understanding of complex social issues, community and environmental impact, social justice, personal reflection, and development (Pollack & Motoike, 2006).

Higher education is experiencing a movement across colleges and universities to return to the founding mission of higher education, which was to educate democratically-engaged citizens (Blackhurst & Foster, 2003; Campus Compact, n.d.; Checkoway, 2001; Dorn, 2011; Glaeser, et al, 2007; Ostrander, 2004; Thelin, 2011). A return to the founding principles of civic engagement and liberal education is being spearheaded by the Department of Education, Campus Compact, and non-profit organizations including the Carnegie Foundation, to promote the development of civically-engaged graduates (Schneider & Humphreys, 2003; National Task Force, 2012).

Campus Compact was created in 1985 as a non-profit organization with a mission to increase the number of colleges and universities committed to fulfilling this civic engagement
purpose of higher education. Now, thirty years later, over 1,000 colleges and universities are committed to advancing the mission of democratic engagement and educating students for “civic and social responsibility” within research-focused higher education institutions (Campus Compact, n.d.). The (2012) Crucible Moment Report commissioned by the White House, called for a return to civic and democratic engagement in higher education by focusing on the connection of K-12 education and the broader community, and refocusing education to solve community issues together.

A long-term goal of higher education must be to graduate adults who are engaged in their communities in meaningful ways, more than just voting or participating in national elections. Civic engagement is the intersection of teaching, education, community, research, and service (Bringle, Hatcher, & Holland, 2007). Additionally, “communities urgently want academics to stop talking and start responding to social service, educational, development and leadership challenges” (Bloogarden, 2007, p. 63). The federal government, higher education institutions, and many communities are all calling for the return of an emphasis on civic engagement as a core focus of a university education. Each college or university teaches and engages students in civic engagement differently. To get a full understanding of this issue requires multiple studies from multiple educational settings. Thus, this study attempted to provide additional data into this larger picture as well as provide a more detailed understanding into the experiences of individual students graduating from one such public university. It is hoped that the findings will add to the national dialog and help universities to instill civic engagement more effectively.

While a national call focused on high-level rhetoric gets the ball rolling, the need to focus on the student is paramount. These large, broad conversations do not engage students in the solution or benefit from learning about student experiences (Gonzales, 2008; Pollack & Motoike,
As mentioned before, college is a series of experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom. Ample literature exists on how service learning develops civic engagement skills in a curricular structure, but very little of the literature focused on civic engagement developed outside of the classroom through co-curricular activities (Astin, Sax, & Avilos, 1999; Moely, et al, 2008). Past studies have been conducted that look at only one activity, such as public speaking or community service, and how this activity promotes civic engagement, but these studies are lacking for several reasons. First, attempting to isolate one activity when trying to understand civic engagement does not seem very useful in a real-world setting where multiple factors are playing a role simultaneously; this cannot be understood in a sterile lab. Secondly, these past studies do not provide an open-ended space for students to describe their overall undergraduate experiences (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Moely et al., 2008; Palmer & Standerfer, 2004; Rhoades, 1998). A lack of information about what activities students engage in during their undergraduate years to become civically minded post-graduation also persists (National Task Force, 2012). The national conversation will be improved by understanding what co-curricular activities students engage in during college that foster civic understanding, motivation, and skills post-graduation.

This research study asked how recent liberal arts college graduates described their lived experiences developing civic engagement understanding, motivation, and skills through co-curricular activities. This study focused on the experiences of undergraduate students, their co-curricular activities, and how out-of-class participation contributed to the development of civic engagement. This research is relevant to individuals inside higher education including university faculty, staff, and students interested in educating, or being, civically-minded college graduates.
Research Question

This qualitative research study was conducted to understand the individual experiences of each participant and their unique experience, perspectives, and interpretations regarding co-curricular activities and how those activities contributed to their development of civic engagement. The central research question was: How do recent liberal arts graduates who participated in co-curricular activities describe their personal experience developing civic engagement?

In order to find an answer, this question was divided into the following sub-questions:

1. How do students describe their co-curricular experiences?
2. How do students describe or define civic engagement based on their experience?
3. What are the lived experiences of students with regard to:
   - civic engagement understanding?
   - civic engagement motivation?
   - civic engagement skills?

The intent of the central research question was to explore recent liberal arts college graduates’ undergraduate experience, focusing on their co-curricular experiences, those outside of the curricular structure, which contributed to developing civic engagement. In particular, the central research question focused on understanding the individual unique experiences of each participant.

Each of the sub-questions looked at a specific aspect of the broader question. Sub-question one asked participants to describe their co-curricular experiences broadly. Sub-question two focused on the participants’ definition of civic engagement. Sub-question three was tied to the theoretical framework of Colby et al.’s (2003) moral and civic development framework.
Colby et al.’s (2003) framework is broken into three categories: moral and civic understanding, moral and civic motivation, and moral and civic skills.

**Conceptual Framework**

Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, and Jason Stephens each represent four scholarly disciplines that intersected on the topic of civic and moral development in college students. These four scholars, who all employed at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, proposed a conceptual theory of civic and moral development in college students in their (2003) book *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*.

The conceptual framework proposed by Colby et al. (2003) centered on three categories that intersect and attempt to reflect the dynamic and multiple dimensions of moral and civic engagement. The three categories are moral and civic understanding, motivation, and skills. These dimensions of moral and civic engagement do not develop in students independently from one another; rather, they are fluid and intersecting; they support one another and evolve together (p. xvi). Students cannot develop in one area without developing in the others. For the purposes of understanding the conceptual framework, each category is broken down further here; however, it is important to recognize that each dimension supports the others.

**Moral and Civic Understanding**

The moral and civic understanding dimension centers on college students’ “capacity to interpret, judge, acquire knowledge of, and understand complex issues and institutions, and a sophisticated grasp of ethical and democratic principles” (p. 99). In other words, do college students have a solid knowledge base of democratic principles, and are they able to think critically about the complex issues and concepts within moral and civic engagement? Colby et
al. (2003) broke this category down into three further sub-categories: moral judgment, moral interpretation, and knowledge.

**Moral judgment.** The terms and concept of moral development, whether judgment, interpretation, or knowledge, are articulated by Colby et al. (2003) and are based on Kohlberg’s cognitive development theory (Kohlberg, 1971; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Kohlberg (1971) described five states of moral development in levels and stages. The first, pre-conventional level is focused on societal definitions of good and bad. Stage one is focused on right and wrong motivated by authority, and stage two is based on fairness and reciprocity. Kohlberg’s stages three and four are called conventional level and focused on both understanding and following the social rules. Stage four is about following rules identified in law. Stage five is the post-conventional and autonomous level, where moral development is based on the societal needs and goals, what is best for everyone in society.

Colby et al. (2003) described the foundation of civic engagement knowledge as being rooted in moral development theory; specifically, they built on Kohlberg’s ideas that moral development moves through five stages. According to Colby et al., most students enter college at stage three of Kohlberg’s development scale, they have a strong understanding of right and wrong, as well as personal responsibility and accountability; these first two stages are developed through childhood and in K through 12 education. Additionally, at stage three students are able to understand the influence and effect of community in their moral thinking (p. 102). The stages of Kohlberg’s theory build on one another in order to reach stage five; at stage five, students understand the interplay of the legal system and human rights. However, to reach stage five, they must first have developed the skills and thinking associated with the previous four stages. Kohlberg’s theory argues for an increasing level of complexity in moral thinking and decision-
making as students develop through the five stages; Colby et al. point out that not all college graduates will reach stage five (p. 103). They argue that the foundational ideas of justice and democracy are central to the U.S. system of higher education and the U.S. legal system and provide an understanding of intellectual moral judgment.

Building on this foundation, Colby et al. applied moral judgment to issues of civic engagement; specifically, can students articulate the different issues of moral, civic, or political issues and impose personal ideals to these issues? Moral judgment develops and becomes more complex through increased interactions, learning opportunities, and social development (p. 102). Colby et al.’s (2003) definition of moral judgment is based on how people think and understand moral issues and make decisions, rather than on the dualistic view of right and wrong (p. 102).

**Moral interpretation.** Colby et al. discussed moral interpretation as the actions one takes based on intellectual moral information. They broke down moral interpretation into two categories: reflective morality, where an individual stops to think and process a moral decision; and spontaneous morality, which is the small and sometimes insignificant moral decisions that are made without stopping to reflectively think. Moral interpretation is the action based on moral judgment and is also grounded in Kohlberg’s cognitive development theory. Moral interpretation is unique to each person, their background, history, lessons associated with moral judgment, and where they are in developing moral judgment and interpretation. These factors are described as cognitive schemas. Individuals may be aware or unaware of how these factors impact on decision-making. Reflection, both self-reflection and discussion with others, is also important to stimulate growth in moral interpretation.

**Moral knowledge.** Moral knowledge is the broad understanding of issues associated with civic, political, and moral issues within society and the students’ chosen academic field.
Colby et al. (2003) indicated that students do not need to have a deep and expert knowledge base on any given academic field, but rather that students should have broad knowledge that can be applied across different issues. This is inclusive of critical thinking and analysis skills that can apply lessons learned in one area to a different issue or topic area. One example the authors gave of this was how knowledge of chess could then be applied to a complex business decision. However, in order to apply knowledge to a different setting, a broad understanding of both chess and business is required, along with the cognitive analysis skills to make the argument. Implied in the area of moral knowledge is the concept of relativism, or thinking unique to each student, that most college students have upon entering college. Increased knowledge allows for complexity of thinking that moves students from dualism, one right answer, to relativism, where there is more than one right answer.

Colby et al. (2003) identified these three sub-categories, moral judgment, moral interpretation, and knowledge to represent the complexity of moral and civic understanding. Working together, these sub-categories represent how students think about moral issues, the actions or decisions they make, as well as the broad knowledge to apply their moral and civic understanding. All three are required and coalesce as students develop through Kohlberg’s stages of moral judgment. However, this is not development that happens in isolation; individual reflection, education, and external influences are required to help students develop their moral and civic understanding.

**Moral and Civic Motivation**

Building on knowledge and understanding, the second category focuses on motivation or student behavior. Colby et al. (2003) described the motivation dimension as:

Having the motivation to do the right thing … individual goals and values, interests, commitments, and convictions and the ability to persevere in the face of challenges. It
also includes a sense of efficacy and emotions such as compassion, hope, and inspiration. Closely related to these dimensions is the individual’s identity, the sense of who she is and what kind of a person she wants to be (p. 99).

This category includes both internal as well as external thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Colby et al. (2003) described motivation as students’ “interests and values must reflect social and moral concerns, and those concerns and values must be central to their sense of why they are” (p. 128). Motivation requires students to be able to articulate their values, goals, and convictions, and then to demonstrate their actions, commitment, and convictions through behavior or skills.

The motivation dimension is further broken down into four sub-categories of: values and goals, moral and civic identity, political efficacy, and moral and civic emotions. Each will be discussed further below.

**Values and goals.** Colby et al. (2003) argued that higher education has the opportunity to influence and affect students’ values and goals associated with civic engagement; however, these values cannot be explicitly informed, but rather are an implicit effect of higher education. They said, “Values include respect and tolerance for others, including social minorities; respect for civil liberties and other key elements of US democracy; and an interest in politics and in contributing to positive social change, however that is defined” (p. 113). The type of college a student attends, their academic course of study, and engagement outside of the classroom all affect these values. Therefore, no consistent cause and effect exists.

Through the development and interaction of values, students experience a transformation of their goals. Colby et al. (2003) described the process where a student changes, modifies, or refines their goals based on a learning experience that challenges, affirms, or alters their value system. The authors tried to clarify the difference between participating in an activity or event for personal enjoyment versus participating for a common goal. Their example was of a student
participating in an environmental activist organization, not just for a love of the outdoors, but rather for the goal the organization works around environmental activism (p. 115).

**Moral and civic identity.** Moral and civic identity relates to personal identity and sense of self. Identity is the intersection of values and goals, which impact actions through personal identification and sense of identity. Moral and civic identity includes values, goals, and feelings associated with moral, civic, and political identity. This sense of identity changes over time, and college is a pivotal time to grow and shape the sense of moral and civic identity and integrate “moral convictions into one’s core sense of self” (p. 117). Building on the life-span theory of Erikson (1968), the authors identified college as a point in the life cycle where young adults question their identity and refine their values and beliefs in an effort to define their core sense of self.

**Political efficacy and moral and civic emotions.** Political efficacy was defined by Colby et al. (2003) as not only caring about issues or having a value or belief in a particular moral and civic topic, but students must also believe they can influence change and make a difference through their actions. In this definition, students must believe they can effect civic and political change through their involvement and actions. Included in political efficacy is a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment through the action alone; the process is just as valuable or meaningful as the end result.

Moral and civic emotions play an integral role in efficacy. Emotions can be positive or negative, but Colby et al. (2003) argued that positive and negative emotions have very different effects on students. In many cases, negative emotions of outrage, disgust, or critical perspectives further contribute to negative feelings in students, increasing their alienation and cynicism about
moral and political issues. However, positive emotions of compassion, hope, and inspiration can increase motivation and create a call to action in students.

**Moral and Civic Skills**

Skills, how students’ knowledge and motivation are demonstrated through actions and behavior, is the third category in the civic and moral framework. Colby et al. (2003) provided examples of skills to demonstrate moral and civic ability as “well-developed capacity for effective communication, including moral and political discourse, skills in political participation, the capacity to work effectively with people, including those who are very different from oneself, and the ability to organize other people for action” (p. 100). Students must be able to demonstrate skills of “discourse, communication and argumentation” (p. 126) related to their knowledge, values, beliefs, and motivation. In the effort to demonstrate skills, students “need the ability to communicate effectively and to organize and work with other people, both persuading and leading others and knowing how to compromise when necessary without abandoning their convictions” (p. 128). The skills category represents the external behavior that demonstrates understanding and motivation around moral and civic engagement. Skill development further advances a sense of efficacy, which leads to a greater sense of self, and in turn a greater level of involvement and engagement. Therefore, skills development is essential to contributing to all the other dimensions of moral and civic engagement.

**Guiding the Research Study**

Colby et al.’s (2003) conceptual framework for civic and moral engagement, including the categories of moral and civic understanding, moral and civic motivation, and moral and civic skills, informed this research study. This included a foundational understanding of the problem
of practice, the research questions asked for this study, the literature reviewed, the use of
qualitative interviews, and how the data were analyzed.

The problem of practice for this research study was college student civic engagement
understanding, motivation, and skills. These three categories were drawn directly from Colby et
al.’s (2003) conceptual framework. Additionally, Colby et al. (2003) discussed the national
landscape of higher education and the reprioritization of higher education on civic engagement
and democratic principles. Colby et al. (2003) presented case studies of colleges and universities
engaging students in civic education and best practices associated with educating students, which
also informed the problem of practice for this research study.

Summary and Organization of the Study

This doctoral thesis was organized to explore the topic of how college students develop
civic engagement understanding, motivation, and skills through individual experience.

The subsequent chapter begins with review of literature on the history of American
higher education as it relates to civic engagement and civic values. This is followed by a review
of current research and scholarly writing on the topic of civic engagement in higher education,
and then the current landscape of civic engagement in higher education is discussed. The
literature review is focused on recent research conducted on college student civic engagement,
covering both qualitative and quantitative research on the topic and on specific co-curricular
activities that have been used to develop civic engagement.

Chapter three details the methodology used in this qualitative research study on civic
engagement, hermeneutic phenomenology. The purpose of the research study was to understand
individual students’ experiences with co-curricular civic engagement activities in order to
understand civic engagement understanding, motivation, and skills post-graduation.
Chapter four presents the data analysis and findings. In-depth qualitative interviews explored students’ lived experiences and co-curricular activities as they related to moral and civic development. The Colby et al. (2003) conceptual framework was used to inform the analysis of participant interviews and transcripts.

Chapter five summarizes the findings as they related to the theoretical framework and relevant literature. Limitations associated with the study and ideas for future research are presented. The importance to practitioners within higher education is also discussed.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

To conduct relevant research for this doctoral thesis, an understanding of the current landscape of civic engagement literature was necessary, including both recent scholarly research as well as a larger understanding of United States higher education. This was achieved by reviewing literature in the following streams: history of civic engagement, service learning as a tool for developing civic engagement, and individual studies examining one activity and how it developed civic engagement. Most research found was quantitative in nature. Much of the literature focused on service learning, a well-studied curricular academic activity that has been found to contribute to the development of civic engagement understanding and skills in students (Altman, 2010; Astin & Sax, 1998; Collins, 2010; Eyler, 2000; Furco, 2001; Kahne, Westheimer & Rogers, 2000; Koliba, 2000; Markus & King; 1993; Moely, et al, 2008; Sax & Astin, 1997; Toews & Cerny, 2005, Wallace, 2000; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000; Whitley & Walsh, 2014).

A number of other studies examined one activity, such as public speaking or community service, but did not provide an open-ended space for students to describe all experiences (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Moely et al., 2008; Palmer & Standerfer, 2004; Rhoades, 1998). Research focused solely on civic engagement was primarily quantitative in nature (Astin, et al, 1999; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2013; Johnson, 2004; Lott, 2013; Weerts, Cabrera, & Mejias, 2014). To date, no studies were located that focused on co-curricular student experiences through a qualitative research approach. Therefore, this current research study is the first to approach the topic of civic engagement with this type of data collection, providing useful new insight to the understanding of college students and civic engagement.
History of Democratic Education

American higher education was founded on the basis of educating for the common or public good. The idea was to educate the lay people and general citizens who would then contribute to society as doctors, lawyers, clergy, and teachers (Thelin, 2011). Students were educated in a foundation of civics and democracy; they were educated to serve the community and improve issues relevant to the community (Checkoway, 2001). However, the last one hundred years has seen a shift away from that foundation. After the industrial revolution, and with a change in demographics and commercialism, higher education moved away from the public good and focused on the private or personal good (Dorn, 2011). Faculty research became focused on individual interests, grants, and fundraising (Checkoway, 2001). Students focused on jobs and outcomes post-graduation; the language of democracy was removed from mission statements and higher education conversations (Dorn, 2011). The focus of higher education moved in a different direction than the historical mission. A minority movement in higher education has called for returning to the historical roots of higher education, to educate students for the public good and for students to “learn by doing” in an intentional way (Caputo, 2005; Furco, 2010).

The historical foundation of civic engagement, or education that serves the common good, is rooted in philosophy. John Dewey, an education philosopher, wrote about learning by doing (Dewey, 1916; Checkoway, 2001; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Rhoades, 1998). Dewey’s vision of learning by doing is what is now called civic engagement. Learning by being involved in the community, by applying the academic subject matter to a real-world context with a greater purpose, is to develop and create knowledge to serve all. Dewey wrote that democracy was about the relationships one has with others and a place where all are involved and contributing to
ideas and decision-making (Rhoades, 1998). Dewey laid the philosophical foundation for
American higher education and articulated many of the ideas and values central to higher
education today, which influenced and created a democratic and engaged society.

In 1995, Robert Putnam published an article describing how the civic and social capital
and engagement of the American public had declined over the last fifty years (Putnam, 1995).
This article reinforced the changes that were seen throughout higher education and society, but
until his article “Bowling Alone” hit the mainstream media, this societal shift went unnoticed.
Building on Putnam’s analysis, Ernest Boyer called for the American higher education system to
recommit to the founding principles of higher education and serve the needs of the community.
Boyer, who worked for the Carnegie Foundation, asked for faculty to become more involved in
the community and for universities to reward faculty who engaged in research and scholarship
that is with, and for, the community (Boyer, 1996). A more recent movement, lead by Harry
Boyte has focused on civic agency. Civic agency “involves capacities of communities and
societies to work collaboratively across differences” (Boyte & Mehaffy, 2008). Civic agency
also requires a focus on political and societal change through an application of skills, knowledge
and action by the individual (Boyte, 2008; Boyte & Mehaffy, 2008). With these articles and call
for action, the Carnegie Foundation, Campus Compact, and the Association of American
Colleges and Universities raised the call for renewing the mission of civic engagement in
American higher education. But how to teach civic engagement and what was meant by civic
engagement became a repeated question by these organizations, without a common answer.

Democracy and civic engagement are regularly thought of as limited to the act of voting
in political elections. However, civic engagement is much more than voting (Gonzales, 2008).
To be engaged in one’s community, participating in the democratic process and applying
education to make a civic impact, requires a broad conceptualization of democracy and civic engagement. The past two hundred years of higher education has had a shift in focus and ideology from the time preceding that can be seen in case studies of different colleges and universities (Dorn, 2011). Many scholars argue that civic engagement has been lost as students, faculty, and higher education focused on the individual rather than the common good.

Shifting from individual research within the academic setting and refocusing on serving the community must start with the individual faculty members, which would ultimately cause large-scale institutional change (Caputo, 2005; Checkoway, 2001; Furco, 2010). The current focus within academia on scholarly research and publishing does not allow for a focus on civics education or the application of research to the community (Caputo, 2005; Checkoway, 2001; Furco, 2010). In order to develop a knowledge and foundation of civic engagement and democracy, students must learn from faculty members who conduct research in, and with, the community; faculty must engage students in this type of learning (Caputo, 2005; Checkoway, 2001; Furco, 2010). Applying scholarly learning within the community can be done through a curricular structure, such as service learning in individual courses, or through co-curricular activities.

In order to engage students in democracy and civic engagement, it is important to consider how students participate in civic engagement. Sax (2004) reviewed survey data over a thirty-year period to understand what activities students participated in, and which ones they were not. Young adults’ voter participation declined over the thirty years of the study, and that was representative of declining interest in politics (Blackhurst & Foster, 2003; Sax, 2004). Students indicated they did not keep up with politics and did not discuss politics; scholars and the media reported this phenomenon only in voter turnout statistics (Sax, 2004). However, at the
end of the study, there was an upward trend of students engaged in volunteering and service learning, two different kinds of civic engagement and democratic participation. Students indicated that they wanted to be involved with their community, and they participated in service to the community (Sax, 2004). These findings did not represent the traditional democratic engagement models, because it showed that the students of that study were mostly apolitical, but wanted to be involved with their community and do service work. This represents a return to the more historical definition of civic engagement, where students are engaged in service to their local community and serving the common good.

**Service Learning**

Service learning is an academic teaching pedagogy and is structured as an integral part of the curriculum, as part of a course students participate in service within the greater community (Harkavy & Benson, 1998; Hartley, 2009). Service learning is described by the American Association of Colleges and Universities as a “high impact practice” which gives students direct experience with the topic they are studying to help “analyze and solve problems in the community” (AACU, n.d.). Many faculty use service learning as a pedagogical tool to educate students on how their academic studies are applicable to the community, and how they can individually have an impact on the common good. Service learning involves applying the topic and subject matter of an academic course, or the academic learning, to the community. Service learning is commonly referred to as “problem based learning” and “community based learning” (Sax, 2004). For the purpose of this study, all three pedagogical methods will be jointly referred to as service learning.

Courses that embed service learning as a curricular component require faculty to connect students with a non-profit or service agency in the community where students can volunteer,
conduct research, complete a project, or otherwise apply the course topic to a setting outside of the university and classroom. By embedding this type of structured learning in an academic course, students are applying their learning to a community issue or problem. Generally, the community partner also receives a benefit in the form of work completed or service to the organization (Altman, 2010). Dewey argued that students learn by doing, and this is one way students achieve that vision (Harkavy & Benson, 1998).

In addition to service in the community, students must also complete a curricular and academic component of the class. Students are often asked to articulate their learning when engaged in the practice of service learning through journaling and self-reflection (Eyler 2000; Whitley & Walsh, 2014). Much of the research looking at students’ self-reflection indicated they had highly personal learning experiences. Students reported a wide array of personal developments, including improved empathy, better understanding of people unlike themselves, and diversity. Students also developed a greater understanding of the academic curriculum and developed values and commitment of service to others (Collins, 2010; Eyler, 2000; Pollack & Motoike, 2006; Rhoades, 1998; Sax, 2004; Sax & Astin, 1997; Whitley & Walsh, 2014). The above research supports that journaling and self-reflection within the academic setting and guided by faculty allows students to have personalized and meaningful learning that is impactful. Based on this, the academic community views journaling and self-reflection as a best practice when conducting service learning.

Service learning is a powerful and highly-effective learning experience for students. Through self-reflection and cognitive development, students have personal, intellectual, academic, social, and community engagement outcomes (Whitley & Walsh, 2014). By engaging students in all of these learning methodologies, they learn by studying, doing, and reflecting; and
therefore, deeper and more meaningful active learning occurs. These all lead into a greater awareness and knowledge of issues related to democracy and civic engagement. Whitley and Walsh (2014) indicated that students participating in service learning in their courses “become more knowledgeable about social justice issues…and the need for outreach programs in [the] communities” they serve (p. 39). For many students, conducting service learning in the community exposes them to a part of the community of which they may have been unaware, and students report wanting to help or engage further after their course requirement concludes. Service learning is an effective way to educate and teach students about the real-world application of their academic studies, which results in a greater awareness, knowledge, and connection to civic learning and civic engagement (Collins, 2010; Eyler, 2000; Pollack & Motoike, 2006; Rhoades, 1998; Sax, 2004; Sax & Astin, 1997; Whitley & Walsh, 2014).

More research studies on the efficacy and outcomes of students participating in service learning have occurred as more high schools and universities have implemented the practice. Longitudinal studies of students over the course of thirty years indicate that students who were exposed to service learning and serving the community in high school were more likely to continue to volunteer or be committed to their community (Sax & Astin, 1997). Students who volunteer or do service learning in high school were learning lessons about democracy and service to others. The earlier students were exposed to this type of learning by doing, the more likely they would continue and build tangible skills for opportunities later in life (Astin & Sax, 1998; Collins, 2010). Students who participated in service learning also demonstrated a greater commitment to their overall education by engaging with faculty and doing homework (Sax & Astin, 1997). Service learning is a sign of greater overall student engagement with their college experience and academic studies. Much like high school students, college students develop
discipline-specific knowledge and real-world skills they use later in life (Sax & Astin, 1997). In fact, research indicated that students were positively influenced on thirty-five outcome measures related to service learning (Astin & Sax, 1998). The data indicated that service learning is an effective way to develop civic engagement in college students, and if students are exposed to volunteering or service in high school they are more likely to continue to find meaningful engagement during and after college.

Although civic engagement has been described as more than voting, engagement with a political campaign or volunteering around politics is one of the fundamental tenets of democracy. Students who were engaged in community service were less apathetic about the political process, and therefore more willing to engage in political campaigns or volunteering (Blackhurst & Foster, 2003). Engaging students in political processes and seeing how democracy works in action is the best remedy to student apathy and increased engagement in education. Students were also more inclined to engage in other forms of civic and community involvement over politics. Increasing student participation and engagement in the political process is one of many ways to increase civic engagement (Blackhurst & Foster, 2003).

However, there are also areas for improvement in service learning. Eyler (2004) argued that service learning also contributes to students’ cognitive development and problem solving skills, skills that are vital for post-graduate success, but noted that this conclusion had not been properly researched.

**Singular Activity**

With the exception of service learning, a curricular component, other civic engagement research mostly focused on a single activity and how it developed civic engagement skills in students. A wide variety of literature described how an individual activity can support the
development of civic engagement skills in students. Much of that literature drew on the expected
teaching outcomes identified throughout the service learning literature; there is a well-established
body of research on service learning that identified student learning outcomes and best practices
for developing civic engagement learning in college students.

One of the primary learning outcomes associated with civic engagement activities is
learning about the community. Understanding of community and commitment to community
service are additional outcomes that support civic engagement. Students who participate in
community service activities, voluntary non-curricular structured activities of their choice, learn
about the community at large and the values of social justice (Rhoades, 1998). Social
responsibility and foundational principles of democracy are also an important outcome of
community service (Giles & Eyler, 1994). In addition to service, politics are a central idea in
civic engagement (Oritsejafor & Guseh, 2004; Ridings, 2001). Through political action or
motivating self and others to effect change, students learn yet another component of civic
engagement (Barnhardt, 2015; Biddix, Somers, & Polman, 2009; Blackhurst & Foster, 2003).
However, serving others and political engagement are but two of many ideas that encompass
civic engagement.

Other singular studies demonstrated the individual learning or skill development students
experience through civic engagement activities. Examples of individual learning outcomes
include an understanding of the application of economics (Emami & Davis, 2009), improved
public speaking skills (Palmer & Standerfer, 2004), and increased self-efficacy (Taylor &
Trepanier, 2007). Moving from an individual to a group context, engaging students in the
residential living-learning curriculum, was shown to promote the development of civic
engagement in small groups (Flores, Crosby-Currie, & Zimmerman, 2007; Fried, 2009).
Moral development and community engagement have been researched quantitatively and resulting studies have shown that students who are civically engaged have a greater sense of civic engagement (Boss, 1994; O’Leary, 2014). Longitudinal studies have demonstrated how student engagement during college can predict future behavior and civic engagement, particularly political and voting behavior (Glaeser, et al, 2007; Sax, 2004; Weerts, Cabera, Mejias, 2014). A correlation between academic major and civic engagement commitments was found (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2013; Johnson, 2004), with liberal arts majors having the highest correlation (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Gronski & Pigg, 2000). Salary was found to be higher for those who participated in civically-engaged activities during college (Hu & Wolniak, 2013).

These studies, in total, demonstrate that many activities, contexts, settings, and structures can contribute to the development of civic engagement in college students. Perhaps any of these activities could be seen to benefit both the student and community in some way. However, where all of these studies on college student civic engagement are lacking is the fact that they have used only quantitative methods to determine correlations. While data can tell a powerful numeric story, in many cases data can only tell a small piece of a story as complex as civic engagement.

**Conclusion**

The scholarly literature on college student civic engagement was organized into three strands: history of democratic education, service learning, and studies on singular activities to develop civic engagement skills. A strong history of focusing on civic engagement in American higher education (Checkoway, 2001; Dorn, 2011; Thelin, 2011) is based on the foundational writings and thoughts of philosopher John Dewey (Dewey, 1916; Collins, 2010; Eyler 2000; Pollack & Motoike, 2006; Rhoades, 1998; Sax, 2004; Sax & Astin, 1997; Whitley & Walsh,
Service learning has been thoroughly researched and shown to develop civic engagement in college students through the academic curriculum (Altman, 2010; Astin & Sax, 1998; Collins, 2010; Eyler, 2000; Furco, 2001; Kahne, et al, 2000; Koliba, 2000; Markus & King; 1993; Moely, et al, 2008; Sax & Astin, 1997; Toews & Cerny, 2005, Wallace, 2000; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000; Whitley & Walsh, 2014). Research correlating one curricular or co-curricular activity to civic engagement has been amply demonstrated as well (Altman, 2010; Astin & Sax, 1998; Collins, 2010; Eyler, 2000; Furco, 2001; Kahne et al., 2000; Koliba, 2000; Markus & King, 1993; Moely et al., 2008; Sax & Astin, 1997; Toews & Cerny, 2005, Wallace, 2000; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000; Whitley & Walsh 2014). Further, quantitative research has demonstrated the development of civic engagement in college students (Astin et al., 1999; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2013; Johnson, 2004; Lott, 2013; Weerts, Cabrera, & Mejias, 2014). In sum, the body of research literature on civic engagement is available, but it lacks qualitative research studies focused on the student experience, perspective, or understanding of individual student development.
Chapter Three: Research Design

This qualitative research study sought to understand how recent college graduates developed civic engagement understanding, motivation, and skills through co-curricular experiences. The main purpose of this study was to uncover students’ stories of what they learned while engaging in civic activities and how that has shaped and developed their efficacy and commitment to citizenship and civic engagement. This study provides greater understanding about the student experience through listening to and understanding students’ stories.

Research Questions

This qualitative phenomenological research study was designed to understand the lived experiences of college students (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenon being examined was the development of understanding, motivation, and skills of civic engagement through the undergraduate college experience.

The research questions were formulated to understand the co-curricular lived experiences of college students. The theoretical framework of Colby et al. (2003) on moral and civic development was used to inform the questions for the interview protocol and the data analysis. The research questions were designed to encourage college students to describe both the phenomenon studied—civic engagement—and their lived experiences regarding the development or advancement of their own individual civic engagement perspectives and actions while they were in college and post-graduation (Creswell, 2013).

The central research question was: How do recent liberal arts graduates who participated in co-curricular activities describe their personal experience developing civic engagement?

In order to find an answer, this question was divided into the following sub-questions:

(1) How do students describe their co-curricular experiences?
(2) How do students describe or define civic engagement based on their experience?

(3) What are the lived experiences of students with regard to:

(a) civic engagement understanding?

(b) civic engagement motivation?

(c) civic engagement skills?

The central research question was broad and overarching and speaks to the purpose of the research study (Creswell, 2013). The central research question allowed for the exploration of recent liberal arts college graduates’ undergraduate experiences. The question focused on their co-curricular experiences, those outside of and either related or unrelated to the curricular structure, which helped inform or develop students’ knowledge, awareness, or commitment to civic engagement. In particular, the central research question focused on understanding the individual lived experiences of each participant and their unique perspectives and interpretations regarding co-curricular activities and the development of civic engagement.

**Methodology**

The research study was qualitative by design. Qualitative research is focused on understanding a social issue through individual or group experiences (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of this study was to understand civic engagement by studying the experiences, recollections, understandings, and interpretations of recent college graduates. By definition, qualitative research is grounded in philosophical theory and uses that theory to develop themes or understandings about the social issue (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research data are typically collected by interviewing individuals, reviewing documents and conducting observations to create meaning, understanding, or theory about the social issue being studied (Creswell, 2013).
Those procedures were followed for this study, which asked recent college graduates about their experiences through the use of interviews and participant-submitted written material.

Phenomenology was the approach within the qualitative methodologies that was selected as most appropriate for this research study. Qualitative research generally starts with a broad question, in this case the question centered on a phenomenon - civic engagement.

Phenomenological research was designed to explore a common experience all participants had in relationship to the phenomenon and to understand the lived experiences of each participant (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1977). The goal of phenomenological research is to understand “what” the participants experienced and “how” they experienced it; in this case, civic engagement during the undergraduate college experience (Creswell, 2013, p. 76; van Manen, 1977).

Phenomenological research has two primary philosophical approaches; this study used hermeneutic phenomenology as described by van Manen (1977, 1984, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology is centered on understanding the lived experience of participants through the “texts” of life (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). Phenomenology is grounded in the philosophical writing of Edmond Husserl and his ideas of understanding or finding truth by understanding the world through phenomenology (Kafle, 2011). The philosophical underpinning for this approach continued to develop through the philosophical writing of Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and others (Creswell, 2013; Kafle, 2011; van Manen, 1977; 2007). Van Manen described phenomenology “as response to how one orients to lived experience and questions the way one experiences the world” (Kafle, 2011, p. 183). Hermeneutic phenomenology is focused on finding individual objective experience, to then develop a subjective experience of groups (Kafle, 2011). This research study was focused on the lived experience of individual recent
college graduates, and focused on understanding their individual experience with the goal of creating group themes or shared understandings.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is focused on “the texts,” which are created through interviews with participants and through written materials from participants and the researcher (van Manen, 1984). The role of the researcher is to understand, analyze, and create meaning from the rich texts to better understand the phenomenon through a process of reading and writing (Kafle, 2011; van Manen, 1984; 2006). In this kind of research, the act of reading and writing is more than analysis, it is diving into the words, the meaning of those words, and the linguistic intentionality and meaning behind the words (Freeman & Vagle, 2013; van Manen, 1984; 2006). A key component of phenomenological research is the role of bracketing the thoughts or position of the researcher. However, in hermeneutic phenomenology, outlined by van Manen, the researcher acknowledges the difficulty of bracketing and rejects the practice; instead, the researcher is part of the interpretive process, acknowledging assumptions and biases and making them explicit in the interpretation (Kafle, 2011; Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1984). The hermeneutic cycle of reading, writing, and reflecting on the texts is the key role of the researcher (van Manen, 1984; 1990; 2006). For this study, texts were created through interviews with participants as well as written documents (essays) provided by participants. A journal text was also developed by the researcher, which reinforces the hermeneutic data cycle.

Site and Participants

The site for this study was a small public Master’s degree-granting institution in the Pacific Northwest. The university has approximately 5,000 students, and the largest school within the university grants liberal arts and humanities degrees. The campus was founded in 1990 and is one institution in a larger multi-institution system.
Participants were recruited from the school of interdisciplinary liberal arts. Participants were recruited from a liberal arts major in order to both limit the participant selection and because the liberal arts are a non-technical, non-competitive major. All students graduating from the school must complete a capstone course. The capstone course includes a framing essay and four smaller essays discussing how students met the school’s learning goals. Participants for the study were recruited by emailing faculty teaching the capstone course (Appendix A). Based on the faculty nomination, participants were sent a recruitment email (Appendix B). Initial recruitment from summer 2015 did not result in a sufficient number of participants due to lack of feedback from faculty nominators as well as responsiveness from nominated participants. This was an unexpected activity during participant recruitment, therefore the graduation date range was extended to span summer 2015 through winter 2016; and accordingly, additional faculty were asked to nominate. After five months of recruitment, which included up to two reminder emails to both faculty nominators and nominated participants, there were still not enough participants in the study to meet the needs of the planned methodology. Nomination was expanded to a few staff in Student Affairs who actively communicate with, advise, and coach students. By seeking additional nominating faculty and staff the pool of nominated participants increased such that the minimum number of participants required for the methodology was achieved.

The same nomination criteria were applied to all participants. Participants were of traditional college age, 20 to 24 years old, and were both male and female. Six participants were recruited; this number was chosen to allow for the rich, in-depth textual analysis that occurred during hermeneutic phenomenology, while allowing for a representation of student experience (Kafle, 2011; van Manen, 1990). It was unlikely that saturation would be achieved given the
complexity of the topic of civic engagement and the uniqueness of student experience, however a balance of participants allowed for themes to emerge (Laverty, 2003). Participants met the following criteria:

- speak English fluently
- traditional-aged undergraduate student, between 20 and 24 years of age
- completed a first Bachelor’s degree in one of the interdisciplinary liberal arts degrees between August 2015 and March 2016
- participated in co-curricular experiences
- participants equally represented men and women
- submit capstone framing essay to be analyzed by this research study.

Confidentiality of the site and participants was maintained through use of pseudonyms for both site and participants’ names. Informed consent was provided by both singing a form and verbally at the beginning of the interview (Appendix C). Any identifying information provided through data collection, names of locations, people, and places were changed to maintain confidentiality. Participants were compensated for their time and participation through a choice of gift cards in the amount of twenty-five dollars each.

The researcher was employed at this institution as the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs and Director of the Career Center. In her role, the researcher did not have a great deal of interaction with students and did not talk to students about civic engagement. Additionally, the Office of Community-Based Learning where curricular civic engagement activities are hosted did not report to the Division of Student Affairs. The researcher was removed from this topic within the work setting.
It was anticipated that the researcher would not know any of the participants or have interactions with them outside of the research study. However, due to the small nature of the university, upon nomination and initial meeting a few participants were familiar by face and had informal interactions with the researcher, but none were well known or had developed a relationship with the researcher. It was made explicitly clear to participants that the researcher was conducting a study for the purpose of doctoral research and was not conducting research as a member of the University community or in the role or capacity of her employment. More specifically, the research topic was not related to the employment of the researcher. The relationship between the researcher and participants was strictly for the purpose of scholarly research.

**Data Collection**

As previously stated, in hermeneutic phenomenology, data collection is through texts (van Manen, 1990). Texts are created through in-depth multiple interviews with participants (Creswell, 2013). Van Manen (1990) identified other forms of texts that can also be collected, including: observations of participants, journals, poetry, music, art, written reflections, or formal responses (Creswell, 2013). In this study, in-depth interviews and follow up interviews guided by open-ended questions were the primary source of texts for data collection. Participants were asked to engage in one primary interview and one follow up interview inclusive of statement checking and confirmation (Merriam, 2009). In their capstone course, students are asked to write a framing essay for their academic portfolio; this essay was collected with permission after the course as a written text to supplement interviews. Students shared the Word document of their essay with the researcher. The researcher also maintained a journal to contribute to the
hermeneutic cycle of reading, writing, and reflecting. This journal was analyzed as additional
text.

Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions in interviews as the primary
source of data collection. The interview protocol first established the purpose, relationship,
definition of terms, and confidentiality of the research study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).
Subsequently, open-ended questions asked about involvement in co-curricular activities,
motivation and decision making, skills developed through those experiences, and more. The full
interview protocol is included as Appendix D.
Data Analysis

Data analysis was driven by the hermeneutic cycle, in that participants and researcher co-create and co-construct meaning of the lived experience and understanding of the phenomenon (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1984). Reading, writing, and reflection are the core of data analysis within the hermeneutic cycle (Kafle, 2011; Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1984; 1997; 2007). Analysis is conducted on the texts or data that are provided by the participants (Laverty, 2003, van Manen, 1984; 1990; 1997; 2007). The goal of data analysis is to identify themes that appear through examining the language of the participants. Important in the language and texts is what is said as well as what is not said; the power of language through silence was also considered during analysis (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1990). The power of language and linguistics, not only the words said, but the meaning in use as well as in reflection were considered (Freman & Vagle, 2013; van Manen, 1977; 1984; 2006). The researcher’s reflective journal was included in the textual analysis and allowed the researcher to move back and forth in the hermeneutic cycle between text and whole in an effort to identify themes (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1984; 2006).

While there is not a standard protocol in hermeneutic phenomenology to conduct data analysis, van Manen provided a guideline and steps to undertake in an effort to identify and develop themes in the texts, which are reflective of the language. Van Manen described themes as “structures of experience” (1990, p. 79). These structures of experience are created from the experience of the participants themselves and are grouped together to define, or are examples of, a larger experience. Themes are an attempt to “get at the meaning of the experience” or the “feeling” that is created through the experience; a theme is providing a “shape to the shapeless” through the description of experience (van Manen, 1990, p. 88). Themes were developed through reading, writing, and reflecting on the texts and language provided by the participants.
Themes were created through individual statements or words, as well as in the overall text (van Manen, 1984; 1990). Themes cannot be developed ahead of time, but emerge through data analysis, deep reflection, and through the hermeneutic cycle (van Manen, 1984; 1990).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is grounded in the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger and the attempt to make meaning out of experience (Freman & Vagle, 2013; Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1977; 1984; 1990). Drawing on this philosophical grounding, van Manen (1990) identified four “lifeworld existentials” to guide reflection and analysis: lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation (p. 102). Van Manen (1990) described how these can be analyzed separately, but cannot be separated, as together they make up the whole experience. These four existential ideas were one way to guide analysis and theme creation through the hermeneutic cycle (van Manen, 1984).

The texts and language were coded to develop themes by using the hermeneutic cycle of reading, writing, and reflection. Data analysis started with data collection and was an iterative process, dynamic and emergent as data collection was undertaken (Merriam, 2009). First, the texts were read and reflected on in order to establish an understanding and familiarity with the texts. Basic inductive and comparative examination was applied to data analysis beginning with open coding (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2012). Coding was conducted using the computerized software system MAXQDA, which also increased the rigor of the study by applying subjective systems to data analysis (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Codes were derived both from the text and language of the participants but were also guided by the theoretical framework and language of the civic engagement literature (Saldana, 2012).

**Validity and Credibility**
In qualitative phenomenological research studies such as this one, the goal of the research is to focus on the lived experiences of the participants in an effort to find commonalities and themes. The very nature of qualitative research is subjective and cannot be proven as fact (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, internal validity is established through triangulation of data, respondent validation, and engagement in data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

Triangulation of data is the primary form of internal validity and credibility in this study. For this research, data were collected through interviews, written essays, and participant self-reflection. The multiple sources of data collection allow for crosschecking of participant stories as well as triangulation among a similar population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Finding similar language in the multiple forms of texts increased the validity of the study, as the data were represented in multiple formats.

Additionally, respondent validation or member checking was conducted by validating and checking the first interview and by asking follow up questions with participants to ensure a higher quality of internal validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Merriam described this process of member checking to provide the highest level of validity and credibility because the participants’ responses are clarified with them so there is not a misinterpretation of their experience or comments (Merriam, 2009).

The third form of internal validity and credibility was deep and adequate engagement in the data collection and analysis. This included fully immersing in the data until there was no additional new information to be found in the data, resulting in a thick description which could be transferable to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). It was important to also look for outlying data and themes, or data or themes that support different explanations,
negative cases, or opposite findings; being willing to identify this type of data reinforces the validity and credibility of the research and the research project (Merriam, 2009).

All three forms of internal validity were engaged to balance the subjective nature of this qualitative research and overcome limitations inherent in qualitative research. Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology employs analytic rigor and participant feedback to enrich the quality and validity of a study (Kafle, 2011). This is described as paying attention to every detail of language, that which supports the themes as well as findings in cases that are outliers. When the reader has concluded, they should be able to see or reflect on the study within their own knowledge and context (Kafle, 2011). By taking all of these practices into account, the internal validity of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was established.

Hermeneutic phenomenology calls for the researcher to be immersed in the rich text and language of the data and data analysis (van Manen, 1984; 1990; 2006). Within this methodology is the need to identify, reflect on, and make evident in the analysis the researcher’s bias. Any bias and assumptions made by the researcher are to be included and explicitly stated in the reflective process of reading and writing; the researcher’s thoughts and beliefs are integral and essential to the process (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1984; 2006). Specifically, the role and beliefs of the researcher are inherent in the “philosophical basis” for analysis that will occur (Laverty, 2003, p. 28). The reflective journal the researcher was used to add in the process of analysis and identifying where the researcher’s bias and assumptions intersected with the text and analysis.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

This qualitative study would not have been possible without the willing participation of human subjects. It is crucial that participants felt safe to share their personal stories and
experiences. To ensure the protection of participants the following actions from Merriam’s *Ethical Issues Checklist* were undertaken (Merriam, 2009, p. 233).

Participants understood the purpose, scope, language, and goals of the research study. Through informed consent before the interview began, participants had the opportunity to ask questions and to excuse themselves from the study. Participant confidentiality was maintained at the highest level. Data collected through interviews and written material were saved on a password-protected computer and USB in the researcher’s home. Data will be destroyed according to records retention regulations. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and names of locations, people, or other identifying information was changed to protect the anonymity of the research participant’s location and activities. Promises of anonymity and confidentiality were strictly kept and reciprocity consisted of both a gift card compensation as well as member checking to ensure participants’ experiences and language was accurate. Advice concerning the protection of human subjects was sought from the principal researcher and adviser.

It was not anticipated that the subject matter of co-curricular experiences, activities, and civic engagement would cause any physical harm to participants. There was a remote possibility that emotional issues could arise, given the discussion of past experiences (Merriam, 2009). Participants were provided ample time and reflection, and the opportunity to disengage from the research if emotional concern became detrimental. Referrals to appropriate resources were available, but were not needed. The role of the researcher was to be objective during data collection and was not to be a “therapist or judge” (Merriam, 2009, p. 231). Protection of human subjects was requested and approved through Northeastern University’s Institutional Research Board (IRB) and can be found as Appendix E.

**Conclusion**
This research study asked: How do recent liberal arts college graduates describe their lived experiences developing civic engagement understanding, motivation, and skills through co-curricular activities? As a qualitative research study focused on the phenomenon of civic engagement and the lived experiences of participants to understand the phenomenon, hermeneutic phenomenology was used to obtain and analyze data (Creswell, 2013). Interviews, document review, and a rigorous process of reading, writing, and reflection completed the hermeneutic cycle of analysis to develop a rich textual analysis and description (Freman & Vagle, 2013; van Manen, 1984; 1990; 2006). A full description of the data analysis and findings is provided in the next chapter.
Chapter Four: Presentation and Analysis of Findings

Hermeneutic phenomenology was used to study the lived experiences of the participants as they developed civic engagement through co-curricular experiences. This study used a broad definition of civic engagement, which allowed for a variety of participants. The definition was taken from Adler and Goggin (2005); “Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (p. 241). Therefore, co-curricular included any out-of-classroom experiences that were not part of an academic course, ideally where participants did not receive academic credit for their participation.

Six participants were recruited for this study. All were between 20-24 years of age and graduated with a liberal arts degree. Each participant engaged in activities outside of the classroom that connected him or her with the community. Many of the activities were volunteer or extra-curricular, and other activities were co-curricular and associated with the university in some capacity. Data collected included two interviews and the submission of the capstone course-framing essay for each participant. All three sources of data were turned into texts and analyzed together. The chart below contains an overview of the six participants.

*Chart 1 Participant Overview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ava</th>
<th>Andrew</th>
<th>Sophia</th>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Jessica</th>
<th>Elizabeth</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>Sex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Science Technology and Society</td>
<td>Community Psychology</td>
<td>Culture Literature and the Arts</td>
<td>Law Economics and Public Policy</td>
<td>Community Psychology</td>
<td>Society Ethics and Human Behavior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The next section provides a brief description of the co-curricular activities of each participant. The descriptions will be followed by the results of the data analysis. Data analysis was conducted using the hermeneutic cycle of analysis as described in chapter three and was focused on the phenomenon of civic engagement explored through co-curricular experiences (Creswell, 2013).

**Description of Participants**

**Ava**

At the time of the study, Ava was a twenty-four year old female who graduated with a science, technology and society degree in December 2015. She was involved in clubs related to Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) issues and had a lead position in an informal transitional network for new students entering the institution.

Ava was primarily involved in these activities because she felt that she could contribute to others going through transitional circumstances (both entering the university as well as identifying as LGBTQ) by providing individualized support for their transitions. She articulated, “I feel those students need that support and guidance to say, ‘hey, this is where this is…it’s okay…you’re fine…struggling is normal.’” Ava wanted to provide a different experience transitioning into the college environment than she had; this was the motivator not only for her lead position, but also for continuing the commitment one quarter after her graduation. While her work was to serve and support individuals, she was also working to create a community in both groups of students, LGBTQ and incoming transfer students. Ava was working with and for these two groups of students and saw them as part of her community.

Through these co-curricular activities, Ava articulated over twenty-five skills she developed through her activities with the clubs and transitional network. Ava identified improved communication skills – specifically public speaking, leadership skills, and a greater
ability to work with other people as her key skills developed through co-curricular experiences. She identified the ability to collaborate and work with others in a team as additional skills she developed. All of Ava’s co-curricular experiences required working in teams or with other people to accomplish their goals and interconnectedness, and collaboration was a theme throughout her experiences.

Andrew

Andrew was a twenty-four year old male who graduated in December 2015 with a degree in community psychology. Andrew was involved in religiously-affiliated clubs, a disability awareness club, and a group that allocated student fees.

Andrew was strongly motivated and interested in helping a particular community or group of students that he identified with, and through his activities help others and himself at the same time. Andrew saw a dual purpose in his involvement, “It was kind of me being helped and me helping others at the same time, which is still in the same way helping myself a little bit, too,” and this dual role was what motivated his co-curricular involvement. Andrew identified himself as part of the disability community, and therefore his involvement was correlated to the reciprocal motivation. The motivation for the student funding group was about service to the campus community, the greater student body.

As a person with a disability, Andrew identified skills that he developed that are typically seen as a weakness for someone with his particular disability. Through his co-curricular involvement, Andrew identified interpersonal and communication skills that he developed and improved, which led directly to improved skills in networking, communicating with others, and presentations. By getting involved and communicating with others, Andrew learned to network. Through his experiences, Andrew also developed leadership skills; some of those leadership
skills were directly tied to communication skills as well. Andrew’s out-of-class experiences impacted his future career goals; he said, “I wanted to go into a career in which I helped people with disabilities in some way.”

**Sophia**

Sophia was a twenty-year-old female who graduated in March 2016 with a degree in culture, literature and the arts. Sophia volunteered in elementary school classrooms, a soup kitchen, a food bank, and mission trips. Sophia’s co-curricular experiences were all off-campus, and nothing was affiliated with the university.

Sophia was motivated to make unique connections with individuals she was working with in an effort to help them meet their individual needs, and to serve or give back. For Sophia, the idea of helping was specific to each individual, no two were the same, and she wanted to “see” each individual. Her focus on the individual led her to seek connections with the individual person rather than the organization, cause, or mission where she was volunteering. The skills Sophia developed through her co-curricular engagement were very focused on her as an individual and her ability to connect with other individuals. These individual connections were then translated into working with others in teams or collaborative settings.

Learning to be a professional, professionalism, and respect were the skills Sophia identified that came through her co-curricular experiences relating to her personal growth and development. Through her volunteer experiences Sophia was “figuring out what professionalism actually is as an adult.” Being professional was strongly tied to respect, being respected and respectable for Sophia; her experiences not only demonstrated the connection between professionalism and respect, but also taught her how the two interacted. This skill, coupled with
her focus on the individual, merged in a meaningful way as she related her co-curricular experiences to her future career goals of teaching.

Matthew

Matthew was a twenty-four year old male who graduated in June 2015 with a degree in law economics and public policy. Matthew was involved in a fraternity and studied abroad.

Matthew’s co-curricular experiences were initially motivated by being part of a social community, but quickly moved to a focus on giving back to the community through philanthropy. Matthew was motivated by altruism. He did not expect something in return for many of his activities; he was simply giving back or helping others. Because much of Matthew’s work was driven by philanthropy and raising money for a particular cause, the greater focus for him was the broad community. That community and those causes ranged from nonprofits the fraternity established, to foster children, research for the blind, and other local non-profits.

Matthew identified a range of skills he developed through his co-curricular experiences including leadership skills and interpersonal skills working with others. Matthew’s skills in communicating with a diverse group of people were developed through his engagement both with the fraternity as well as in his study abroad experience. He learned “how to converse, have a dialogue, and have civil discourse.” Skills in communication and working with others subsequently developed leadership skills for Matthew. Leadership skills were also demonstrated through teaching others in the fraternity about the rules, customs, and values of the organization. Being in a leadership position that was responsible for teaching gave Matthew the skills of teaching and training others, while also motivating them. Matthew had a unique experience due to the philanthropic work of the fraternity. He developed skills in event planning, budgeting, and fundraising that were a result of his co-curricular experience.
Jessica

Jessica was a twenty-two year old female who graduated in June 2015 with a degree in community psychology. Jessica’s co-curricular involvement included being an orientation leader and a student assistant on campus, and a volunteer for a museum, the YMCA, and in an elementary school classroom off campus.

Jessica’s co-curricular involvement started as a way for her to get involved in something on-campus, but quickly shifted to wanting to give back and help others. Through her co-curricular experience, Jessica believed she found her passion for education, and identified education as her future career goal. Her motivation shifted from participating in co-curricular experiences for her personal development, to being about helping others and being a support system for her peers as evidenced when she said, “I realize that I’ve had so many people in my life that helped me, and it's how do I help others how others helped me?”

Through her co-curricular activities, Jessica developed a number of skills and was able to connect many of them to her classroom experience and future career goals as an educator. Jessica developed skills in communication; communication was extended to presentations, emails and written communication, and customer service. Her customer service skills were further explained as conflict resolution skills. Jessica also identified leadership skills as an outcome of her co-curricular experience. Included in these skills were the abilities to teach and train others and share or impart knowledge. In classroom settings, at the museum, and through her on-campus involvement, Jessica taught others.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth was a twenty-three year old female who graduated in March 2015 with a degree in society, ethics, and human behavior. Elizabeth’s co-curricular experience included being an
orientation leader and orientation coordinator, as well as volunteering at a hospital, and studying abroad.

Elizabeth pushed herself to get involved on-campus to create a different experience for herself. Once involved, her motivation shifted to giving back to others. She said, “Getting involved for me was a crucial turning point in my career, in my academic success.” Elizabeth wanted to help her peers as they found their own path of involvement on-campus and then continued to pass it forward. Elizabeth put a lot of her time and energy into building a community on-campus and then served that community by giving back.

Elizabeth identified many skills developed through her co-curricular experience including communication, interpersonal skills, and leadership skills. Elizabeth also learned how to be a team member, a leader, and to work with a wide variety of people. Elizabeth also talked about interviewing skills and how through her event planning, time management skills, and experience she was better prepared with examples to give during an interview. Elizabeth said her co-curricular experience made her “better, more well rounded,” “outgoing,” “dependable,” and “more hard working and dedicated.” These personal characteristics were all as a result of her co-curricular experiences and engagement outside of the classroom.

**Overview of Findings**

This qualitative research study was guided by the primary research question: How do recent liberal arts graduates who participated in co-curricular activities describe their personal experience developing civic engagement? For the purpose of this research study, civic engagement was defined as “how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241). To address this research question, the methodology of hermeneutic
phenomenology was undertaken. Hermeneutic phenomenology is centered on understanding the lived experience of participants through the “texts” of life (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). Texts were generated through the two interviews per participant, transcribed to create a text, as well as participant submitted essays and the researcher journal. Texts were initially analyzed using a software program, MaxQDA, to identify codes, frequency of the codes, and correlations between codes. Through deep emersion in the words and texts of the participants, themes emerged to address the research question. Civic engagement was seen through the development of motivation and skills. The co-curricular activities developed building blocks of civic engagement, which are discussed in the following themes. The themes are as follows:

- **Theme One:** Participants developed civic engagement by identifying, participating in, and shaping a community that was personally significant.
- **Theme Two:** Participants developed civic engagement through co-curricular experiences that improved interpersonal, communication, and transferable skills.
- **Theme Three:** Participants developed civic engagement through co-curricular experiences that connected learning in and out of the academic classroom.
- **Theme Four:** Participants developed civic engagement through co-curricular experiences that increased self-efficacy, purpose and career goals.

These central themes are interconnected and are presented with sub themes in the following sections.

**Theme One: Identifying, Participating, and Shaping Community that was Personally Significant**

Each of the six participants identified a community that was important or personally significant to them. Based on this commitment to a community, they were then motivated to be involved, to give back, or to help others within that community. This civic engagement was
fostered by their co-curricular activities and increased their motivation and interest in shaping the future of the community they found important and personally significant. All of the participants identified a unique community, or defined the community that they chose to be involved in; no two participants defined community in the same way. Community was what the individual determined and felt was their group of people for whom they cared. Two sub themes emerged within the idea of community: (1) for each, there was a personal commitment to the community with which they were involved; and (2) the desire to help or give back to the community that was social by nature, was also an underlying motivation for the co-curricular activity and civic engagement. When the participants identified a personally significant community, they became more involved in that community and developed civic engagement.

**Personal commitment to community.** Whether the LGBTQ or disability community or co-curricular activities for fellow students as a whole, the personal connection and commitment to the community was an underlying motivator and driving interest for participation in co-curricular activities. There was an underlying human-to-human connection that was the foundation of the community and relationships that were built into a community. Andrew said:

> I think community is important because I don’t think life is meant to live alone. Having other people to live life with is important. It’s not just necessarily living life with other people, but also people I get along well with, that you can care about and they can also care about you, and you can support each other.

Ava felt qualified to provide support to two groups of peers (LGBTQ and transfer students), given her past experiences with both of these transitions. She said, “This job was an outlet for me to extend my helping hand to students who are in the position I was once in.”

Andrew was motivated to form a disability club because he wanted to “have a networking group and a place where people can come and get support, and even network to some degree, just be a place to check in about where we were at during the quarter.” The club would create a
community for those with a similar disability, he said, “There would be a community, … getting to know other people, not only getting to care about what I was doing, but also about the people I was doing it with.”

Sophia’s community was not as specific, but she was still very committed to the community, “I saw that there was a great need in this community of individuals. I wanted to be a part of that, and I wanted to help in anyway that I could.” The connection with other people created building blocks of the community. For example, Jessica said, “You get to make these personal relationships with the individuals; you have a connection.” For Matthew, “I was looking for ways to get involved in different philanthropic endeavors and volunteer opportunities that fit my interests.” Those personal interests drove his personal commitment, Matthew added, “Areas that I was interested in, I was more keen to be able to get involved in those areas.” The motivation for civic engagement started with the participants’ personal interest and commitment to an individual or group of people.

**Helping and giving back.** The strongest civic engagement motivator to participate in co-curricular experiences and become more engaged with their identified community came from the idea of helping others or giving back to the community where they felt a social connection or personal commitment. The person-to-person connections and interactions were all structured on social situations, making friends, and using those groups of people as the basis for the community. For example, Matthew said, “It’s a group of people that care about each other and can help each other grow.” The shared experience resulted in deeper social connections and commitment to one another and the community. Elizabeth said she “wanted them to have the college experience that I had, I wanted to be a resource for people if they needed it.” Ava was strongly motivated “to give back and make sure that someone, anybody knows that I’m here; I
can guide them.” When describing the reason for this motivation to support and help those in the LGBTQ community, she said, “I didn’t have anyone there to support me. I want to be that support for other people.”

Participants all shared in their own way that a social connection with other people was the foundation of a community. Elizabeth said, “Then these friends, we were sharing that experience together, so we were much closer.” Friendships were created and sustained by “being a friend to support,” Jessica said. Underlying the idea of community for Jessica was the goal “to meet more people and to be more connected.” The civic engagement motivation to improve the circumstances for others in the community was forefront. Participants were motivated by the commitment to a community to make sure that others had resources, support, friendship, social connections, or a helping hand.

The concept of doing for others as you would want done for you was a common theme for civic engagement motivation. This idea was articulated as helping others as the participant would like to, or was helped. Elizabeth said, “I live a lot by I do for other people what I wish somebody would do for me. If I wish somebody would do that for me, I would definitely help them.” Helping others was described by Jessica as “put others before you” or the idea of “selflessness.” Matthew said:

> You have to be altruistic and put self aside a lot of times in life. I’m typically always willing to do that. …I wanted to give back. …I will always go out of my way and try to be altruistic to help other people.

Sophia said, “I think that’s the thing that I’m trying to balance, is maintaining that relationship and that connection with the individual … as well as trying to reach out to as many [people] as I can.”

The idea of helping others was an intrinsic motivator that was part of the character or
personality of these individuals, giving back to others because help had previously been provided to them. Elizabeth stated:

I wanted to get involved. That was one of my main goals, outside of the academic world for coming to college; I want[ed] to get involved. I want to meet people, friendships, connections, [and] networking, all of the above. … Everything that followed after that was influenced by my choice to get involved.

Elizabeth wanted to give back, “Giving back for me, is a lot about creating an environment that people want to be in, and they want to be here. I was determined to be that point of support for others.”

Jessica said something similar:

It goes back on who have I had in my life and how they played a role in my life as a mentor and seeing how huge of a impact that left on me and a huge imprint it left on me. How I can hopefully pass that on to someone else.

Matthew also added the idea of a long-term investment that was being made in other people, he said, “In the long run, it’s more important to help others than it is myself.” The investment of help now, which would have long-term consequences, was a goal and desire for him, “[It] all stems back to wanting to help and wanting to help someone, to help them benefit in life.”

Altruism, helping and giving back, was a bigger motivation for civic engagement for these participants than financial gain. For example, Sophia said, “I think so often people associate positive change in the world with money or creating organizations or institutions, but really it is just impacting one life at a time.” Participants discussed money as a skill, how to budget or allocate funds, or how to spend it wisely. Money was mentioned during event planning, or fundraising money for a philanthropic cause. Matthew said, “I was on the philanthropy committee for two years, so we created a new philanthropy.” He added, “I raised a bunch of money, and I had to set up a ton of different events specifically to raise money.”
However, money was never mentioned as a motivating factor for participation or engagement. For Sophia, money was specifically excluded as a value or driving factor in her overall values system, reasons for helping others, or future career goals, “If I don’t have money then money is not what defines me. It’s who I’m interacting with, it’s the relationships that I’m building and the connections that I’m making, that should [define me].” Matthew, who identified his future career goals were to be a contract lawyer in professional athletics, indicated philanthropy, giving back, and helping others as lifelong goals and motivators for his actions and behaviors. The motivation for co-curricular activities for the participants was not to achieve financial gain through their development of civic engagement.

All of the participants demonstrated a commitment to a community. Each community was different, but each was motivated to be involved, to give back, or to help others within that community. Civic engagement motivation was not driven by financial gain but rather through a sense of altruism. This commitment to a community that was personally significant defined civic engagement motivation.

**Theme Two: Improved Interpersonal, Communication, and Transferable Skills**

Across all participants, improved communication and interpersonal abilities with others were identified as skills developed through their co-curricular experiences. Examples included: talking to others, presenting to large or small audiences, working in teams, collaborating with others toward a shared goal, and developing and demonstrating leadership skills. These skills were developed outside of the classroom and were unique to the co-curricular experience.

Four specific sub-themes emerged: (1) leadership and mentorship; (2) communication inclusive of collaboration, conflict resolution, and public speaking; (3) working with others; and (4) tangible and transferable skills. All of the skills developed through co-curricular activities
and discussed in this section have interplay with one another as interpersonal skills that enhanced the participants’ abilities to work with other people.

**Leadership and mentorship.** Leadership was developed through co-curricular experiences and was an evolving skill. Leadership was a skill that took many different forms, but was identified as one of the most significant lessons from co-curricular activities that developed civic engagement skills. This may have started with being responsible for a small project or executing an event, or developed into leading a group and being responsible for training and supervising peers or initiating others into the group. This can be summarized in Matthew’s statement, “I began to take small [leadership] roles and then larger roles as I went on.”

For the participants, leadership evolved over time with the activity, and each developed a more complex view of leadership. Their definition and view of leadership evolved and expanded over time, as did their behaviors. Ava described her leadership style and leadership skills that were developed through the club, “I made everyone a core member and we used the skills that [they brought] to the table to help out and divide[d] the events or we [would] do one event each.” She described this as a strengths-based model of leadership where the “importance of interconnectedness of everyone” was acknowledged. Ava “took down the hierarchy” of the group in an effort to include all members in the leadership of the group. Ava observed, “I learned how to be a leader, but part of being in a leadership role, you learn when to step back.”

Andrew described his understanding of leadership, “I think leadership, in one way, could be coming up with a goal or a group of people, showing the group of people how to get to that goal.” Additionally, he “collaborated while leading this group, and we shared leadership in the group equally.”
Matthew described leadership as, “collaborate and lead others effectively; one must be able to listen, display humility, and react to challenging situations with patience, all while inspiring those around them.” He went on to describe the motivation of others that were part of leadership:

You have to find different ways to motivate the people that are already really invested into it, then a different way to someone who’s not, to try to get them to buy in and commit to something that we would like to tell them is bigger than themselves.

Over time, his leadership skills developed and grew in addition to “leading by example,” so that:

I’m trying to look at the situation and figure out whether I need to lead by example or if I need to take a more vocal role depending on the group, and the type of people, and the situation …[doing] a situational analysis and figure it out.

Jessica described for herself being a “leader not just for myself but for my peers as well.” She said her experience, “taught me to become a leader, but also being a leader, you learn how to step back a little bit.” Her leadership style evolved to now:

Putting it into their own hands of what they would like to see and what they would like to do, rather than me saying, ‘you do this or you do that.’ It’s a hands off way, but you’re still providing that …support.

Most of the participants described the idea that leadership developed into helping their peers learn how to be a leader in their own right. Sophia described her leadership style as “being a leader, but also being willing to step down and let other people take the reins if that’s where they excel.” Recognizing their own skills and talents and how that led to their ability to be a leader also developed into styles of leadership that were based on the personal connections with those in the community. Matthew said he “leverage[d] the talents, and skills, and personalities of people within the community because we all had something unique that we could really add.”

Leadership ranged from supporting and helping, to being a “point person” and supervisor,
as Elizabeth described. She said she “learned how to work with people on different, in different roles.” She learned how to be the leader, “responsible for hiring and training a new team of fourteen people,” but also “not lead the group, but be a contributing member instead.” She then took those leadership skills and translated them into supervising, “I knew how I liked to be supervised and how I felt in that position.” The evolution of leadership skills for the participants evolved from individual skills, to applying those skills to others so they could in turn learn to be a leader and eventually a supervisor.

For a few, leadership was also demonstrated as mentorship. Elizabeth said, “Mentoring is somebody who can share their experience, for the benefit of others.” Mentorship was another form of relationship and support, help, and a way to give back to those more junior. Jessica said:

A mentor, for me, is someone that you can always have a support to and have someone to lean onto if you have any questions at all. To really be a mentor for someone but also passing on that knowledge and the skills and seeing someone else grow from it would be, I hope, my biggest impact in society.

For Jessica, mentorship, like leadership, was about “passing on that knowledge and skills” to others. Mostly, leadership was about working with others and communicating with them and being able to translate those skills into different situations and circumstances. Improving their leadership and communication skills, and the interaction between these skills, emerged and grew during the course of co-curricular engagement. Leadership and mentorship are civic engagement skills, which are closely tied to communication skills.

**Communication and public speaking.** Communication skills included speaking with individuals, groups, peers, faculty, staff, customers, and more, and being comfortable having those conversations - both positive and negative. Jessica summed up her co-curricular experience as, “A lot of skills with communicating. Communicating [and] customer service.” Communication was also closely tied to confidence, being comfortable and knowledgeable in
that communication, as well as being able to deal with conflict that came through communication. Jessica described this as, “Knowing everything that you know and being comfortable explaining what you know.” For Andrew, “Dealing with the conflict … might be negative,” he said, but, “Having your arguments and not agreeing but still being able to resolve that conflict and dealing with and learning how to do that better for the future.” Exchanging verbal information with others, communication, was a civic engagement skill developed through co-curricular experience.

Public speaking was one very specific form of communication frequently discussed that was developed and increased through co-curricular experience. The ability to make presentations in front of others, small and large groups, as well as presenting in front of peers in classroom settings was a developed skill. Specifically, as a result of these experiences, Andrew was able to communicate “not just [to] my own peers but people higher up than I am,” including faculty, staff, parents, and administrators through “informal conversation and then a formal presentation.” He added, “Being able to interact with them [different people] and work to navigate those interactions” was a skill he had to develop. Jessica, too, talked about “being able to understand communication with different people of all ages,” and “not just communicating with students at college, but also their parents at orientation, which was different for me, but also working with staff members and professors.” Ava included the ability “to carry on a conversation,” communicate via email and in person, and “learn how to communicate with people [who have] a lot of . . . variations of communication.”

Most of the participants expressed fear or anxiety about speaking in front of others and through practice, advice from others, and having to “push through,” the fear was overcome and the skill developed, even mastered for a few. Elizabeth said:
I finally overcame the fear of public speaking and that was huge for me, of just being able to be up there, understanding what I was telling them and be comfortable in that environment, which I never thought possible. Because I did not like public speaking. I didn’t want to, but I pushed myself and we practiced so much that once I was up there, I was fine.

Ava described her ability to speak in front of groups: “Now, I’m just like, yeah, five minutes, nothing; 30 seconds, nothing; 20 minutes, nothing; an hour, maybe something, but I’ll do it.” Public speaking no longer gave her anxiety because she had spoken to various sized audiences throughout her experience. She said, “There’s less anxiety that used to prevent me from speaking before.” Verbally communicating information in front of an audience, large or small, was a civic engagement skill developed through co-curricular experiences.

Public speaking and the skills of communication were developed and improved through co-curricular experiences. These communication skills are important in civic engagement, as they are combined with leadership skills to demonstrate the ability to work with others.

Working with others. All of these skills come together when working with others. Whether it was collaboration, teamwork, or sharing leadership, all of the interpersonal and communication skills came together as the ability to work with others. Matthew said, “I’m able to always find common ground.” Jessica said, “Working with other people has helped me really work together with a team,” which is a skill that is applicable to other situations and circumstances. These experiences, Jessica said, “Taught me the importance of working in a group setting to accomplish goals.”

Working with others, particularly on a team, developed the ability to work together and collaborate. Ava explained, “I’ve learned the importance of the interconnectedness of everyone and everyone’s job.” And with that interconnectedness, she added, comes “collaborating with other people, playing nice, even when you don’t get your way.” Sophia said, “Teamwork and
just being willing to be gracious and to be patient with people …were some of the biggest skills I learned.”

Additionally, working with differing opinions is a form of communication and conflict management, but also an interpersonal skill that encompasses all of the others together. Sophia said:

I guess for mutual respect, it’s just that tolerance or that willingness to say even though we might have differing opinions; I’m still going to listen to you. I’m still going to respect where your thoughts are coming from and how this is forming you as an individual or where this is coming from in your life.

Matthew said, “I was willing to work with other people and find common ground where you can find [agreement] to actually get something done.” For Matthew, working with all of these different people increased his “ability to really read people and situations really quickly.”

Elizabeth learned a wide range and variety of communication skills. These skills then allowed her to develop other skills including, “[how] to have that difficult conversation,” “how to stay calm and be a resource,” “adaptability,” and “making [customers] feel welcome and accepted.”

Working with others also stretched from peers or co-workers, to faculty and staff on campus, or guests and customers. The ability to adapt communication skills to different environments and work settings, including the classroom, was built through co-curricular experiences and contributed to the skills needed for civic engagement.

**Transferable and tangible skills.** In addition to the improved communication and interpersonal skills discussed in the previous sections, co-curricular activities also nurtured tangible transferable skills that are ideally placed on a resume, discussed in an interview, or translated to other situations. As Elizabeth put it, these are skills that demonstrate “proof that you’ve done it.” These specific skills were developed through co-curricular activities, and they can be replicated in additional contexts and locations. They are transferable and they are an
important part of demonstrating mastery of civic engagement skills and implementing those skills in different settings. The specific skills identified most were event planning, time management, marketing, and budgeting.

**Event planning.** The skill of event planning included many steps and was developed through trial and error; one cannot say they have the skill unless they have actually gone through the exercise of demonstrating that skill. As many participants articulated, much goes into planning an event, it is not as easy as initially believed, and many events are much more complicated to execute. For example, Elizabeth commented:

> I think a lot of people go into event planning thinking, oh, I’ll just invite whoever we’re having come and it will go fine. That’s not how it works. It was eye opening to be like, you have to have food. You have to have marketing and all of this stuff that completes an event.

Matthew said, “but you still have to be flexible enough because there’s always things that are going to come up and you have to be able to think quickly on your feet.” Ava described that initially she would “wait ‘til a week [before] to try to set everything up and then realizing not everyone answers their emails as fast as I do,” which led to the troubling realization that “all of a sudden a week has passed, we had to keep moving the date.” She learned from those experiences to improve her timing and planning skills.

Jessica explained, “With event planning, it was like, where do we want to take the students? What are the learning outcomes? Then going on the phone with different companies and trying to figure out a contract.” Until participants actually had the experience of planning and executing an event, they could not accurately describe the steps or process required for event planning. Without actually executing an event during co-curricular experiences, they would not have described this as a skill they developed. Event planning put participants’ communication and leadership skills into action and offered the opportunity to put their civic engagement
motivation and skills into practice.

**Time management.** Event planning encompasses attention to details, time management, and working with other people. Elizabeth said, “Getting people together in an organized fashion, and having everything go smoothly is so much harder than it sounds. It takes so much more work than you think it does.” These events were all part of the co-curricular experience, which meant that these responsibilities were an additional part of their daily or weekly obligations, in addition to attending class. This meant that if participants wanted to get good grades and be civically engaged, they had to manage their time wisely. Matthew said, “It’s always very time sensitive because you’ve always got other things because you’re in school and you’re doing things that also are taking your focus.” Time management became key to being successful in planning events and planning their lives. Ava described event planning and time management:

Time management [is] keeping track of everything that you need to keep track of. I mean, to do a simple movie night, you need to get copyrights, so you need to email somebody for that. … you need other people to help you … just keeping track of everything. Time management so that you can do everything in a timely fashion.

Most of the participants saw these two skills as separate – event planning and time management. However, they are complementary skills since event planning required forethought, communication and leadership; and it was through event planning that participants recognized the need for better time management. These skills were building blocks of civic engagement skills that would be useful to the participants in future experiences.

**Marketing.** Through event planning, marketing skills were also developed. In this case, marketing included posters, flyers, social media, and other promotional methods to encourage attendance at the planned event. Andrew said:

We would also make flyers with all the needed information, like the time, place, location, kind of the information that you need to know to what was going to go on during the group. We would make those flyers, have them printed out, and then we’d go around and
put those up around campus, so we could advertise for the group.

Ava described the purpose of marketing as “making sure you can reach the students.” Overall, understanding the purpose and value of marketing as an integral piece of success in event planning was understood. While it was acknowledged that marketing was important, not all felt like it was a skill they mastered; for example, Elizabeth said, “Marketing was the hardest part for me because I’m not good with graphic design and the visual aspects of it.” Participants developed basic understanding and skills around marketing but did not feel mastery of the skill such that it could be claimed and replicated in another situation. However, they recognized the importance and could discuss the skill, the importance of marketing, and the steps involved. Marketing is another building block in civic engagement skills.

**Budgeting.** The ability to budget was another skill promoted through event planning. For most, this was identified as a skill, but not one they felt confident in applying to other situations. In many cases, it was the communication associated with budgeting, speaking to vendors or communicating with the team or supervisors that was identified as the more transferable skill. Elizabeth said, “Communicating with them [vendors], was more of a skill that I feel like I [developed].” Budgeting was specifically about “go through a budget and decide on how to allocate money” for Andrew. For Matthew, it was “figuring out what things are going to cost and actually sticking to it.”

In these cases, it was about allocating funds, spending money, and not going over the allotted dollar amount. Budgeting, like marketing, was closely tied to event planning and all three skills had a grounding in communication and working with others. All were skills that could be put on a resume and listed as skills developed through co-curricular experiences. The development of specific and transferable skills was one of the positives of participating in a co-
curricular activity and helped build the foundation for ongoing civic engagement skills.

**Summary of theme two.** Across all participants, improved communication and interpersonal abilities with others were identified as skills developed through their co-curricular experiences. These skills are all relevant for future experiences and are foundational civic engagement skills. Leadership and communication were closely tied as skills that allowed participants to work with others. Tangible and transferable skills such as public speaking, event planning, marketing and budgeting were developed and improved through co-curricular experiences and contributed to the building blocks of civic engagement skills. Since these skills are all interconnected and apply to one another, they can be replicated in the future. The skills were for the purpose of serving others, they complement and enhance other civic engagement skills developed through co-curricular experiences.

**Theme Three: Connecting Learning in and out of the Academic Classroom**

Making meaning between the learning happening in the academic curriculum and the learning in co-curricular experiences was a key takeaway from participant experiences. Identifying how the two areas reinforced and enhanced their individual learning, personal growth and development of civic engagement were demonstrated by participants. Participants were able to unite the skills fostered in their co-curricular experiences in their academic curriculum and vice versa. They identified how the different methods of learning reinforced and enhanced their overall academic experience. Individual learning and personal growth led to civic engagement. The interplay between co-curricular experiences, skills developed through those experiences, and the connection to the academic curriculum reinforced the development of civic engagement motivation and skills during the undergraduate experience.

Connecting learning in the academic classroom and learning in co-curricular experiences
was reciprocal, and things learned in each area were applicable to the other. Ava summarized the connection between in and out-of-class experiences:

I think there’s so much you can do in the classroom. You can learn about how to do things, you can maybe do an exercise or two, but applying them is a different story, and that’s where I think activities outside the classroom come in, where you can apply what you’ve learned and actually see it play through.

Sophia identified “understanding and listening [to others] …the teamwork aspect has definitely been applicable [to the academic classroom].” She described how the connections between in and out of classroom learning could help an individual she was working with, “It was kind of cool, actually, seeing how I could pull from some of the ways that I learn [in class] to incorporate them and create a better learning experience for the student [where she volunteered].”

In the classroom, Jessica would “work with other teachers to form curriculum, share classroom activities, and teach my students how to work with one another.” At the museum, Jessica “would come up with [her] own curriculum based on the core standards of elementary education.” The participants experienced greater learning when they had to apply theoretical concepts learned in an academic classroom into real-world actions. The reinforcement of learning between the academic and co-curricular settings developed a greater commitment to civic engagement. The application of knowledge and the translation between settings reinforced not only the learning, but also the commitment to civic engagement motivation.

In particular, the ability to work with others directly correlated to group work in the academic setting; being able to communicate with a wide variety of people, navigate conflict, make presentations, and collaborate with others were directly taken from the co-curricular experience back into the academic setting. Leading the co-curricular groups translated into the classroom. Andrew described it as:
In a class it could be like we’re broken up into smaller groups, and then I could potentially step up and lead the small group, ...I think it made my college experience better. I got to know people and that also impact(ed) my grades as well in some way and my in-class participation.

Matthew said:

It’s like a group project. As much as you get annoyed with people, you still have to work with them; and you can’t just do it on your own because it defeats the entire purpose of the group project itself.

Being able to work with others in groups or teams, as well as being prepared to make presentations in class, was easier because participants had developed and practiced their leadership and communication skills and developed an ability to work with others in co-curricular activities and settings.

The ability to apply what was taught in the classroom to the out of class experience made the theory and learning come to life. Ava summarized the connection between in and out of class experiences by saying, “Until you go outside and do it, you’re not going to stumble and fall, you’re not going to actually do it and apply what you’ve learned.” Sophia also articulated the connection between co-curricular and academic learning:

Most of my skills that I learned outside of the university setting I can definitely directly see here [in teaching], especially the ability to make connections across the two different spheres in my life, seeing how they interact and how what I’m learning here in the classroom and in textbook can be brought to life and vice versa.

For some, the out of classroom experience was more valuable in their overall growth and learning. Elizabeth said:

The skills I have obtained both inside and outside the classroom have proven to be equally beneficial, providing me with an assortment of skills and abilities I can pull from in the future. I almost think that my outside of classroom work was more valuable than my in classroom because I learned so many skills.

The reinforcement of learning between co-curricular and academic settings was evident and resulted in a better, “well rounded” college experience for these participants. Civic
engagement developed in these participants because they were able to apply their academic learning to another context or setting, and vice versa. They also brought skills developed in co-curricular activities to the classroom. The reinforcement of learning between the two settings created a depth of knowledge and learning. The application of learning between the classroom and the co-curricular settings allowed civic engagement understanding to develop.

**Theme Four: Increased Self-Efficacy, Purpose, and Career Goals**

Theme four represents overall effects; co-curricular experiences resulted in personal growth and development for these individuals, which included specific skills as well as personal characteristics. Sub themes included personal values, professional development, and stronger career goals. The participants experienced increased self-efficacy; they refined their values and career goals, and had an improved self-awareness. These resulted in a sense of civic engagement identity as evidenced by their motivation and commitment to community and skill development that translated between contexts.

**Personal values.** Each participant had different life circumstances and values that motivated and informed their thinking and action associated with civic engagement. All of the participants had a values-driven motivation. For example, Sophia had religious motivators that came from her parents; Sophia identified religion and religious ideas as contributing to her values as an external influence that drove internal motivation:

> I definitely learned that from my parents and I’m pretty sure that stems from religion. …One of the things that I really try to live by is that in all things, I should be humble and be willing to put others as a priority over myself. It’s not necessarily all about doing good deeds …Again, my religion’s kind of connecting to the individual. It’s just something that I do. I know that religion definitely plays a lot into it.
Matthew had a commitment to altruism learned from his mother, but his values were more intrinsically motivated. He said, “Not lose sight of the broader purpose and bigger picture of where I want to go with my own life and how I want to treat people.”

Elizabeth was motivated to develop and assert her independence and prove to herself and her parents that she was capable. She wanted to demonstrate the skill as well as the motivation of independence through her co-curricular experiences. She developed independence as a result of her experience, specifically the study abroad. She said, “I got more independent through the experience.” The study abroad was “my chance to experience the freedom of traveling and prove to myself that I could thrive on my own in an unfamiliar country.” Independence was a skill Elizabeth felt she had, but the study abroad allowed her to “prove” it to her parents and herself. She added, “We traveled so much that the learning was traveling.”

Internal and external values drove civic engagement motivation and activities. Values were unique to each participant’s circumstance, personality, experience, and goals and their values were important motivators for co-curricular involvement. Those same personal values were why they stayed involved in the co-curricular activities, developed skills and together those all come together to develop civic engagement motivation and skills with the goals of improving a community and giving back to others within that community. The civic engagement motivation became a value of importance for participants.

An underlying motivator, which for some was more overt than others, was the idea of passion and being passionate about what they were doing. The participants were having fun either with other people, or the co-curricular activities themselves were fun, which together provided a sense of joy and happiness for the overall motivation of further civic engagement.

Motivation came from passion for people, helping, giving back, or for the community
they were serving. In a few instances, the passion resulted in career motivation. For example, Jessica said, “I found my passion for working with people,” “realizing what my passion is started with all these experiences.” For Ava, it was about the cause, “I was passionate for the underrepresented populations, an advocate for the LGBTQ, a mentor for the first-generation students.” For Sophia, the two came together as a “passion for education.” Jessica summed it up by saying, “I think my passion is described as what I’m interested in and what I want to pursue.”

Passion and being passionate is best described as strong emotions or feelings as a motivator for their civic engagement. Without passion, the motivation to stay involved in the community and develop civic engagement would not have been present.

The feelings associated with co-curricular experiences included fun, happiness, and joy. Co-curricular experiences were enjoyable, and participants were happy when engaging in the activity or with the result of the activity. Ava gave a definition, “fun: something I like doing.” The enjoyment came from being with others in the community for Elizabeth, “It was so fun to be here and to be around everyone” and watch others learn. She said, “I just think it’s so fun to see that realization of, either an accomplishment or something that they learned.”

Many of the positive feelings came from acknowledgement or accolades from others in the community. Jessica mentioned how a simple thank you, “Made me feel nice that they would say thank you to me,” a gesture or acknowledgement that “warmed my heart.” While the acknowledgement was not sought out or requested, the positive feelings that were created, the happiness, the joy in helping someone else contributed to the civic engagement motivation to continue the activities; and it provided positive reinforcement that giving back was meaningful to others in the community. This positive feedback and reinforcement of civic engagement added further commitment to civic engagement.
**Professional development.** Professional development skills included not only learning about professionalism, but also learning and identifying what it means to be a professional. Many of the co-curricular experiences allowed the participants to act as a representative of the greater community or organization, thus forcing them to reframe their thinking from being a student to being a professional. Sophia said:

> Definitely professionalism has been the biggest one for me, because I’ve been trying to figure out, coming straight out of high school and launching into college, and figuring out what professionalism actually is as an adult; learning how to transition into a professional role and seeing what that was like.

Jessica discussed learning how to be professional as:

> Being yourself, but just being a professional side. Just being comfortable in your own skin, I would say. When I think about how to dress professional, I …think about how would you want to be represented, but also not being a different version of yourself, but being what you’re comfortable with.

Jessica described being professional as being “mature,” and “confident”, while Sophia described professional as “responsible,” “respectful and respected.” Confidence came when there was acknowledgement that they had skills, which could be used and applied, and they were respected for demonstrating those skills. For Jessica, “confidence, but also knowing what skills I have and being able and being confident to use those skills.”

Combining personal growth and development skills with the specific skills - such as event planning, marketing, and public speaking - resulted in having greater networking and interviewing skills. Both personal growth and development and specific skill sets came from communication, leadership, and the ability to work with others; this resulted in the application of those skills for personal career development. Informational interviews, networking, and references were all easier because of the skills developed through co-curricular experiences.

Networks with other people were created for both personal and professional purposes and
increased the sense of community. Ava said, “I think a lot of the volunteer work and the networking has taught me how to network. I guess I learned the importance of networking.” Jessica said, “I think connection and networking is definitely the biggest takeaway.” Andrew stated, “Networking, in a sense, in a basic form, could be said to be getting to know other people, which is what you do when you get involved.” He added, “I guess in just about all of these I got to know people like in different fields and different areas.”

Since networking and communicating skills were improved, translating the experience into an interview was an easy next step. Elizabeth said her leadership and supervision experience, “allowed me to see the way employers think during an interview and the ways in which I should conduct myself in future interviews,” which in the future, she said:

Helped immensely to be able to know how to translate the skills I already had to what they were looking for. …I know resumes are important, but I didn’t realize how important they were, until I started interviewing and hiring people …It helped immensely to be able to know how to translate the skills I already had to what they were looking for.

Co-curricular experiences developed personal career development tools and resources that will be beneficial in lifelong learning and post-graduation endeavors. The transition from student to professional happened through co-curricular experiences; the interaction with supervisors, staff, and other professionals allowed the participants to have demonstrated what a professional looked and acted like. Co-curricular experiences allowed the opportunity for participants to develop an individual definition of professional and professionalism that demonstrates a commitment to civic engagement.

**Strengthened career goals.** The connection and interplay between co-curricular experiences, interests, community, and future career goals was evident for most participants. All of the participants were able to make a connection between their post-graduation career goals and how their co-curricular experiences connected both directly and indirectly. Some examples
were more direct: Sophia planned to become a teacher and contribute to society through education and had her co-curricular activities in the classroom. Others were more indirect: Matthew developed communication skills with those who had different points of view and civil discourse, which will help him in a future legal career.

In some cases, it was the experience that led to identifying career goals, and for others it was the career goal that led to the interest and seeking out of the co-curricular experience. Andrew found a career goal, “With doing the disability awareness group, that kind of opened my eyes to wanting to go into that kind of work and help people with disabilities in some way during my career.” While Elizabeth’s motivation was based on her career choice, “I volunteer [in the] hospital setting, but that was career and life path [focused].” However, it was directly because of her co-curricular experiences that a career goal was confirmed for Elizabeth, “The study abroad helped me narrow down and see what I really wanted to do.” Combining these skills, Jessica planned to pursue a career in education, “I have been pushed as a student and as a learner [in the academic classroom], and look forward to [using] these skills to help both my students and peers grow as a person.”

The ability to create meaning out of these experiences has future implications for civic engagement understanding. The experiences had purpose and value to these individuals, and they will continue to be important for them in the future. The academic and co-curricular experiences reinforced the future career goals of participants. This increased the importance of co-curricular experiences to the participants because they were deeply motivated, engaged, and passionate about their co-curricular experiences. The ability to make meaning and connections between personal values and career goals contributed to civic engagement motivation and ultimately an understanding and commitment to continued civic engagement in the future.
Summary of Findings

This chapter presented the findings of this qualitative research study on co-curricular engagement by liberal arts graduates. All participants were recent liberal arts major graduates between the ages of twenty and twenty-four. Individual participant profiles and descriptions were used to provide context for the four central themes that emerged from the participant narratives used in this hermeneutic phenomenological study.

Recent graduates who participated in the research described the civic engagement that occurred during their university years as having developed by:

- Identifying, participating in, and shaping a community that was personally significant.
- Improving interpersonal, communication, and transferable skills through co-curricular experiences.
- Connecting learning, in and out of the academic classroom, through co-curricular experiences.
- Increasing self-efficacy, purpose, and career goals through co-curricular experiences.

The following chapter analyzes these themes in relationship to the relevant literature and to the theoretical framework. Implications of the findings, limitations of the research study, and recommendations for further research will also be discussed.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This qualitative research study sought to understand the individual experiences of each participant and their unique experience, perspectives, and interpretations regarding co-curricular activities, activities outside of the academic curriculum, and how those activities contributed to their development of civic engagement. Civic engagement is a broad term and for the purpose of this study was defined as “how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241). The following section will discuss the findings in light of the conceptual framework of Colby et al. (2003) and the relevant literature. Implications for professional practice, limitations of the study, and ideas for future research will also be discussed.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Conceptual Framework

Colby et al.’s (2003) conceptual framework of civic engagement was used as background and to frame the research study. It was also used to think about the findings and themes that emerged from the data. The conceptual framework had three categories of moral and civic understanding, motivation, and skills (p. xv). Colby et al. (2003) discussed how these dimensions of moral and civic engagement do not develop in students independently from one another; rather, they are fluid and intersecting; they support one another and evolve together. Students cannot develop in one area without developing in the others. The findings of this study reinforced the idea of each category working together to reinforce the development of the other; one category could not be developed independently of the others.

Moral and Civic Understanding

Colby et al. (2003) broke down the first category of moral and civic understanding into three sub-categories: moral judgment, moral interpretation and moral knowledge. This category
is the most difficult to address in light of the findings of this study. Participants did not use the language of civic or moral engagement or understanding. Therefore, this must be inferred through the language, conceptual framework, and Alder and Goggin’s (2005) definition of civic engagement. Moral, or the idea of right and wrong, is open for individual interpretation and definition. The participants in the study all had an idea of doing the “right” thing and believed they were “giving back” or “helping others” because it was the “right” thing to do given their moral structures and definitions. Each participant had their own idea of morality and how they thought about doing the “right” thing for their community; this would infer an understanding and commitment to moral and civic engagement as described by Colby et al. (2003).

**Moral judgment.** Colby et al.’s (2003) definition of moral judgment was based on how people think and understand moral issues and make decisions, rather than on the dualistic view of right and wrong (p. 102). Much of the discussion Colby et al. used to describe moral judgment was based on Kohlberg’s stages of moral development theory (1971). The third stage of Kohlberg’s theory is the ability to understand the influence and effect of community in their moral thinking (Colby et al., 2003, p. 102). For the participants, community was a large and very important part of their motivation. While “community” was defined differently for each participant, there was a community of people that each participant was “giving back to” and for whom they believed they were morally obligated to do the “right” thing by “giving back” or “helping.”

**Moral interpretation.** The crux of Colby et al.’s (2003) definition of moral interpretation is the ability to reflect on one’s actions or behavior and make meaning of why they were participating and for what purpose. Colby et al. (2003) described a process of reflection, both self-reflection and discussion with others to stimulate moral growth. The authors described
some cases where individuals would stop and intentionally think and then process. For others, moral decisions occurred spontaneously, where actions and decisions were made without stopping to think reflectively. All of the participants in this study made a reflective and thoughtful decision to participate in an activity. Participants described a well thought out motivation, either for personal growth or to “give back” to a group that influenced their initial decision. However, once engaged in the activity of choice, the decisions of what to do, why to do that activity, or for what purpose, seemed to become more spontaneous. Based on the two processes described by Colby et al (2003), the participant behavior in this study was more about the morality of doing the right thing, rather than being reflective and thoughtful on what the right thing was.

**Moral knowledge.** Colby et al. (2003) described moral knowledge as critical thinking and analysis skills, or the ability to apply lessons learned in one area to a different issue or topic area. Participants in this study described developing skills in one activity that either allowed them to engage in another more complex activity or situation, or apply skills from one activity to another. They provided specific examples of skills and knowledge that they applied across the curricular and co-curricular spheres, and how an out-of-class experience influenced or reinforced the learning from their academic classrooms. Three participants provided examples of study abroad and volunteering, which allowed for deep and meaningful critical thinking and analysis of the academic subject matter they were studying. This reinforced their academic and career goals and decision making, which met the definition of Colby et al.’s moral knowledge.

**Moral and civic understanding summary.** The section of moral and civic understanding was the most difficult to analyze in light of the findings and the participants’ experiences due to the subjective nature of this category. While Colby et al. (2003) provided
descriptions of the behavior or understanding of the concepts that make up moral and civic understanding by giving three sub-categories previously discussed, these are all based on the individual’s interpretation of the concept of “right and wrong.” In this study, participants demonstrated a commitment to moral and civic understanding through their behaviors and actions. Each participant believed they were doing the right thing based on their individual definition of right and wrong. Only time will tell if that understanding translates into a lifelong commitment.

**Motivation**

Colby et al. (2003) described the motivation dimension as “having the motivation to do the right thing … individual goals and values, interests, commitments, convictions and the ability to persevere in the face of challenges. It also includes a sense of efficacy and emotions such as compassion, hope, and inspiration” (p. 99). Motivation required students to be able to articulate their values, goals, and convictions, and then to demonstrate their actions, commitment, and convictions through behavior or skills (the next category). Giving back to a community motivated participants in this study. Each participant defined his or her community differently, but it was always related to the individual sharing similar interests or purpose with the chosen group. The personal commitment that drove the motivation to “help” and “give back” to a community was about a human connection. Social connections were made through the community and included friendship, but also included shared values and interests. Their motivation led to actions towards those goals, interests, and purpose to help others within the community.

Colby et al. (2003) discussed emotions such as compassion, hope and inspiration as motivating behaviors. While emotions and feelings were a substantial motivator for participants,
they were different emotions than Colby et al. (2003) articulated. These participants described emotions of fun, passion and joy. Without fun, happiness, and the feeling that what they were doing was enjoyable, the initial motivation to participate, or continue to participate, in an activity might not have been as positive. Participants described positive feelings and the relationship the feelings had on their motivation and participation in their co-curricular activities. Colby et al.’s (2003) defining language for this category was met, as well. Participants did talk about compassion for others, a hope to improve the situation or circumstance of others; and for a few, the goal of inspiring others to their individual potential or to “pay it forward” and help others. Participants were strongly motivated to do “the right thing” as Colby et al. described (2003), but for each person the right thing had a different meaning.

Values and goals. Colby et al. (2003) described the process whereby a student changes, modifies, or refines their goals based on the learning experiences that challenge, affirm, or alter their value system. The authors make a distinction between participating in an activity or event for personal enjoyment versus participating for a common goal. Given this definition, many participants did change or modify their goals based on the co-curricular experiences they had, which in most cases were professional or career related. For most participants, the initial goal and motivation for participation in the co-curricular activities developed into a moral goal of impacting a system or structure of the larger community to serve more people. For many, the goal of helping others began as helping the individual; and, while that continued to be a goal, the motivation to help one person grew to help many people. Examples of this larger group for these participants included the university student body and non-profit groups that served a larger geographic region. For participants who had co-curricular experiences redefine their professional values and goals, it was in a direction that allowed their professional work to be
driven by values in service to a larger community (e.g. the disability community, education, and health care).

Colby et al. (2003) also identified that “values include respect and tolerance for others, including social minorities, respect for civil liberties and other key elements of U.S. democracy, and an interest in politics and in contributing to positive social change, however that is defined” (p. 113). Participants described an increased understanding of others that was social, cultural, socio-economic, geographic, and related to ability. However, none of the participants discussed or identified political or democratic understanding as part of their interest, motivation, or outcomes through co-curricular engagement. There was a strong understanding and motivation to have social change or to impact others within their defined community, but that does not align with Colby et al.’s (2003) description of democracy and politics. For the participants in this study, the concepts of democracy and political interests were not forefront in their thinking or actions.

**Moral and civic identity.** Identity is the intersection of values and goals, which impact actions through personal identification and sense of identity, according to Colby et al. (2003). The participants developed a sense of self and identity through their values and actions, specifically personal growth in skills and professional development. For a few participants, this was identified as understanding or creating a personal definition of “professionalism” and what it means to them to be professional and to work in a professional environment. For others, it was identifying what and how their parents had influenced their values, goals, and decision making, and how they were going to align with those parental influences or identify their own path as they created their own identity.
Political efficacy and moral and civic emotions. Colby et al. (2003) described political efficacy and moral and civic emotions as not only caring about issues or having a value or belief in a particular moral and civic topic, but students must also believe they can influence change and make a difference through their actions. All of the participants believed they could effect change through their actions and behavior for the individual or the community in which they were serving and working. Each cared deeply about the individuals or community to which they were committed and believed their involvement or engagement would serve the greater good of that community in a positive way. Colby et al. (2003) described a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment through the action alone; the process is just as valuable or meaningful as the end result. Participants described their involvement as “fun” and “enjoyable,” to see others grow, change, and develop as a result of their actions, behavior and involvement. However, Colby et al. (2003) specifically identified political efficacy as an indicator; and as identified earlier, the participants in this research study did not identify political interest and values as important to them nor did they mention the word politics at all. They did, however, have strong emotions that resulted in conviction and motivation.

Skills or Expertise

Moral and civic understanding and motivation come together in the Colby et al. (2003) conceptual framework when students demonstrate knowledge and motivation through actions and behavior. All three categories and sub-categories combine to create the overall concept of civic engagement. Colby et al. (2003) provided examples of skills to demonstrate moral and civic ability as “well-developed capacity for effective communication, including moral and political discourse, skills in political participation, the capacity to work effectively with people, including those who are very different from oneself, and the ability to organize other people for
action” (p. 100). The authors further elaborated by adding, “Specifically the ability to communicate effectively and to organize and work with other people, both persuading and leading others and knowing how to compromise when necessary without abandoning their convictions” (p. 128).

Participants developed a wide variety of skills; however, none of those skills were specifically about political discourse or political participation. All of the developed skills were associated with working effectively with people, communicating with people of all different skill levels and hierarchy, and communicating in many different forms (e.g. one-on-one conversations, small groups, presentations to large and small audiences, written communication, and more). Key takeaways frequently mentioned were the ability to work with many different people in groups of varying sizes, and to lead those groups through a wide variety of leadership skills. Specifically, participants described how to alter their leadership style to be effective and meaningful for the given group.

This adaptability in leadership and communication is the heart of what Colby et al. (2003) described as civic engagement skills: the ability to critically think across situations and contexts and then apply that learning to current situations and lead others in effecting change. The development of these skills further advances a sense of efficacy, which leads to a greater sense of self, and in turn, a greater level of involvement and engagement. Participants were articulate in describing how the skills that were developed and learned through co-curricular engagement increased their sense of self and self-efficacy, confidence, and sense of purpose to the individual, the community, and their own personal growth. As Colby et al. (2003) described, it is through skill development that all the other dimensions of moral and civic engagement are developed. Through skills and motivation come civic and moral understanding and commitment.
This study demonstrated that many skills were developed through co-curricular experiences, and there was a deep motivation that was personal and community focused. However, the deep understanding of how these combine together to have civic engagement understanding is not yet present. Given Kohlberg’s five stages of cognitive development, in which Colby et al. (2003) grounded their conceptual framework, it can be stated that these recent college graduates had not yet reached stage five. To reach stage five of Kohlberg’s cognitive development as it related to civic engagement, a depth of reflection and meaning making must be present, along with an understanding of the political and democratic system and how the interplay of the legal system and human rights affect the global community. Participants were very focused on a smaller, local or personal community and how their skills and motivation could affect that system, most reflective of stage four in Kohlberg’s theory, but they had not expanded their thinking, reflection, and understanding to the global democratic system of human rights and common good, stage five.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to Relevant Literature**

In this section the findings of this study are compared to the reviewed literature on civic engagement. While no literature was found that explored the individual student experience through a qualitative study, this research study aimed to contribute to the body of scholarly literature relating to co-curricular experiences and civic engagement. As such, this section will embed this study into the following streams of civic engagement literature: definition and understanding of civic engagement, student learning and skill development related to civic engagement, the role of community in civic engagement, and service learning as an academic tool to develop civic engagement.
Definition of Civic Engagement

As stated in chapter two, the civic engagement literature is grounded in the philosophical ideas of John Dewey. John Dewey, an education philosopher, wrote about learning by doing (Dewey, 1916; Checkoway, 2001; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Rhoades, 1998). Civic engagement philosophy is founded on the idea of learning an abstract idea through the action of physically doing something to reinforce the learning. The literature review described the national call for educating students for the public good and for students to “learn by doing” in an intentional way (Caputo, 2005; Furco, 2010). This was centered on students learning the abstract concept of civic engagement by applying the theoretical or academic subject matter to the practical, or action and act of doing.

The definition and idea of civic engagement has been broadened from Dewey’s idea of learning by doing and the historical ideas of serving the common good (Dorn, 2011; Ostrander, 2004; Rhoades, 1998; Thelin, 2011). Now, civic engagement assumes that students have an understanding of complex social issues, community and environmental impact, social justice, personal reflection, and development (Pollack & Motoike, 2006). This much larger definition of civic engagement cannot be the result of a singular experience, either curricular or co-curricular, but is a result of the entire educational experience, inclusive of the learning inside and outside of the classroom, personal growth, and individual learning. Participants identified many of these dimensions of learning, but not all were included in this study or can be understood through a limited qualitative research process. The idea of civic engagement developing in students is deep, complex, and lifelong, rather than confined to the collegiate experience.

Civic engagement is also grounded in the idea of community. This study used the definition of civic engagement as “how an active citizen participates in the life of a community
in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241). How each participant was involved in their community, both on an individual and group level, met this definition of civic engagement. The participants in the study defined community differently from one another, and the motivation to improve the conditions for others was grounded in their definitions of community. Participants were engaged in meaningful ways in their communities. Civic engagement occurs at the intersection of teaching, education, community, research, and service within a community (Bringle, et al, 2007). The intersection of learning between curricular and co-curricular experience happened at the confluence of action where participants were learning by doing.

**Student Learning and Skill Development**

The reviewed literature about civic engagement identified multiple dimensions of student learning and how the sum total of all experiences results in the broad idea of student learning and cognitive development. The literature focused on skill development as a demonstration of student learning.

Much of the reviewed literature concentrated on research studies that focus on one activity, such as public speaking or community service, and how they promote civic engagement (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Moely, et al, 2008; Palmer & Standerfer, 2004; Rhoades, 1998). This study, instead, focused on the skills developed through the entirety and variety of co-curricular experience(s) and then examined how the total of developed skills could be related to civic engagement. The study revealed that many skills were interconnected and related to one another. No single skill could be seen to develop independently of other skills. The total experience created a plethora of skills that had interplay, development, and meaning to the entire student learning experience. Participants’ abilities to learn about civic engagement through skill
development was a result of all these skills being put into practice for the purpose of the greater activity, motivation, or goal. Participants did not choose to engage in co-curricular activities and were not motivated by skill development; rather, it was an added benefit and part of the greater outcome.

The results of this study demonstrate that studies focused on one activity related to civic engagement are not all that useful. While they may lead to “statistically significant” results for the authors, they do not lead to greater understanding of a complex, interrelated topic like civic engagement. This study demonstrates the complexity of the entire curricular and co-curricular experience as being interconnected and related to the development of civic engagement understanding, motivation and skills.

Community

The reviewed literature identified the role community plays in civic engagement. In the literature, students indicated that they wanted to be involved with their community and they participated in service to the community (Sax, 2004). This was reinforced through the research study; participant motivation was about a community group and service or “giving back” to that community. The study identified the participants’ varying definitions of “community” and “service.” For each participant, the terms had individual meanings.

While the literature identified an overarching statement about community, it did not identify the individual meaning of these terms or how community was a driving motivator for individuals. Additionally, the reviewed literature uses an academic definition of these words that did not always align with the participants’ information in the study. For example, the literature suggested that students who participated in community service activities, voluntary non-curricular structured activities of choice, learn about the community at large and the values of
social justice (Rhoades, 1998). It referred to community as the overall environment or group of people; however, participants identified community as a specific group of people with whom they individually identified or saw themselves as a member. The literature identified a greater goal of social justice, but the participants did not identify the same community goal. For the participants, it was on the individual level. As the literature presents, community is a large part of civic engagement. This study demonstrated the type of community and the relevance to the individual to be the key issue for participants. It is not enough to just be involved in a community as the literature and previous studies have demonstrated, but the type of community and the value that community holds for the individual that makes it relevant to civic engagement understanding, motivation and skills.

**Service Learning**

Service learning is grounded in the academic learning of a course. It involves applying the topic and subject matter of an academic course, or the academic learning, to the community. Service learning is commonly referred to as “problem based learning” and “community based learning” (Sax, 2004). For this study, service-learning experiences were intentionally excluded, while co-curricular experiences were the primary focus. However, it is important to discuss the findings of the research study in relation to the literature on service learning because both activities have many of the same outcomes; this indicates the civic engagement development through co-curricular experiences can be as meaningful as through academic service learning.

The literature that was focused on service learning identified the personal learning experiences of students in a way that was similar to the co-curricular learning identified in this study. In the reviewed literature that focused on self-reflection, the outcome of the reflection indicated students had highly personal learning experiences. Students reported a wide array of
personal developments, including: improved empathy, understanding of diversity, and exposure to people unlike themselves; students also develop a greater understanding of the academic curriculum and develop values and commitment of service to others through service learning (Collins, 2010; Eyler, 2000; Pollack & Motoike, 2006; Rhoades, 1998; Sax, 2004; Sax & Astin, 1997; Whitley & Walsh, 2014). The findings of this research study indicated that many of the same indicators were true for students who participated in co-curricular experiences. Participants discussed empathy, greater understanding of diversity and of those different from themselves, and an increased connection to their academic learning. While reflection is not a structured part of co-curricular experiences, this research study identified that students had very meaningful personal experiences on which they reflected. Participants already had an altruistic purpose and sense of helping others, which was deepened through their personal learning during co-curricular experiences.

Additionally, commitment to educational and professional goals was an outcome of service learning, according to the literature reviewed. The findings in this research study also indicated that educational and professional goals were also outcomes of co-curricular experiences. Students who participated in service learning demonstrated a commitment to their overall education by engaging with faculty, doing homework, and greater overall engagement with their college experience and academic studies (Sax & Astin, 1997). One participant in this study explicitly stated that her co-curricular experiences allowed her to be more engaged with her homework, group work, peers and faculty. Much like high school students, college students develop discipline-specific knowledge and real-world skills they use later in life (Sax & Astin, 1997). This was also reinforced by the research findings, which indicated that co-curricular experiences created, developed, and reinforced post-graduation career goals for participants.
Service learning has been well studied in the literature as an academic methodology to develop civic engagement understanding, motivation and skills in college students. This research study demonstrated that many of the outcomes identified in the literature were similar, whether a student participated in service learning or had co-curricular experiences. Participants used much of the same language to describe their learning, skill development, motivation and overall outcomes of their experience. This study demonstrated how co-curricular experiences could result in many of the same learning experiences and outcomes as other well-established and researched methods for developing civic engagement motivation, understanding and skills. Service learning is not the only established methodology associated with civic engagement; other co-curricular experiences can have the same results, as these participants described.

**Implications for Professional Practice**

Given the historical foundation of civic engagement and the purpose of higher education to serve the greater good of the broad community, this research has a number of professional practice implications for how university faculty and staff support student learning (Dorn, 2011; Ostrander, 2004; Rhoades, 1998; Thelin, 2011).

The findings are applicable to how faculty and staff at colleges and universities support the learning and education of students as the study demonstrated how students think about and engage with the community. Participants were strongly motivated by a sense of community and their commitment to that community, whether on-campus or off-campus, created opportunities for engagement and meaningful interaction. Through co-curricular experiences, participants developed learning and connections between their curricular learning and the community. Participants were motivated to give back and help their particular community, which was different for each participant. University faculty and staff who want to engage students in co-
curricular activities should understand this personalized view of community and allow and encourage students to participate in a community that is personally meaningful to them. Rather than instructing or assigning or even telling students to engage with a community, demonstrating the value, the how and why, students would benefit from a learning experience in and with a community that is important or of value to them personally.

University faculty and staff should also be aware of the breadth of skills that can be developed through co-curricular experiences and share those with students. Changing practice to explain and demonstrate to students the skill development and learning that can result from co-curricular experiences will encourage greater participation and learning. Many of these skills were unique to the co-curricular experiences and enhanced participants’ academic learning in the classroom. Without their co-curricular experiences, many of the participants indicated they would not have learned many of the skills they identified even though they may have been part of the curricula. Or, if they did learn the skills through the academic setting, they would not have practiced, refined, and mastered the skills such that they could be applied to a different setting or context. As the Colby et al. (2003) conceptual framework illustrated, the deep understanding of skills, particularly those relevant to civic engagement, must be applied to a different context in order to be fully mastered. Additionally, university faculty and staff must understand that in order to develop civic engagement understanding, motivation, and skills, the findings from this study indicate that co-curricular experiences are instrumental and important because they allow students to put learning into action. By understanding the theoretical and practical implications of learning outside of the classroom, university faculty and staff will be more likely to encourage these experiences when advising, teaching, mentoring, and supporting students in the collegiate experience.
Learning by Doing

As John Dewey identified, learning through action is a meaningful learning tool (Dewey, 1916; Checkoway, 2001; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Rhoades 1998). Dewey’s philosophy of “learning by doing” is evidenced through co-curricular experiences (Checkoway, 2001; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Rhoades 1998). The literature extensively discusses the value of service learning, a curricular component, as a methodology to develop civic engagement, and this study indicates many of the same positive outcomes can be attained through co-curricular experiences. Participants in the study identified learning and connections between the academic coursework and community learning that were developed through co-curricular experiences. University faculty and staff could better support students if they reinforce learning that occurred in co-curricular experiences as well as in the academic setting and how the two reinforce overall learning. These out of classroom experiences can be just as valuable to students, and for one participant in the study, was identified as potentially more valuable than the academic curriculum in the overall collegiate experience. University faculty and staff should encourage students to put learning into action by participating in co-curricular experiences that will allow them to apply academic learning and concepts as well as skills.

Relationships and Community

University faculty and staff must understand the power of social connections as a motivating factor for co-curricular engagement and learning. Social connections through personal relationships and friendships were both a motivator for getting involved, as well as for staying involved in activities; this was also an outcome of the co-curricular engagement for participants. The participants’ identified community service as the basis for the social connections and motivation for co-curricular experience and allowed for the personal
relationships and connections to be formed. Helping others in the community engaged participants more deeply in the community. The cyclical nature of engagement, commitment, and motivation all combined to reinforce students’ meaning making of civic engagement. Practitioners can encourage students to identify the community or social connections that are important to each student as an individual, and then encourage participation and engagement. All of these participants were actively engaged in a community they had self-identified and were committed to improving the conditions and lives of those in the community. This study highlights and reinforces the importance and value of personal relationships, friendships, and social connections as they relate to civic engagement motivation, understanding and skills. Practitioners should note that, without a personal community or social connection, students may not become or stay involved in co-curricular activities.

Skills

Through co-curricular experiences, skills are developed and put into action, which are applicable to a wider variety of contexts and situations. University faculty and staff can support students if they understand the role co-curricular experiences play in developing skills and encourage students to participate in co-curricular experiences that will develop a variety of skills. Participants identified over thirty-five unique skills that were outcomes of their co-curricular experiences. Many of these skills translated into the academic courses, other co-curricular experiences, and future life and career settings. Participants identified many skills that would not have been developed without the co-curricular experiences, and they were thankful and appreciative of the skills that would stay with them as they moved forward into future pursuits. While the academic curriculum is extremely important in a college education, the value of co-curricular experiences cannot be denied and should be encouraged by practitioners as they
support students. The ability to work with a diverse and wide variety of other people in a leadership capacity or as a member of a group are strong skills for civic engagement in students’ future lives and career goals.

The ability to work with diverse groups, to develop and demonstrate leadership skills, and to apply those skills to future contexts, situations, or life pursuits is the definition of civic engagement. As university faculty and staff consider the desired outcome of a college education, for graduates to serve the community as participatory members and leaders with a wide variety of experiences and skills, the role of co-curricular experiences is unique in developing civic engagement. The community, social connections and skills participants develop during college in co-curricular experiences are the building blocks for lifelong learning and civic engagement. This study demonstrated for university faculty and staff how co-curricular experiences are relevant and important to civic engagement understanding, motivation and skills and highlight how encouragement, reflection, and engagement between students, faculty and staff can further enrich and deepen the student experience.

**Limitations**

This qualitative research study was limited by a number of factors, including the demographics and number of the participants, lack of civic engagement language on the part of the participants, and a lack of participants’ deep reflection.

**Participant Demographics**

A limiting factor in this qualitative research study was the small sample size of six participants. All participants had graduated within a year prior to the study with a liberal arts degree from one specific university. They were between 20-24 years of age. Participants were identified through nomination by faculty or staff, and only these qualifying criteria were used to
include participants in the study. The difficulty recruiting participants resulted in extending the graduation date range, which may have led to a limitation in the similarities of the participants. The small sample size resulted in more females participating than males. Additional demographic data such as ethnicity, first in the family to attend university, socio-economic or other identifying qualities were not collected and therefore were not used to either include or exclude participants. Only degree, graduation date, and age was collected.

**Civic Engagement Language**

Civic engagement, as a concept, has a broad definition and can be conceptualized in a number of different ways. By using one specific definition (Adler & Goggin, 2005) and the conceptual framework of Colby et al. (2003), this research study was limited to this conceptualization. Rather than asking participants to define civic engagement as a term or concept, the research was focused on the students’ own language surrounding civic engagement of understanding, motivation, and skills to develop a broader understanding of participant’s lived experiences. Participants were nominated to participate in this study by faculty and staff who presumably had a much deeper knowledge, understanding and language around civic engagement than the students. Participant knowledge, understanding, and language about civic engagement were limited and were not a requirement to participate in the research study. Participants were not explicitly asked to define civic engagement. This is a limiting factor in this study. If participants had been asked specifically to define civic engagement, the data collection may have resulted in different language associated with civic engagement.

Additionally, political and democratic civic engagement language was not included in the study. None of the participants engaged in political co-curricular experiences, and as such they did not discuss the understanding, motivation, and skills associated with the democratic or
political processes. In much of the civic engagement literature, political and democratic engagement is a centerpiece of civic engagement. However, based on the methodology and interview protocol of the study, if participants did not discuss the topic on their own, the researcher did not artificially ask the participants to discuss it. This study is limited because this dimension of civic engagement was not included in the study, and, therefore, it cannot be compared directly to studies that do. As a result, the findings are presented using the conceptual framework language that Colby et al. (2003) articulated and political civic engagement is not included.

Reflection

Reflection and the ability to make meaning out of personal experiences is a central piece of moral and cognitive development (Colby, et al, 2003). A lack of deep and meaningful reflection by the participants resulted in a limitation in the research study. As discussed in relation to Kohlberg’s cognitive development theory of moral development, participants appeared to have not yet moved into stage five of moral development. A lack of deep and meaningful reflection as well as a lack of connection to the larger democratic and human rights issues of moral and civic engagement was evidence for this conclusion. This could been a result of the limiting factor of age of the participants (20-24), cognitive development, and/or the recentness of the actions to the time of the study, which may not have been enough time for the deeper reflection of stage five moral development.

Recommendations for Further Research

This was a small sample study that inquired about the lived experiences of recent liberal arts graduates from a small public university. Due to the findings, as well as the limiting factors of this study, a number of further research directions could be undertaken. Future research
recommended includes different demographic groups, geography and institution sizes, a longitudinal study, and macro-community versus micro-community research.

Further research could focus on different demographic identities. This study was limited by age, graduation date, and liberal arts major. Future studies focused on first in the family students, different ethnic or cultural groups, socio-economic factors, or other academic majors could result in different themes and findings associated with the lived co-curricular experience of participants. The similarities and differences found in varied groups could shed further light on civic engagement. The possibilities and combinations of demographic data are endless for further research on the lived experience of recent graduates.

This study was conducted in the Pacific Northwest at a small public institution. Future research could be conducted using a different geographic location or type of institution, such as a private college or university or institution of larger size.

This study could be conducted as a longitudinal study. This research study was a snapshot in time, up to one year after graduation. Further research could be conducted on these same six participants by following up with them in five, ten, or more years to understand how time and deeper reflection has changed their understanding of co-curricular experiences. Additionally, further research could also ask how their understanding, motivation, and skills associated with civic engagement have developed or changed over time. Participants identified skills and motivation through their experiences they intended to use in future life and career goals, further research could inquire as to if and how these came to fruition. Many different options for longitudinal studies or tracking participants into the future exist.

As a qualitative research study, this study focused on the lived experiences of a small number of participants. Saturation was not anticipated, given the complexity of the topic of civic
engagement, and this was found to be true. Therefore, more participants could produce more highly saturated data. However, the balance of participants and the themes that emerged from the participant experience still allows for this study to make a contribution to the scholarly literature on civic engagement (Laverty, 2003). This study was one small piece of the much larger landscape of student experience, student learning, and civic engagement. Due to the lived experiences of these participants, the themes and findings resulted in micro-level change. Participants were focused on affecting the community on a small scale, the community they felt a part of or were involved in. This study and findings did not shed light on macro societal or cultural change. As such, these issues of community on a micro versus macro scale could be further explored.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the individual experiences of each participant and their unique experiences, perspectives, and interpretations regarding co-curricular activities, activities outside of the academic curriculum, and how those activities contributed to their development of civic engagement. In light of the conceptual theoretical framework and relevant literature about civic engagement, participant’s co-curricular experiences developed many of the pieces, concepts and themes in the literature of civic engagement. Based on the results, it can be argued that participants still have more development, growth, and understanding to gain because participants had not reached Kohlberg’s fifth stage of development, deep reflection had not occurred and a vocabulary around civic engagement had not been reached. However, participants’ co-curricular experiences clearly shaped their skills and motivation, which are two of the three foundations of Colby et al.’s (2003) conceptual framework. Recent graduates who participated in the research described the civic engagement
that occurred during their university years as having developed:

- By identifying, participating in, and shaping a community that was personally significant.
- Improved interpersonal communication, and transferable skills.
- Connected learning in and out of the academic classroom.
- Increased self-efficacy, purpose, and career goals.

The findings of this hermeneutic phenomenological research study are important to understanding the lived experiences of recent liberal arts graduates who participated in co-curricular experiences and are relevant to the professional practice of university faculty and staff, as well as current university students. As higher education institutions return to the founding mission of civic engagement (Dorn, 2011; Thelin, 2011), the role of co-curricular experiences in the overall educational landscape of student learning will become more and more important. As higher education aims to increase and develop civic engagement understanding, motivation, and skills in recent graduates, the co-curricular experiences will be essential to the student experience. In time, the lifelong commitment to civic engagement and community contribution will become more evident as a result of co-curricular experiences that allow students to put theory into action.
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Appendix A: Recruitment Email to Faculty

I would like to invite you to nominate participants in a research study titled College Student Civic Engagement. I will be conducting this study for completion of my requirements for the Doctor of Education degree at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. The goal of my study is to understand what co-curricular activities students participated in which contributed to the developed civic engagement understanding, motivation, and skills. The study is an in-depth look at the experiences of recent graduates who have learned civic engagement skills during their undergraduate education. You are being asked to nominate students because you taught BIS 499 during Summer 2015.

For the purpose of this research study, civic engagement is defined: “Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241).

Students who participate in the study will be asked about their out-of-class engagement and activities, their understanding of civic engagement and what they believe developed their engagement and commitment to civic engagement. I will ask each individual to participate in an interview to discuss specific activities, situations and events that they deem important to their overall experience and civic engagement development. Additionally, I will ask participants to share their BIS 499 capstone essay(s).

Please consider nominating students who meet the following criteria and whom you believe have demonstrated civic engagement understanding, motivation, skills, or commitment based on your knowledge of their undergraduate education; the criteria includes:

- Participants must speak English fluently.
- Participants must be traditional-aged undergraduate student, between 20 and 24.
- Participants must be completing a first Bachelor’s degree in one of the interdisciplinary liberal arts degrees by August 2015.
- Participants will have participated in co-curricular experiences.

Ideally I am hoping to identify the most thoughtful, articulate, highly-engaged and skilled students who graduated this summer.

Confidentiality of the site and participants will be maintained through pseudonym of both site and participants’ names. Participants will be compensated for their time and participation through a choice of gift cards in the amount of twenty-five dollars.

Thank you for your consideration and nominations,

Emily Christian
Appendix B: Recruitment Email to Participants

Dear [name of student]:

You have been nominated by your capstone faculty member to participate in a research study titled *College Student Civic Engagement*. I will be conducting this study for completion of my requirements for the Doctor of Education degree at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. The goal of my study is to understand what co-curricular activities students participated in which contributed to the development of civic engagement understanding, motivation, and skills. The study is an in-depth look at the experiences of recent graduates who have learned civic engagement skills during their undergraduate education.

I am recruiting research participants who meet the following criteria:

- Participants must speak English fluently.
- Participants must be traditional-aged undergraduate student, between 20 and 24.
- Participants must be completing a first Bachelor’s degree in one of the interdisciplinary liberal arts degrees by August 2015.
- Participants must have participated in co-curricular experiences.

If you decide to participate in the study, I will ask you about your out-of-class engagement and activities, your understanding of civic engagement, and what you believe contributed to the development of your engagement and commitment to civic engagement. I would like to know how you think these experiences affected you. I will also ask you to share your BIS 499 capstone essay(s).

If you volunteer to participate in the study, I will ask you to take part in the following:

- A 60-90 minute interview during which you will be asked questions about your co-curricular experiences.
- A short interview (no more than 30 minutes) to check to be sure that your information has been transcribed correctly and to ask follow-up questions.
- An optional 30-minute time for you to review what was written up from your interview and to make changes, if you would like. This can also be conducted via email.

The interview will be audio recorded. I will transcribe it or hire a professional company to transcribe the audio recording. Information from the interview will be used in the study findings, however your name and any identifying information will be changed to protect your confidentiality. I anticipate a total time commitment of 2.5 hours. Your participation is voluntary and can be ended at any time. I will provide a $25 gift card to your store of your choice for participating.

If you are willing to participate in my study, please let me know and I will schedule the first interview. During that meeting I will explain my study further, answer any questions you have about the research study, and ask you to sign an informed consent form. Thank you for your consideration. You can reach me via email, christian.em@husky.neu.edu. I look forward to hearing from you!
Sincerely,
Emily Christian
Appendix C: Informed Consent

Northeastern University, Department of Education: College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigators: Dr. Carolyn Bair, Principal Investigator, Emily Christian, Student Researcher
Title of Project: College Student Civic Engagement

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
You are being invited to take part in a research project. This form will tell you about the study but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask the researcher any questions you may have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher whether you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you do decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being asked to participate in this study because you were nominated by a faculty member to participate based on your undergraduate co-curricular experience and development of civic engagement. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to learn about students’ experiences during their undergraduate education to determine what co-curricular activities develop civic engagement in students post-graduation.

What will I be asked to do?
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in the following:

- A 60-90 minute interview during which you will be asked questions about your co-curricular experiences.
- A short interview (no more than 30 minutes) to check to be sure that your information has been transcribed correctly and to ask follow up questions.
- An optional 30-minute time for you to review what was written up from your interview and to make changes, if you would like. This can also be conducted via email.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interviews will take place at a location of your choosing. The interview will take 60-90 minutes and the researcher will ask you to answer a series of questions about your experiences. Approximately three weeks after the first interview, the researcher will contact you if more information is needed or to clarify any parts of your interview that were not clear. No more than eight weeks after the first interview, a 30-minute meeting will be set up to give you time to review information that was written from your interview and to make sure that you feel this is an accurate description of your experience or this may be done via email. The total time for your participation will be no longer than two and a half hours.

Potential Risks and Discomforts
There are no known risks or discomforts to volunteers participating in this research.
Will I benefit by being in this research?
You will receive a $25 gift card to a location of your choice upon completion of the third interview/interaction. Additionally, your personal experiences and reflection may help faculty, staff, and administrators understand out-of-classroom experiences and how they impact the development of civic engagement.

Who will see this information about me?
Your part in the study will be confidential. Only the researcher will know that you participated in this study and will see information that you have given. Any reports or publications about this research will assign participants a different name and will not identify you or anyone else in the study by your real name. The signed consent form will indicate your real name, and it will be located in a secure and locked cabinet in the researcher’s home. The interviews will be transcribed either by the researcher or a hired company, and each will be given a pseudonym so that no real names appear on the research document. Electronic data will be kept on a password protected computer to which the researcher has the only access. All audiotapes of interviews and copies of this consent document will stored in a locked cabinet and destroyed after the researcher completes the dissertation and any journal publication submissions, in accordance with the University’s institutional research guidelines.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose what information to share or not share with the researcher. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

Who can I contact if I have any questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call Dr. Carolyn Bair, the person primarily responsible for this research, at c.bair@neu.edu or by phone at 617-390-4197. You can also contact the Student Investigator, Emily Christian at Christian.em@husky.neu.edu or at 951.764.3201.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617-373-4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will receive a $25 gift card to the store of your choice upon completion of the third interview.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
It will not cost you anything to participate in this study. You will be reimbursed by me for any parking expenses related to the interview process.

I Agree to Take Part in This Research
Signature of person agreeing to take part

__________________________________________  _______ _______

Printed name of person above

__________________________________________  Date

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

__________________________________________  Date

Printed name of person above

__________________________________________
Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Opening Questions:

1. Describe the specific activities you were involved in during your undergraduate education outside of the classroom?
   
   Prompt: Clubs, volunteer, church, service activities.
   
   Prompt: What activities engaged you with the community?

2. Why did you choose these activities?
   
   Prompt: How did you become aware of them? Who recruited you to participate?
   
   Follow up: What motivated you to participate in these activities?

3. What was your favorite or most memorable out of classroom experience? Why?

4. Why did you continue to stay involved or not involved in these activities?

Meaning-making Questions:

5. Which skills do you believe you developed as a result of your outside-of-class engagement?
   
   Follow up: Where else have you used or applied these skills?

6. When you think back in chronological order, do you see any pattern of your engagement? For example, did one activity lead to another?

7. What values or decision-making factors were important to you as you engaged in these activities?

8. Why do you believe you participated in these activities?
   
   Prompt: personal motivation or fulfillment, helping others, someone else told you to

9. Now that you have graduated, do you plan to stay involved in any of these activities?
   
   Why or why not?
10. Tell me about the kind of person you believe you have become as a result of these activities.

**Concluding Questions:**

11. If you could re-live your undergraduate experience, what (if anything) would you do differently?

   Follow up: What advice would you give to other students based on what you know now?

12. Is there anything I haven’t asked you about your experience that you would like to share?

   Follow up: Is there anything I should have asked you and didn’t?
Appendix E: IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: November 23, 2015  IRB #: CPS15-11-06
Principal Investigator(s): Carolyn Bair
Emily Christian
Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University
Title of Project: Developing College Student Civic Engagement
Participating Sites: Permission in file

DHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: NOVEMBER 22, 2016

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

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