THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF VICE PRESIDENTS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS: A STUDY
EXPLORING HOW SOCIAL IDENTITY IMPACTS LEADERSHIP APPROACH

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Abstract

This study aimed to both draw awareness and increase understanding of how lived experiences across race, gender and sexual orientation social identities impact the leadership approach of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. As the student demographic becomes increasingly more diverse on college and university campuses, higher education leaders should begin to consider how social identities might impact their leadership approach. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research tradition, this qualitative study proved specific ways in which Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) considered their identity as a leader. VPSAs reflected and recreated the details of their social identity experiences, shared what those lived experiences looked and felt like and how it shaped and informed them as a leader. VPSAs reflected on the meaning of their social identity experiences and how it impacted their approach to leadership. In this study, five findings emerged; (a) identity learning experiences, (b) environment, (c) graduate program or as a new professional role, (d) storytelling and (e) advancing cultural competency. Each finding was supported by subcategories that detailed specific ways in which this awareness and understanding of self and others emerged for the participants. The deep reflections of the participants and the emerged findings of this study are valuable to student affairs organizations and a variety of leaders who serve diverse organizations. The use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a research methodology illustrated the lived experiences of the participants and provided insightful reflection that could help increase identity awareness and understanding among leaders on diverse college campuses. Implications of this study’s findings, insights named by the researcher and recommendations for future research are presented in the concluding chapter of this study.

Keywords: social identity, leadership, lived experience, awareness, understanding, organization
Dedication:

This doctoral thesis is dedicated to my late grandparents; Vivian Bennett, Darrell Bennett; my late great-grandmother, Victoria Overton; and my late great-great-uncle and aunt, Rufus Walker and Genevieve Walker. I am eternally grateful for your love and commitment to family. It is because of your sacrifice and teaching; my parents were able to provide me with opportunities that shaped me into the person I am today. Earning my doctorate of education in organizational leadership from Northeastern University is a testament to the generations of sacrifice for which each of you were a catalyst. Your presence is greatly missed, but your legacy and spirit lives on. This body of scholarship is dedicated to you. Thank you.
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“Without Struggle, There Is No Progress” – Fredrick Douglass
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Chapter I: Introduction

Over the past five years, organizational environments and demographics have changed significantly (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). One approach to address unpredictable and multifaceted changes was for organizational leaders to critically explore and develop an understanding of self (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). Leaders tended to spend time exploring self in terms of skills and values. Leaders must look beyond values and experiences and begin to examine social identities as a way to assess self to develop an awareness of how social identity impacts leadership (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010).

Literature suggest that in addition to the increasingly diverse organizational environments, colleges and universities are also noticing a significant shift in the composition of today’s college student (Alger, Chapa, Gudeman, Marin, Maruyama, Milem, Moreno & Wilds, 2000). In previous decades, a large majority of historically underrepresented students did not attend college, with the exception of those who attended historically black colleges and universities (Alger, Chapa, Gudeman, Marin, Maruyama, Milem, Moreno & Wilds, 2000). Based on a study from 2000, one in five undergraduate students at four-year public schools identify as non-white (Alger, Chapa, Gudeman, Marin, Maruyama, Milem, Moreno & Wilds, 2000). More than a decade later, the literature remains consistent, naming this shift in student demographic on college campuses. Bowman’s (2013) study suggested comparable trends of a changing demographic within the overall United States population and its’ equivalent comparison among college undergraduate students. Bowman’s 2013 study points to the notion that college undergraduate students are less likely to be White, male, U.S. born and Christian. Thus, this changing demographic among students on college campuses should be of interest to higher education leaders because this identifies a need to understand their own social identity
experiences and its relevancy on how they lead. Therefore, this study of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs at higher education institutions in the United States is timely and warranted.

**Context and Background**

The demographics among membership in organizations has changed significantly and organizations have noticed shift where it is critical that leaders begin to develop a greater understanding of self (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). Leaders tend to focus on values and skills and less attention is given to identity. In a culture where identities among social groups and individual experiences are more widespread, there is a need for leaders to explore identity more closely (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). The problem of practice presented in this study was addressed so leaders could have a heightened awareness of social identity and develop knowledge of how social identity impacted leadership. Ruderman and Ernst (2010) explained that an approach to understanding self should be centered on social identity group memberships. Those group memberships leaders should consider social identities such as race, gender or sexual orientation. Similarly, leaders must also conceptualize specific implications for identifying with a particular social identity (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). These implications may also inform how an individual may approach leadership.

There are several reasons this problem of practice was addressed. Researchers explain that this awareness of self as a leader in higher education is important because without greater awareness of how social identity impacts leadership, this sense of unknowing for leaders will yield exclusive organizational cultures and negative experiences for organizational members, such as students, faculty and staff workplace (Guerrero, Sylvestre & Muresanu, 2013). To this end, a sense of awareness on an individual, community and organizational level will help create inclusion for the organization and its’ members. Harper’s (2008) research supports this claim
suggesting that college and university campuses need to create inclusive communities to help promote and increase diverse student engagement. Understanding diversity where new knowledge of self and others occurs for individuals within the campus community will foster social identity development and growth of members. With the changing demographics in higher education, specific to traditionally underrepresented minority populations who are now becoming the majority, Hofhuis, Van Der Zee and Otten (2012) explain that it is critical for leaders in higher education to spend time exploring lived experiences across social identity. Hofhuis, Van Der Zee and Otten (2012) argues that rarely is this phenomenon explored by leaders in higher education and often this population are unaware of their social identity and its’ intersection with leadership. By contrast, some leaders may not understand how to approach the complexity of social identity and its impact on leadership. Also, traditionally underrepresented minority leaders in higher education are often positioned to consider their social identities in their leadership role (Barlow, Louis & Terry, 2010).

Specific to this study, adoption of this concept of social identity awareness as a leader in higher education communities is paramount, given the increase of student diversity on many college and university campuses. To help emphasize the need for having an awareness of social identity and its’ impact on leadership, one must conceptualize how changing demographics in society impacts organizations such as college and university campuses. According to data from a study published by Sanner, Baldwin, Cannella, Charles and Parker (2010), “U.S. minorities will be the majority by 2042, increasing from 34 percent in 2008 to 54 percent in 2042” (p. 58). More specifically, in 2011 the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the Asian American, Black, and Hispanic populations would increase from 4.6% to 7.8%, 12.9% to 13.0%, and 16% to 30% by the same period, 2042.
This broader context is important to colleges and universities because higher education institutions should reflect and mirror the change in the United States population. Bowman (2013) noted that while the diversifying representation in the social landscape is not that of college and university campuses yet, higher education institutions are beginning to notice a shift in diversity on their campuses among student communities. Sanner, Baldwin, Cannella, Charles and Parker (2010) note in their research that society is becoming more racially diverse. Given this, it is critical that Vice Presidents for Student Affairs develop their individual understanding of self and identity. This shift is important because, in some cases, leaders spend more time on leadership approach and less time, if any, exploring self and developing an authentic understanding and awareness of self through a social identity lens (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). One study suggested that leaders must approach their organizations from a social identity lens to help advance the core identities of individuals within a group or organization and to also promote identity inclusion among all members of a group (Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, Platow, Fransen, Yang, Ryan, Jetten, Peters, & Boen, F, 2014). As leaders, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs must adopt the approach that this recent study suggests to be able to respond to the growing needs of an increasingly more diverse college and university environment.

For leaders in higher education, awareness and making meaning of social identity requires educators to reexamine social identity to support the organizations they lead and the growing diversity on college and university campuses. Gaining awareness of social identity expands world view perspective and helps individuals think about how others view and act toward them (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). It also informs leaders of a level of awareness that they can consider when others react to social identity. Acquiring social identity awareness will allow leaders to appreciate the views of others and see how and why others who have had different life
experiences may have a different lens and certain biases about social identity (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). This knowledge of and awareness for social identity strategically brings people of diverse social identities together and helps create inclusive organizational environments.

This aforementioned context and background supports the problem of practice of why it is needed to address social identity among leaders in higher education. This compelling argument underscores why leaders in higher education need to explore their own social identities more deeply in order to strategically lead and manage diverse student groups. This leadership approach will help develop the organizational members and students on their campus. Therefore, for this qualitative study, the researcher brought awareness of social identity to Vice President’s for Student Affairs, critical leaders in higher education communities.

Statement of the Problem

With continued injustice on college and university campuses, especially in the form of heterosexism, racism and homophobia (Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram & Platt, 2011; Nunn & Bolt, 2015) this study identified ways in which senior student affairs officers should critically reflect on their own social identity to determine how these lived experiences impacted ways in which they lead within a college environment. This study was an opportunity for top-level university executives, specifically Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) to critically reflect on their identities as leaders within diverse university communities. In order to effectively lead and create inclusive communities on college campuses, an understanding of self as a leader is imperative. This is especially critical for Vice President for Student Affairs, who have a significant responsibility to ensure students; faculty and staff feel welcomed and included on a college campus. A recent practical example of injustice occurred in 2015 at the University of Missouri (Eligon & Perez-Pena, 2015). This example demonstrated a lack of social identity
awareness among higher education leaders, which consequently neglected marginalized communities on college and university campuses and caused increased tension among students, faculty and staff. As a result of existing literature and current practical examples, the researcher concluded that a better understanding of self as a leader will help leaders on college campuses approach leadership with a more inclusive lens and eliminate, or at best, minimize continued injustice and oppression.

To this end, it is paramount that higher education leaders develop strategies to increase an awareness and understanding of self to effectively lead increasingly diverse college and university campuses. Literature addresses the shift in the diversity composition of college students and a changing demographic in organizational environments, but this area of study needed to be extended and applied to top student affairs executive administrators in the university setting. Therefore, gaining a better understanding of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) lived experiences of social identity and ways in which it impacted their approach to leadership contributed to the literature and assisted VPSAs and other higher education leaders in addressing diversity issues and supporting diverse communities on college and university campuses. Exploring this problem of practice generated a greater awareness and understanding self among VPSAs and informed scholars and practitioners of the impact of social identity on leadership approach among senior student affairs officers.

When reviewing relevant research for this study, the researcher found that much of the existing literature did not specifically explore the impact of social identity on leadership approach for VPSAs. The minimal research that has been conducted broadly examines identity, but doesn’t intersect it specifically with leadership, which justified a need for this study. The researcher addressed how an increasingly more diverse undergraduate enrollment on college and
university campuses suggests why leaders in higher education must conceptualize how their identities impact their approach to leadership. Further, the researcher used this research problem to argue that the rise in student enrollment and organizational diversity should be of interest to higher education leaders because this necessitates a need to understand their own social identity experiences and its relevance on how they lead. Understanding self is a core need for leaders to be able to effectively lead and create welcoming, inclusive spaces on college campuses so both organizational members and students, particularly those of diverse backgrounds, feel valued within the campus environment. Therefore, the researcher considered the exploration of how social identity impacted leadership approaches among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs.

As a result of the problem of practice of this study, the researcher’s purpose for this qualitative study explored how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) make sense of their social identities and of its impact, if any, on their leadership approach. For the purposes of this study, social identity was defined as an individual’s self-concept resulting from his or her perceived membership in a social group such as race, gender identity or sexual orientation (Burford, 2012). Dungy (2003) defines Vice Presidents for Student Affairs as the senior student affairs professional, leading and overseeing the programmatic, community building and student engagement components of a college or university. Dungy (2003) emphasizes that the Vice President for Student Affairs “responds to student, faculty, staff, parents, community members and others concerned with student-related issues or concerns that arise on campus” (p. 346). On the majority of college and university campuses, the Vice President for Student Affairs is charged with leading a division of diverse members, creating inclusive environment while also reinforcing community and institutional standards to maintain a safe campus climate (Dungy, 2003). The significance and rationale of why this sample population is most appropriate for this
study as well as the broadly defined research question supported the purpose of this study which is identified in the subsequent sections.

Rationale and Significance

The researcher’s interest in this study was coupled with key factors, which rationalized and justified the significance of this study. One factor, which justified the significance for this study, was the revelation that many colleges and universities were becoming increasingly diverse. This means that students, faculty and administrators are experiencing a university culture that is more diverse and, as a result, are charged to develop their multicultural awareness and understanding to meet the needs of a diversifying campus community (Bowman, 2013). This suggests that the landscape of higher education, especially student life on a college campus is changing significantly. Dungy (2003) suggested that the Vice President for Student Affairs (VPSA) role requires that they lead a diverse group of people in order to effectively meet organizational, community and individual needs. As a result, a VPSA must identify ways to develop the knowledge and awareness of self.

The growth of diversity in the student population on college campuses coupled with college and university leaders needing to adopt concepts of diversity, equity access and inclusion over the last decade framed another reason why this study was significant and made this study appropriate (Owen, 2009). Awareness generated from this study informed VPSAs on the impact of social identity on leadership in higher education and equipped them with an increased understanding of how to effectively lead diverse organizations. Vice President’s for Student Affairs are leaders on college campuses charged to build and support the campus community and cultivate an environment; that also encourages full and equal participation for everyone validates why this study is significant (Roper, 2005). For these reasons, the researcher deemed it critical to
challenge VPSAs to critically explore their social identity to better understand self and its impact on leadership.

The importance of this study was also demonstrated by the fact it increased social identity awareness of leaders in higher education but also identified multiple ways to assess social identity, its impact on leadership and what it meant to each participant of this study (Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, Platow, Fransen, Yang, Ryan, Jetten, Peters & Boen, 2014). VPSAs must consider each member of the community they lead to make meaning and create space for healthy campus relationships across multiple social identities within the institution (Roper, 2005). Because VPSAs oversee multiple functional areas on a college campus such as residence life, student support services, student life, wellness and career services, to name a few, the social identities that are named within these departments must be valued and included in the organization. VPSAs must consider ways in which they engage in diversity particularly, social identity development within their organization to understand how their individual social identity events, stories and experiences may impact an organization. This justifiable rationale for this study was supported with evidence that the changing landscape of higher education required this study to be conducted to challenge VPSAs to acquire learning and awareness on social identity.

The findings of this study helped educators understand the importance of exploring their social identity and how this knowledge of self-increased awareness of social identity and its impact on leadership. This was important because in today’s increasingly unpredictable and multifaceted organizational environment, it’s quintessential for leaders to understand themselves beyond their capabilities, motivations, styles, and values; there needs to be a focus on developing an awareness of social identity (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). Inevitably, this learning contributes to how VPSAs approach leadership of diverse groups and create organizational culture.
Furthermore, the findings of this identified challenges, barriers and outcomes for leaders in higher education to consider which will lead to VPSAs being more aware of their social identity, the social identity of others and also be more effective leaders. The study’s findings were shared with scholars and practitioners to advance research and inform practice on the impact of social identity on leadership in higher education.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) at institutions of higher education make sense of their social identities and of its impact, if any, on their leadership approach. The outcome of this purpose was to increase awareness of how lived experiences across social identity impacted leadership. For this study, the research on social identity was generally framed using Henri Tajfel and John Turner’s (1979) Social Identity Theory as the framework based on Burford’s definition (2012), which suggests that social identity is an individual’s self-concept resulting from his or her perceived membership in a social group. Specifically, this present study explored: race, gender, class and sexual orientation among VPSAs. To examine this problem, the following research question was addressed:

*How does 6 Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) of colleges and universities make sense and develop awareness of their social identities?*

**Theoretical Framework**

Using qualitative research, Creswell (2012b) states that the theoretical framework for the study grounds and informs the problem of practice, research question and methodology. Researchers agree that the early selection of a theoretical lens is crucial because it defines how the researcher explores and frames a given problem (Anfara & Mertz, 2006; Butin, 2010;
Creswell, 2013). For this particular study, the researcher applied Tajfel and Turner’ Social Identity Theory (SIT) as its’ theoretical framework (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Social identity provides one lens colleges and universities can use to respond to this shift in diversity and help make their campuses more inclusive (Burford, 2012). This framework incorporates cognitive processes to understand how identities are perceived within a larger community (Stets & Burke, 2000). By applying SIT as a framework for this study, the researcher was able to identify ways in which social identity experiences of Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSAs) impacted how they lead an organization. Employing social identity theory was most appropriate for this study, particularly when framed as a theory that describes intergroup behavior and privilege based on group status differences, in addition to the access and ability to move from one in-group to another while additionally exploring intergroup relations, group process, and the social self (Stets & Burke, 2000). While Stets and Burke definition of social identity was appropriate for this study, Burford (2012) more recent description of social identity was also applicable. Burford (2012) cites that SIT is an individual’s self-concept resulting from his or her perceived membership in a social group such as race, gender identity or sexual orientation. Hechanova (2012) notes that SIT explore intergroup relations, group process, and the social self on the individual, group and organizational level. As this study aimed to address the central question of how VPSA’s make sense and develop awareness of their social identities the researcher used seminal theorists and contemporary scholars of social identity to synthesize the findings of participants and make connections back to the framework to ensure the research design is aligned.

**Foundation of social identity theory.** The development of social identity theory has its origins as a European social psychology theory in Britain by Tajfel on social factors in
perception (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). The framework of social identity emerged from a collaboration between Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the late 1970s. In 1979, Tajfel and Turner designed social identity theory to describe intergroup behavior and privilege based on group status, difference and the ability to have access to move from one in-group to another. In fact, this framework suggests that an individual’s self is included in their personal and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

**Cognitive Processes of Social Identity.** The social identity literature contains three predominate cognitive processes of social identity: 1) social categorization, 2) social identification, and 3) social comparison (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). Tajfel and Turner (1979) used these three cognitive processes to connect an individual to being part of an in-group or out-group identity. The most recent developments in social identity studies have used Tajfel and Turner (1979) research as a foundational lens to continue deepening the understanding and impact of social identity among individuals. Group membership in a social identity has differing outcomes depending on the situation. Membership in one group could denote access to privilege, whereas membership in another group could align an individual marginalized because of membership in a particular group. Social categorization is the process of determining which group membership you or someone else identifies with (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). Social identification explores the affiliation with a group that is perceived in a more obvious form (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). There is a strong connection with members within that group because of the identification. Social comparison examines one’s understanding of self and is closely connected to how you are perceived by others who are not connected to that particular group membership (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). In social comparison, individuals are conditioned to act a certain way to be accepted in society. The table chart below illustrates the
way in which social identity is structured based on in and out groups and these three cognitive processes.

Table 1: Social Identity Framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

Seminal researchers, Hogg and Terry (2000) define social categorization as a production of group distinctive stereotypes, normative perceptions and actions, highlighting experience, which is subjectively meaningful in specific context. Hogg and Terry (2000) explain self-enhancement as an approach, which guides the categorization process by distinguishing in-
groups and out-groups. In-groups are high-favored and members see themselves in a positive light. Out-groups are not favored and are on the exterior of the group. For example, race in the larger community, White people are members of the in-groups, whereas, non-White individuals such as Black, Latino or Asian are considered out-group members of the larger community (Stets & Burke, 2000). Contemporary scholar, Burford (2012) suggests that it is critical to be able to understand out-group and in-group differences in organizations. Members of both groups should know of what it means to be part of the other group. Hechanova’s (2012) research implies that understanding in-group and out-group differences is critical because one must be fully aware of the access and privilege associated with in-groups’ members and the inequities and marginalization aligned with out-group members. An indication of how critical it is to have this lens of awareness was noted in Scott’s (2007) research where he argued that an individual’s social identity could have a significant impact on the community and organizational level therefore; it is critical to have a clear understanding and awareness of the individual identities that exist in communities and organizations. Further, it is a vital lens through which to understand issues of identity and identification as they relate to organizations (Scott, 2007).

**Social Identity Theory: Justification and Alignment to Study.** The alignment of social identity theory with this research study was critical. Aligning the theoretical framework with each phase of the research design grounded the significance and relevance of this theoretical framework with the research topic. The significance of this theory to both a researcher and practitioner was also important because it increased awareness among VPSAs of how lived experiences across social identity impacted leadership. One critical reason why the social identity theory was necessary for this present study was because it framed a critical discussion
into developing an awareness of social identities and the lived experiences of one’s social identities.

On college and university campuses, individuals do not always feel comfortable and are often marginalized (Guerrero, Sylvestre & Muresanu, 2013). As leaders of the student community on college campuses who are charged to ensure members of the community do not feel marginalized, Vice President’s for Student Affairs (VPSAs) must commit to understanding the social-self and establish a clear understanding of their lived experiences of social identity to identify ways in which these experiences impact how they lead (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). The social identity theory provided sufficient reasoning and conceptual context to frame this understanding for the researcher conducting this study.

It is evident that Social Identity Theory (SIT) aligned with this problem of practice, which was the need to bring attention to the social identities of Vice President’s for Student Affairs (VPSAs) to increase awareness of how lived experiences across social identity impacted leadership. The theoretical framework provided context to the problem of practice, which helped understand why it was critical and timely to explore this research topic. The theoretical framework also underscored how in-group and out-group identity experiences informed and shaped an individual and how they showed up as a leader in their organization. SIT also provided the appropriate theoretical lens to explore VPSAs lived social identity experiences and generated awareness for this population on the individual, community and organizational level. Further, this study helped frame the importance of being aware of social identity and how it impacts leadership.

The research question is the most critical component to a study (Creswell, 2013). It states the intentions of a study and also frames the study. As previously discussed, knowledge of social
identity on the individual level is important because it provides the ability of an individual to have the awareness to understand how lived experiences across social identity impacts leadership. Given this, it is critical for VPSAs to understand social identity of self and those they are leading in order to lead effectively and inclusively. The research question sought to use SIT to make meaning and provided a theoretical context of the social identities VPSAs shared during the data collection process. The central question provided a broad foundation for the framework of this study. If applicable, supplement research questions would support the macro-level question to help explore the research topic deeply. These research questions informed researchers and practitioners of the importance of having an awareness of social identity as a leader. Additionally, the research question connected the purpose of this study to why SIT was the theoretical framework identified for this qualitative study.

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

*Vice President for Student Affairs* – is defined on most campuses as the senior student affairs professional who leads a division of student affairs at a college or university. This individual serves as the Chief Student Affairs Officer for the institution and typically reports to a vice chancellor or president. In addition to leading the division of student affairs, a large part of their portfolio is strategic planning, fiscal management, global perspective and institutional perspective versus divisional perspective (Bass, 2006). In addition, Dung (2003) emphasizes that the Vice President for Student Affairs “responds to student, faculty, staff, parents, community members and others concerned with student-related issues or concerns that arise on campus” (p. 346). The Vice President for Student Affairs is also charged with leading a division of diverse members, creating community while also reinforcing community and institutional standards to maintain a safe and welcoming community for everyone (Dungy, 2003).
Leadership – is generally defined in multiple ways, but for the purposes of this study it is an approach that maintains a critical understanding and consideration of the social context in which processes of leadership take place in an organization (Alvesson, 2011). Leadership uses meanings and interpretations of what is said and done in a culture to help frame the social context among members of an organization (Alvesson, 2011). Leadership is closely related to culture, on the individual, community and organizational level (Alvesson, 2011).

Social Identity – is defined as an individual’s self-concept resulting from his or her perceived membership in a social group such as race, gender identity or sexual orientation (Burford, 2012).

Categorization - is a production of group distinctive stereotypes, normative perceptions, and actions, highlighting experience, which is subjectively meaningful in specific context (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Self-enhancement - guides the categorization process by distinguishing in-groups and out-groups (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Social Group – Hardiman, Jackson and Griffin (2007) define social group as a “group of people who share a range of physical, cultural, or social characteristics within one of the social identity categories” (p. 56). For the purposes of this present study, social group refers to social identity groups such as race, gender or sexual orientation.

Marginalized – also coined as marginality refers to when an individual or groups of people that are excluded from a community or group in society and leads to departure from a particular space because of exclusionary practices (Hardiman, Jackson and Griffin, 2007).

Race – is a social construction that signifies groupings of people that share a commonality among physical basis and traits. Bell (2007) suggests race as a social construction is “created to
interpret human differences and used to justify socioeconomic arrangements in way that accrue to the benefit of the dominant social group (p. 118).”

*Gender Identity* – Griffin (2007) refers to gender identity meaning “how we identify ourselves and is typically based on our biological or birth sex such as woman, man, boy and girl” (p. 170).

*Sexual Orientation* – Griffin (2007) defines sexual orientation as an individual that identifies with “one’s predominant sexual and romantic attractions toward someone of the same sex (lesbian or gay), another sex (heterosexual) or any sex (bisexual) (p. 171).”

*Social Comparison* - examines your understanding of self and is closely connected to how you are perceived by others who are not connected to that particular group membership (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010).

*Social Categorization* - is the process of determining which group membership you or someone else identifies with (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010).

*Social Identification* - explores the affiliation with a group that is perceived in a more obvious form (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). There is a strong connection with members within that group because of the identification.

**Summary**

Evidence herein clearly provided supportive context suggesting that Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) have a critical role as a leader on a college campus to create an inclusive campus community in which they are charged to lead. Bass (2006) and Dungy (2003) support this notion by defining the role for VPSAs as instrumental leaders critical to creating community, developing institutional standards and providing inclusive spaces for student engagement. Therefore, the VPSA is a significant leader on a college campus charged to guide how the culture of the community is created and sustained overtime. Because of this, there is a
need for this population of leaders to explore their social identity more deeply in an effort to develop an awareness of their social identity and understand how their social identity impact how they approach leadership.

For this study, the researcher deemed social identity theory most appropriate (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This theoretical lens was appropriate for this study because it independently provided a framework of knowledge to support the role of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. The research question, coupled with the social identity theoretical framework, served as a sufficient lens to explore for this particular study. Given the minimal literature specifically on VPSAs and their lived experiences of social identity, the researcher investigated this unexplored research topic among VPSAs to draw on the need for this community of leaders to make meaning and sense of their social identity so they have an increased awareness as a leader. The outcome of this study helped VPSAs be more aware of social identity and understand how social identity impacted their approach to leadership. The identified studies and findings that aligned with this problem of practice are presented in the literature review.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review examined social identity to understand how the lived experiences across social identity impacted leadership among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs). This review begins by providing an understanding of social identity and an overview of social identity in social and organizational environments. Following this introduction, the first section of this review imparts a brief historical and contemporary background on social identity theory. Accordingly, this section offers insight into the seminal writings that provides a foundation to social identity and draws on connections for its relevance today.

The next section of this review explores the cognitive process of social identity. This section sheds light on social identification, social comparison and social categorization. The
following part of this review examines the self-enhancement approach, specifically in-groups and out-groups. This section explores the role that specific social identities such as race, gender and sexual orientation play in the lives of individuals and groups and how they differ from being an in-group or out-group member. The final two sections of this review elaborate on social identity and leadership and organizational culture, respectively. This stream of literature provides supporting theoretical and empirical literature that contributes to the understanding of how social identity impacts leadership and organizational culture. One of the concluding sections discusses gaps in the research and supports the idea that this study added to a body of knowledge. The last section summarizes the literature.

Ruderman and Ernst (2010) contest that organizational environments are constantly changing in demographic composition and there is a critical need for leaders to develop an understanding of self. Guerrero, Sylvestre & Muresanu (2013) explain that this demographic shift is critical for higher education leaders to be aware of because without greater awareness of these organizational changes one will not be able to understand self as a leader and more specifically how social identity may important leadership. Further, Guerrero, Sylvestre & Muresanu (2013) emphasize that avoiding the urgency to develop awareness and understanding of self will consequently yield exclusive organizational cultures and negative experiences for organizational members. Ruderman and Ernst (2010), also emphasize that leaders spend too much time exploring self in terms of experiences and values and must reframe their approach to look beyond those aspects and begin to examine social identities. This approach explored a way to assess self to increase awareness of how lived experiences across social identity impacts leadership.
Due to the lack of research on social identity specific to VPSAs, this review of the literature provided supporting theoretical and empirical evidence with the intention to lay groundwork for future scholarship on this topic. In addition, it is also meant to highlight the emergence of an unpredictable, multifaceted and diverse changing demographic in organizational environments and the critical need for leaders to develop a better understanding of self (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). Strong underpinnings on social identity and its’ connection to social and organizational environments, leadership and organizational culture, the cognitive processes and self-enhancement approaches and the impacts the lived experience of individuals and groups was explored. This chapter is organized into five streams that focus on distinct areas of social identity.

**Changing Social Environments**

With increasingly more diverse social environments, specifically changing demographics across social identities such as race, the researcher found it critical to indicate the societal transformation that is notably significant in the United States. Data in the literature suggests that racial minorities in the United States will be the majority by 2042 with a 20% increase (Sanner, Baldwin, Cannella, Charles & Parker, 2010). Ruderman and Ernst (2010) highlight that the U.S. Census Bureau is reporting an increase in minority population specifically that the Asian American, Black, and Hispanic populations would see an increase from 4.6% to 7.8%, 12.9% to 13.0%, and 16% to 30% by 2042. As a result of an ever changing diverse environment, higher education is charged to respond to the impact the change in social environments has on today’s college and university campuses to help develop a community where everyone may also have a great impact on understanding of self and others. For example, Bergerson and Hufalin (2011) note in a study that the goal of higher education is to provide students with the tools, experiences
and interactions to help them develop a greater understanding and acceptance of self and also others, particularly those who are different from them. This, in turn, provides members of the higher education community the knowledge, skills and experiences to live and work in an increasingly diverse world (Bergerson & Hufalin, 2011). More recently, Packard (2013) supported how an increase in the United States social landscape Studies positively benefits the higher education community. Packard (2013) suggested that, as a result of more diverse campuses a shift in positive outcomes in retention, satisfaction cultural awareness, intellectual motivation and engagement, capacity to conduct problem solving and stronger self-confidence and ability to have multiple perspectives all play a role in the enhancement of a more diverse campus community. These outcomes, however, are more prevalent among students, which is why this particular study of campuses senior leaders and identity was warranted as higher education communities continue to mirror the increase in diversity within the changing social environment.

In a study, Odell, Mahon and Wang (2003) suggested that a growth in higher education is the growth in diversity on college and university campuses, identifying that this growth in diversity is educationally sound and can benefit students of racial groups. Specifically, the researcher supported the notion of diversity scholars who suggested that the literature on racial diversification enhanced the idea that future college graduates are likely to experience a culture that is more racially diverse than past generations (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn & Terenzini, 1996). While Bowman (2013) notes that these changing social environments may not fully reflect that of college and university campuses, data and literature are critical to the idea that institutions of higher education are beginning to notice a shift in student diversity on their campuses and, therefore, must respond to an increasingly diverse environment. Research studies
strongly identify what colleges and universities need to be doing in preparation and response to increasingly growing diversity within various social environments.

Drawing from the notion that changing social environments are beginning to mirror that on college campuses, it seems appropriate for institutions of higher education to consider ways in which they create opportunities for students and administrators to develop a greater openness to diversity and strengthen their diversity awareness (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn & Terenzini, 1996). In a recent article, Dr. Nicole Bowman (2013) from the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University summarized the changing demographic with this following excerpt:

“The population of the United States is becoming increasingly heterogeneous. While the number of non-Hispanic Whites grew by only 1.2% between 2000 and 2010, the population increase during this decade was substantial among Hispanics/Latinos (43%), Asians (43%), Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders (35%), and people who identify with two or more races (32%). Trends toward greater pluralism are also apparent for other demographic categories, including a 223% increase in the foreign-born population from 1970 to 2000. These shifts within the overall population are paralleled by changes among U.S. college campuses, which represents a population that are now considerably less likely to be White, male, traditional college age (18–24 years old), U.S.-born, and Christian than in previous decades. Thus, the ability to interact effectively across multiple forms of difference has become increasingly important for today’s college campuses.”

Bowman’s excerpt, in addition to the aforementioned study, supported the problem of practice for this study in that it addressed the need for colleges and universities to respond to
these changes in diversity. One way to draw attention and address these changes is to explore the problem of practice more deeply to bring attention to social identity among leaders such as Vice President’s for Student Affairs (VPSAs). This attention will help VPSAs be more aware of their individual social identity experiences and how it may impact their approach to leadership on a campus that is becoming more diverse. Leaders such as VPSAs need to develop an awareness of social identity and its’ impact on leadership in order to conceptualize how changing social environments in society impacts organizations such as college and university campuses.

The data on changing social environments in the United States and its impact is an indication of what colleges and universities are beginning to mirror on their campuses (Bowman, 2013). As a result, higher education must develop practices and strategies to provide diversity awareness on college and university campuses. This study revealed that literature supported the idea that with social environments becoming more diverse, colleges and universities must make the necessary adjustments to reflect these changes.

This section presented literature and data that showed the change in demographics in the United States and its’ impact on college and university campuses, which illustrated why increasing awareness of areas such as social identity is critical to help understand how it impacted leadership and aspects of an organizational culture.

**Higher Education**

Initial beginnings of higher education emerged with a plan to focus on education and scholarship. Overtime, it would evolve to include scientific research, but only after it spent decades studying the works of renowned thinkers such as Aristotle (Higher Education, 2014). However, in recent decades, higher education not only focuses on education and research, but is also an institution that promotes economic growth, social justice and new models and
advancements for learning, both in and out of the classroom (Higher Education, 2014). With immense financial pressure, higher education is forced to evolve and change quickly to meet government, state and local demands (Higher Education, 2014). In higher education, research remains at the core of institutional values as many colleges and universities are seeing a push for interdisciplinary tracks and implementing approaches and experiments that will produce the best educated students or students that have the greatest academic potential (Higher Education, 2014). Universities are constantly responding to the needs of students, faculty while also maintaining compliance of laws, both state and local (Higher Education, 2014).

Currently, higher education is forced to do more with less resources while accommodating a more diverse and challenged student population, increase in diversity among professionals (Shugart, 2013). Further, higher education is working to overcome economic challenges and simultaneously produce growth by identifying strategies to meet the demands of institutional outcomes, increased graduation rates and rigor in STEM disciplines and serving students with financial challenges, more student loan debt and a lifestyle that experiences poverty (Shugart, 2013). Higher education is challenged with assessing resources and reallocating resources to meet the needs of the organization. There is extreme pressure on higher education to produce. While combating the lack of resources and resistance across today’s college and university campuses, leaders in higher education must engage in the process of cultural change to meet extraordinary demands (Shugart, 2013). Shugart (2013) notes that organizational culture will determine the limits and possibilities of institutional goals and strategies. Student affairs plays a critical role in producing out of the classroom initiatives, policies and programs for students and as the leader of student affairs, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs have a major responsibility to strategically engage students in models for
learning on their college campus. Given this, studying the identities of leaders drew attention to understanding self and others during a period in higher education where diverse experiences and perspectives have an impact on the organizational culture.

**Student Affairs.** The division of student affairs on most college or university campuses is comprised of administrative units that provide out of the classroom support services for key stakeholders of the college community such as students, faculty, parents, alumni, community member or other staff members at the college (Culp & Dungy, 2012). Student support services include programs, activities and services provided by the division of student affairs on a college or university campus (Culp & Dungy, 2012). Such support services are housing, athletics, career services, Greek life, public safety, student activities, financial aid, health and wellness, orientation, recruitment, student conduct, community service, student life and leadership, multicultural services and international students (Culp & Dungy, 2012). While this list is not exhaustive, it offers a comprehensive inventory of services student affairs is charged to provide and lead at an institution. Each of these areas traditionally has a director and staff to oversee the day-to-day operations of the area (Bass, 2006). Ultimately, the Dean of Students oversees the day-to-day services of these administrative units, which are ultimately all directed by the Vice President for Student Affairs (Bass, 2006). Student Affairs focuses its work on student development, being able to critical look at student development as a goal and theory (Culp & Dungy, 2012). In theory, student development identifies ways in which students develop and grow from their involvement in college (Culp & Dungy, 2012). As a goal, student development focuses on the work of the student affairs professional on the campus level that are committed to consistently providing programs and services that help students to become engaged in leadership experiences and out-of-the-classroom learning (Culp & Dungy, 2012). Student Affairs provides
the core experiences of student engagement that is critical for a student to succeed during their college experience.

**Vice President for Student Affairs.** Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSA) are instrumental leaders in higher education and more importantly on a college campus. A VPSA role can be defined on most campuses as the senior student affairs professional leading a division of student affairs at a college or university. This individual serves as the Chief Student Affairs Officer for the institution and typically reports to a vice chancellor or president. In addition to leading the division of student affairs, a large part of their portfolio is strategic planning, fiscal management, global perspective and institutional perspective versus divisional perspective (Bass, 2006). In addition, Dung (2003) emphasizes that the Vice President for Student Affairs “responds to student, faculty, staff, parents, community members and others concerned with student-related issues or concerns that arise on campus” (p. 346). The Vice President for Student Affairs is also charged with leading a division of diverse members, creating community while also reinforcing community and institutional standards to maintain a safe and welcoming community for everyone (Dungy, 2003).

Often, VPSAs are leading or participating in gatherings within the collegial environment, meeting with individuals and groups on various levels of the organization. For a VPSA, much of their work is centered on student engagement with a particular focus on global perspectives, long-range strategic planning, institutional viewpoints versus divisional perceptions and fiscal management (Bass, 2006). In addition, depending on institutional type and size a VPSA may also have a role in student advocacy, student governance and staff supervision (Bass, 2006). A VPSA must always keep a critical lens of understanding that a college or university is a complex organization that operates as a business in addition to an educational environment (Bass, 2006).
The VPSA is responsible for maintaining a strategic plan for the division of student affairs that includes building renovation, student engagement, retention and other areas of the out of the classroom experience for students. The VPSA may also be pulled into leading recruitment and fundraising initiatives with key senior university administrators. While Bass (2006) and Dungy (2003) note many of the responsibilities and roles of a VPSA, diversity and social justice are not a consistently a primary focus for this role, especially with relationship to identity (Roper, 2005).

Many of diversity concerns for VPSA are based on the enrollment of diverse students. However, minimal attention is given to the lived experiences of individuals and how those experiences impact their time on a college campus. Thus, conducting a study of this nature was warranted to provide the space for VPSAs to reflect and think critically about their own social identities and how their identities impacted their approach as leaders for their organization. The next section provides an understanding of social identity within the context of organizational environments among leaders in higher education.

**Social Identity**

It is vital for one to comprehend the impact of social identity on leadership among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. Before discussing the history of the complexities of social identity theory and its’ connection to leadership and organizational culture, the larger context of understanding social identity and its application in social and organizational environments should be considered. According to Stets and Burke (2000) social identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group. A social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category” (pg. 225). Seminal theorist, Tajfel (1986) cites that this individual’s social identification with a particular social identity group also holds significant value and emotional
attachment to a social identity group. Examples of social identity groups include race, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, ethnicity, or national origin, to name a few. Stets and Burke’s research as well as other researchers work on social identity provide evidence that Tajfel’s historical explanation of social identity continues to be relevant in contemporary social identity research and literature. Seminal theorists such as Tajfel created a foundation of defining social identity, which has evolved over time.

Burford (2012) suggest that social identity is defined as an individual or group based on similarities and differences among one another. Burford (2012) also contends that social identity is shared within a particular social identity group and also provides an understanding for shared social action. Jans, Postmes and Van der Zee (2012) study shares that social identity is a result of historical and present day experiences. Jans, Postmes and Van der Zee (2012) suggest that social identity may link individuals and groups to the social world and offer the connection between the individual and society. As a result, individuals align with in-groups and out-groups based on their social identities (Jans, Postmes and Van der Zee, 2012). Social identity may also frame intergroup relations, group process and the social self as part of social identity formation (Jans, Postmes and Van der Zee, 2012).

**Organizational Culture and Social Identity.** Diversity in the workplace includes a multitude of social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation and nationality (Allen, 1995). In Mumby (2013), Mary Parker Follett stated (1924), “fear of difference is dread of life itself” (p. 301). This quote addresses the challenges and fears organizations face to create an inclusive culture, accepting and welcoming to all social identities. Studies posit how organizational members must work collectively to create a diverse workplace environment and develop strategies to promote the integration of equality in the
workplace (Allen, 1995). Further, studies theorize that diversity in the workplace increases organizational performance and helps organizations pay attention and add value to cultural differences in the organization (Dinsbach, Feij, de Vries, 2007). The study contends that in a utopian environment all organizational members are treated equally and members and organizations alike can work together effectively across difference in the workplace (Dinsbach, Feij, de Vries, 2007). However, the study also conveys that in practice this hypothesis is not always the experience for all organizational members, particularly those who identify with marginalized identities and encounter identity oppression and prejudice in their organization (Dinsbach, Feij, de Vries, 2007). This understanding of changing organizational environments and organizational culture is critical for leaders to consider in order to approach leadership in a way that promotes a message of social equity for all its members and to help create social change across diverse groups in the workplace. This type of leadership approach cannot be done effectively without a true understanding of individual social identity and the lived experience of social identity to conceptualize how these experiences informs an individual’s approach to leadership in their organization.

Cultural diversity significantly impacts organizations. Durant and Shepherd (2009) discussed the significance associated with integrating culturally diverse individuals and groups in an organization. Often, organizational members make certain cultural assumptions and biases, which can affect an organization. Studies from Schein (2010) cite that to understand culture in an organization one must “see the world through a cultural lens” (p. 13). The literature suggest that this is critical because it develops competencies in analyzing culture, which offers you the ability to effectively identify culture, interpret culture and communicate across cultural differences in your organization. Further, Schein’s research unveils three levels of culture that defines culture
based on shared values and assumptions of a group—1) artifacts, 2) espoused beliefs and 3) values and basic underlying assumptions (see table below). Artifacts focus on visible structures and processes and observed behavior Schein (2010). Espoused beliefs and values explore organizational goals, values, ideologies and the outcome of this is that rationalizations may or may not be aligned with artifacts Schein (2010). Lastly, basic underlying assumptions are unconscious basic beliefs; and values that determine behavior, perception, thought and feeling in an organization Schein (2010). The three levels of culture influence how organizations are developed and how they integrate the differences that exist in an organization. The literature derived from Schein (2010) suggests that we consider these three levels of culture in organizations to effectively create cultures that are inclusive and allow members of all identity groups to perform well and feel welcomed in their organizational environment.

This analysis of organizational culture and social identity validates the technique that researchers argue, which is that organizational inclusivity and organizational openness to cultural diversity is critical for an equitable and inclusive organization. Individual, group and organizational identity play an integral role in an organization. Stets and Burke (2010) discuss the intersectionality of social identity theory and its’ impact on organizational culture where their study concluded that members within an organization may view themselves as part of the in-group or out-group in their organization based on their identities and the inclusion of their identities within the organization. If the inclusion of difference across identities in the organization is not open to all cultures and personalities in the organization, members may feel a sense of exclusion as an out-group member (Stets and Burke 2010). Although out-groups exist, organizations must do an effective job to always create an engaging and welcoming space for all identities to be represented and to feel part of the community (Stets and Burke 2010). Another
concept Stets and Burke (2010) highlighted was the notion of salience. Salience refers to the identity that an individual or group feel most connected to, which can be created based on the representation of that particular identity in the organization or by the experiences and journey of that individual (Stets and Burke 2010). Regardless of how individual saliency is defined, organizations must consider this to incorporate a positive culture that allows for one’s salient identity to be welcomed and valued in the organization (Stets and Burke 2010). Stets and Burke (2010) draw on the idea that social identity theory adds value to understanding how to work with individuals and groups of different identity groups in the workplace.

This section introduced how culture plays a role in organizations and framed its importance and role in considering the social identities of organizational members and the critical need to create inclusive organizational cultures. As this study explored social identity among leaders in higher education organizations, this overview of organizational culture and its connection to identity was a critical perspective to consider.

**Leadership and Social Identity**

The literature on social identity suggests that it is critical for leaders to develop awareness of their social identities. Ruderman and Ernst (2010) conclude, “Individual membership in social groups affects how others see them and respond and react to them. For leaders, any quest for self-understanding needs to take into account the way others respond to their social identities. Understanding the dynamics of their own social identities helps people to better appreciate the views of others and to see how and why others who have had different life experiences may also have diverse ideas and assumptions about how to lead or what is right and wrong. This appreciation is essential if leaders are to effectively bridge differences” (p. 15). This assertion supports why this researcher intended to explore the social identity experiences of Vice
Presidents for Student Affairs to understand how those experiences impacted their approach as leaders. Ruderman and Ernst (2010) offer a critical look at social identities and leadership provides empirical evidence for this study.

Similarly, scholars in Chavez and Sanlo (2013) edited book, *Identity and Leadership: Informing Our Lives, Informing Our Practice*, discuss the intersection of identity and individual leadership highlighting that student affairs professionals can use their social experiences to better understand how personal identities influence their work with students and colleagues. In their work, they discuss that by connecting identity and leadership, student affairs professionals can be better practitioners and incorporate an intentional social justice approach in their work. This synthesis of the literature for this citation articulates the importance for further research on identity and its impact on leadership with a specific lens on Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. Research also suggests that identity informs leadership styles (Ospina & Su, 2009). Social identity, cultural perspective and the way leaders approach leadership are cautiously navigated because of race (Ospina & Su, 2009). In the research, Ospina & Su (2009) discuss that leaders from historically underrepresented backgrounds frequently encounter discrimination and exclusion in the workplace (Ospina & Su, 2009). While overt discrimination appears to be decreasing in the majority of organizations, there is a heightened increase with more subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice (Offermann, Basford, Graebner, Jaffer, De Graff & Kaminsky, 2014). This form of discrimination negatively impacts the members of the organization that are most affected and threatens their well-being within the organizational environment (Offermann, Basford, Graebner, Jaffer, De Graff & Kaminsky, 2014). Offermann, Basford, Graebner, Jaffer, De Graff and Kaminsky (2014) recent study shares the impact of ethnic harassment among members in an organization also has negative affect on those who are bystanders to this type of
harassment which makes this type of organizational culture a concern for everyone. Despite the discrimination and prejudice historically underrepresented people encounter in the workplace, Ospina and Su (2009) research concludes that leaders from historically underrepresented backgrounds will use their racial identity and negative experiences because of race as a source of mobilization and strength. Understanding this complex experience of historically underrepresented people encounter is critical for everyone, especially leaders because this social awareness will help increase cultural competency among leaders to be able to work toward creating inclusive workplace organizations.

Social Identity Theory

In both seminal and contemporary research, social identity theorists state that individuals have a natural tendency to place others into groups based on similarities and differences, often time unconsciously (Ruderman & Ernst, 2010). The development of social identity theory has its origins as a European social psychology theory in Britain by Tajfel on social factors in perception (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). The framework of social identity emerged from a collaboration between Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the late 1970s. In 1979, Tajfel and Turner designed social identity theory to describe intergroup behavior and privilege based on group status, difference and the ability to have access to move from one in-group to another. In fact, this framework suggests that an individual’s self is included in their personal and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Tajfel and Turner (1986) cited that personal identity is an individual’s characteristics where an individual’s social identity is decided based on the individuals’ salient identity group. Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament (1971) indicate that personal identity and social identity is an exploration of self-identification where an individual develops a sense of who they are, which speaks directly to their values, beliefs, behaviors and goals.
Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament (1971) emphasize that social identity was constructed by group membership within a larger community. For example, an individual may identify with their gender, religion or national origin and align their own personal beliefs, values and behaviors with those identities (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). However, the challenge is when an individual’s identity is aligned by group membership of a larger community, where those identities are socially constructed and the individual and personal values, beliefs and behaviors are often marginalized and omitted from the larger context of an individual’s particular identity (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Personal experiences of an individual’s social identities can help them understand in what way their identity is socially constructed, which was later developed by scholars in contemporary research.

**Contemporary foundation of social identity.** Since 1979, social identity theory (SIT) has evolved and contemporary researchers (Stets & Burke, 2000) indicate that SIT digs deeper to explore intergroup relations, group process, and the social self on the individual, group and organizational level. Turner (1985) suggested that SIT creates structure for individuals to define their social worlds and place themselves into groups and compartmentalize themselves into selected groups, which is commonly known as self-categorization. Hogg and Terry (2000) indicate that this notion of contemporary understanding of social identity theory is present in two elements of SIT, categorization and self-enhancement. Hogg and Terry (2000) define categorization as a production of group distinctive stereotypes, normative perceptions and actions, highlighting experience, which is subjectively meaningful in specific context. Hogg and Terry (2000) explain self-enhancement as an approach, which guides the categorization process by distinguishing in-groups and out-groups. Tajfel & Turner (1986) emphasized that “positive social identity is based to a large extent on favorable comparisons that can be made between the
in-group and some relevant out-groups (p. 15). In-groups are high-favored and members see themselves in a positive light and out-groups are not favored and are on the outside of the group. For example, race in the larger community. White people are members of the in-groups, whereas, non-White individuals such as Black, Latino or Asian are considered out-group members of the larger community (Stets & Burke, 2000). Further, this study supported these concepts of social identity and its applicability to this research.

Contemporary scholars, Stets and Burke (2000) suggest it is critical to be able to understand out-group and in-group differences in organizations. Members of both groups should know of what it means to be part of the other group. Hechanova’s (2012) research implies that understanding in-group and out-group differences is critical because one must be fully aware of the access and privilege associated with in-group members and the inequities and marginalization aligned with out-group members. An indication of how critical it is to have this lens of awareness was noted in Scott’s (2007) research where he argued that an individual’s social identity could have a significant impact on the community and organizational level. Scott (2007) contested that it is critical to have a clear understanding and awareness of the individual identities that exist in communities and organizations. Further, it is a critical to have a lens, which looks to understand issues of identity and identification as they relate to organizations (Scott, 2007). Ruderman and Ernst (2010) insist that organizations create an environment where it is comfortable for members in the organization to discuss issues of social identity and share individual identities. This will promote self-awareness in the organization and encourage everyone to be authentic about self-identity, which will make a positive and significant impact on the organizational environment. Ruderman and Ernst (2010) provide an example of how an organization strategically approached the acceptance of social identities in the workplace, which
resulted in employees sharing feelings and experiences about social identity and challenging one another to ask the difficult questions to probe and learn more about one another and their individual experiences with identities such as race, gender or sexual orientation. Despite difference social groups, this creates a sense of openness where individuals benefit from knowing one another more intimately (Ruderman and Ernst, 2010). This organizational environment that is created by the organization’s leaders results in an open climate where people identifying with different social identity groups can be themselves, successful in their role and develop relationships with other members in the organization (Ruderman and Ernst, 2010).

Torres, Jones and Renn (2009) study on understanding how social identity is conceptualized in student affairs is of particular importance because it provides context of social identity in connection to student affairs, which is where the sample population of this study is being collected. In their research, they conclude that social identity is shaped by how one organizes particular experiences within their environment and situates those experiences around oneself. This study also introduced the idea that social identity is also commonly understood as one’s personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups and the ways one subsequently expresses the relationship (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009). Jones and McEwen (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity describes this concept of social identity, highlighting the notion of identity salience in the context of multiple identities suggesting that the more salient a social identity is to the individual, the closer to the core it is moved. Therefore, the more integrated that social identity is to a core sense of self, the greater the impact on the individual. These points from this research on social identity within the context of student affairs provided empirical and theoretical support to the understanding of social identity. Torres, Jones
& Renn, (2009) study aligns with this research study by underscoring the social identity focus on understanding self and personal identity.

**Critics of Social Identity Theory.** Seminal researchers have critiqued social identity theory suggesting that it can be perceived as a general theory and not specific enough to comprehensively understand social groups (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Further, (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995) indicate that social identity theory does not develop group processes from an interpersonal lens, which can disconnect group members. The concepts embedded in social identity theory draw on the ability to reveal commonalities within social identities among group members, but it can also indicate significant differences among group members. This outcome may create divisions and separatism among members within a particular social identity group and subsequently narrow the self-unification across the various lines of difference in a social group (Carastathis, 2013). Additionally, (Carastathis, 2013) also suggests that the concepts and approach of this theory may also subordinate one or more aspects of an individual’s identity. In doing so, there is the potential that this approach can eliminate the possibilities of an alliance with all those who share in an identity (Carastathis, 2013).

In contrast, Willetts and Clarke (2014) also contest that social identity theory and the categories among the various social identities can act as a social movement to engage members to act in solidarity to combat exclusionary behavior that may come from noticeable differences among social identities. This sense of group organizing can be effective in bringing different groups of people together across multiple social identities (Willetts & Clarke, 2014). The notion of unification among members within a social identity group is a significant factor of social identity theory, however critics remind practitioners that social identity theory can also divide social groups or members within one social group, which can be a negative aspect of the theory.
Theoretical Framework Rationalization. The theoretical framework used for this study was most appropriate because it informed the problem of practice for the research being conducted (Creswell, 2013). From this chapter, the researcher and practitioner could clearly identify an alignment between the applied theoretical lens and the problem of practice.

One reason why the social identity theory was necessary for this present study was because it framed a critical discussion into understanding more deeply social identities and the lived experiences of one’s social identities. Guerrero, Sylvestre and Muresanu (2013) cite that on college and university campuses members of these communities do not always feel comfortable and are often marginalized. Subsequently, leaders on college campuses who are charged to ensure members of the community do not feel marginalized must commit to understanding the social-self and establish a clear understanding of their lived experiences of social identity in order to identify ways in which these experiences impact how they lead Ruderman and Ernst (2010). Mumby (2013) posits that a leader who possesses cultural sensitivity and competency (e.g. understanding of social self) can effectively lead an organization across difference. This type of leader has an increased level of cultural awareness, knowledge and skills to positively impact the experience of marginalized members of the organization (Mumby, 2013).

The social identity theory provided sufficient reasoning and conceptual context to frame this understanding for the researcher who conducted this study. In addition, this theory aligned with the research question. This connection between the theory, research question and problem of practice were effectively linked to the purpose of this study. This study helped frame the importance of understanding social identity in the role of a leader and how it impacted leadership in higher education.
Social Identification. Social identification explores an individual’s affiliation with a group that is perceived in a more obvious form of identity (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). There is a strong connection with members within that group because of the identification. For example, social identity across race would indicate that individuals that identify as black typically affiliate with members of a group that also identify as black, particularly in social environments. This social identification provides a level of comfort for members in groups. An assumption identified in the literature suggests individuals’ self-concept and social behavior are structured by perceived social relationships where social identification plays a dynamic role to how an individual responds and affiliates in the social world (Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, Haslam & Jetten, 2014). There are significant implications for an individual based on how they socially identify in the social world that can be both beneficial and harmful to an individual (Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, Haslam & Jetten, 2014).

Drawing from literature, Asforth and Mael (1989) theorize that social identification is viewed as a cognitive concept that is not always linked to an individuals’ characteristics, but more so on how an individual perceives self-aligned with a particular group. Previously mentioned, but critical, is the notion that social identification is often seen as an individual aligning with a particular group based on failure and success experiences that may occur within that group (Asforth & Mael, 1989). There is a commitment to identifying with a group based on what is experienced whether a success or failure.

While social identification refers to self when aligning to social categories such as identities like race, gender or sexual orientation, social identification is also important to the internalization of self when considering an individual values, behavior and principles (Knobloch-Westemrick, 2010). Social identification with a group and self is similar because often an
individuals’ identification with a group is typically established on the identification of self mainly to satisfy and gain approval of the other within a particular group (Asforth and Mael, 1989). This conclusion indicates that social identification with a group and self is complementary of one another. Leaders in organizations can develop its’ members and create an organizational culture that allows individuals preference to create their own understanding of social identification on both the individual and group level within their organization.

Social Comparison. Seminal theorist, Leon Festinger (1954), was the first to explore social comparison. According to social comparison theory, this cognitive process involves one individual comparing self to another or to self in which these comparisons are considered in the evaluation of an individual (Boen, et al, 2002; Snyder, Higgins, and Stucky, 1983). Since its’ evolution in 1954, research in the literature identify the cognitive process of social comparison as an individual’s self-development where someone creates, maintains and develops their individual self-concepts (Alicke, 2000). Literature theorizes that the process of social comparison is considered fundamental where it supports the opportunity for individuals to learn about themselves, specifically their characteristics, values, abilities, opinions, behavior, actions, accomplishments and also failures, to name a few (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Willis, 2000; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992).

Social comparison is critical to include in this study’s review because this cognitive process draws on a key component of the individual social identity experiences that may develop during the data collection process. This cognitive process suggests that an individual may compare themselves to someone who is might be in a better position, also known as upward comparison, and also to someone who may be in a more difficult situation, also known as downward comparison, or lastly to their own self at various junctures of their life, known as
temporal comparison (Blanz, Mum mendey, Mielke & Klink, 1998). These comparisons can develop as a result of an individual’s experience with one or more of their social identities, which could subsequently impact how they approach leadership in their organization. As a result of social comparison being very common, literature recommends that individuals conduct self-evaluations to continually consider ways in which their own self-knowledge may not always be a reflection of what others in various social contexts such as organizational or personal environments may see (de Hoog, 2013). This type of reflection will help individuals overcome the constant challenge of social comparison, particularly within the experiences of complex social identities (de Hoog, 2013).

**Social Categorization and Self-Enhancement.** Stets and Burke (2000) discussed two elements of social identity theory; categorization and self-enhancement. Social Categorization is a production of group distinctive stereotypes, normative perceptions, and actions, highlighting experience, which is subjectively meaningful in specific context (Stets & Burke, 2000). Ortiz and Behm-Morawitz (2015) describe social categorization in that it establishes power and status relations between people and that the benefits associated with a group are generalized to members of the group. Their literature continues to articulate that through this process individuals are able to form in-group and out-group distinctions that favor the in-group (Ortiz & Behm-Morawitz, 2015).

This understanding of social categorization offers a foundation into understanding self-enhancement and how this component guides the social categorization process by distinguishing in-groups and out-groups (Stets & Burke, 2000). In-groups are high-favored and members see themselves in a positive light and out-groups are not favored and on the outside of the group (Stets & Burke, 2000). The alignment of social identity to social contexts is the main component
of categorization. Specifically, when an individual seeks to rationalize or reason in order to make meaning within a particular context the individual then integrates whatever categorization is most appropriate and most effectively articulates or aligns with the commonalities and differences among individuals (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). For example, literature notes that privileged social identity groups such White, Male or Heterosexual, based on how these identities are socially constructed will be viewed as in-groups (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010). Whereas, out-groups in society may be perceived as Black and Latino, Lesbian, Gay and Bi-Sexual or Women, typically identifying with a marginalized socially constructed social identity (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010). With this example the outcome of how these groups are viewed either as in-groups or out-groups in the self-enhancement process are initially classified during the categorization process based on specific contexts, but also is a product of group distinctive stereotypes, normative perceptions, and actions and experiences in society. To that end, Liu (2012) proposes that behavior in intergroup situations is qualitatively different than that involved in interpersonal situations (including transformations of the self and relationships with others). Furthermore, Liu (2012) also argues that competition over access and resources is the driver of intergroup conflict, but psychological identification can produce preference toward the in-group. Another notable takeaway from the research of Liu (2012) highlights that when in-group and out-group engage in social comparisons often intergroup conflict arises.

**Summary**

Studies inform that in qualitative research literature reviews are not as significant as other phases of qualitative studies such as methodology and findings (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, literature on qualitative studies suggests, “qualitative research relies more on the views of participants in the study and less on the direction identified in the literature” (p. 17). This review
synthesized studies and literature by providing insight into understanding social identity, which was critical for this particular study to determine how social identity impacted an individual’s approach to leadership in their organization. The literature presented evidence of how much social identity plays in the experiences of individuals and groups. The literature review attempted to create a broader awareness of how social identity is of greater importance when considering leadership in organizations.

In this review, the researcher identified literature and studies that articulated how social identity theory was the most appropriate framework for this study. The researcher attempted to address social identity by including literature from seminal and contemporary scholars to synthesize the findings from studies and make a distinct connection to the theoretical framework to ensure consistent alignment. Employing this theoretical framework resulted in identifying outcomes that the researcher hoped to gain from investigating the social identity experiences of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and its impact on how they lead an organization.

Much of the literature discusses social identity in a broader scope as in relationship to leadership. There are few studies, however, that have drawn specifically on the social identity experiences of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and its impact on leadership. This remains limited and presents gaps in the research. The literature offers a foundation on social identity and warrants a need for further exploration in more specific areas of social identity such as exploring social identity of Vice Presidents for Students Affairs and how experiences related to their social identity impact their leadership approach on a college campus. Filling this gap in research will contribute significantly to literature on social identity and also contribute to practices administrators can implement on our increasingly more diverse college and university campuses. The subsequent chapter details the research design applied in this study.
Chapter III: Research Design

This chapter presents a brief description of the research design that was used for this study. Most importantly, this chapter articulates how the research paradigm, design and tradition were each aligned to the central research question. In this chapter, the researcher described several components critical of this study: 1) the study participants, site location and how participants were recruited, 2) sampling strategy and ethical considerations, 3) researcher positionality, 4) the data collection process, 5) data storage and analysis approach and 6) strategies to maintain trustworthiness throughout the study. Finally, this chapter identified potential limitations of the study.

Research Questions

The goal of this study was to explore how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs made sense of their social identities and of its impact, if any, on their leadership approach. It also aimed to increase awareness of how social identity impacted leadership. A comprehensive review of the literature indicated a need for investigation of social identity and its impact on leadership in higher education. For example, studies urge higher education to engage in the process of cultural change to meet extraordinary demands of a changing organizational culture (Shugart, 2013). More specifically, student affairs leaders such as Vice Presidents for Student Affairs are critical in developing an on-campus culture that engages students in learning outside of the classroom. As a result, understanding identity and its impact on leadership has tremendous value for the changing culture of higher education. Leaders must draw attention to understanding self and others during a period in higher education where diverse experiences and perspectives have an impact on the organizational culture.
The researcher applied interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodology for this investigation to gain an understanding to the participants’ experiences and perceptions. This research used three cognitive processes of social identity theory: 1) social categorization, 2) social identification, and 3) social comparison (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). This paradigm was utilized to provide clarity of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) social identity and the impact on their ability to lead organizations.

IPA seeks to make sense into understanding the participants’ life and experience in the world by suggesting a broad research question to create a space for interpretation and in-depth analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In order to conduct in-depth interpretative phenomenological analysis of the phenomenon, one broad research question was used to address the experiences of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs social identities to help understand, increase awareness and make meaning of social identity. The researcher explored categories of social identity such as race, gender and sexual orientation by applying the following research questions to the data collection process:

*How do Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) make sense and develop awareness of their social identities and How does 6 Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) of colleges and universities understanding of social identity impact their leadership approach?*

This research question focused specifically on VPSAs reflection and interpretation of their lived experience across their experiences of social identities to determine if awareness or lack of awareness of social identity impacted their ability to lead. It was intended that this research question would lead VPSAs to explore and critically reflect on their own social identities. The purpose of this research question sought to serve as a window into making sense and meaning of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) social identity experiences in
connection to awareness of self and others and its impact on leadership approach in the organization.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

**Qualitative research.** According to Creswell (2013) there are three main study designs: 1) qualitative, 2) quantitative, and 3) mixed methods. For this study, the researcher used a qualitative research design. Merriam (2001) suggests that a qualitative research design allows an investigator to explain social phenomenon without interrupting the current situation of its environment. In a qualitative study, the researcher identified participants to collect data, analyzes codes and interprets the results of the study (Merriam, 2001). Moreover, qualitative studies allow researchers to gather data that provides a thick description and is rich in content, which helps develops themes and descriptive conclusions (Merriam, 2001).

Creswell (2013) suggested that a researcher should use one of the following five research traditions for a qualitative research design: 1) case study, 2) narrative, 3) grounded theory, 4) ethnographic study and 5) phenomenological. For this particular study, the researcher employed a phenomenological research tradition, specifically the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodological approach to learn about the unique lived experiences shared by a group of study participants (Creswell, 2013). IPA is the most appropriate methodology for this qualitative research study because it aligned with determining how one made sense of lived experiences and used a detailed approach to investigate the participants’ life and experience in the world (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In IPA, there is a critical effort to acquire insight with the individual’s subjective reports of events (Fade, 2004). Breakwell, Smith, and Wright (2012) described IPA to have a connection to the study of social cognition, which
explores differences in individual meanings related to experiences based on the understanding that individuals are involved with different parts of reality.

According to Creswell (2013), in IPA the researcher should have direct inquiry and contact with sample participants’ qualitative research. This particular study engaged with each participant closely, spending significant time understanding the social identity experiences of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) to learn how social identity impacted leadership.

IPA looks at multiple traditions of philosophy such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Brocki & Warden, 2006). IPA models phenomenological inquiry in that it aligns with understanding the individual’s personal reports of experiences rather than making meaning of objective reasoning. IPA also employs a hermeneutic tradition where it focuses on individual interpretation. Hermeneutic analysis suggests the importance of interpretation to make meaning of particular groups of individuals that are linked to specific lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Fade, 2004; Wilcke, 2002). Idiography is another influence of the IPA research design. Idiography aligns with specific individual descriptions and the process is to fairly consider the participant’s account of the experience (Breakwell, Smith, and Wright, 2012). Using an idiographic research tradition, the researcher was able to align rationally and emotionally with a participant’s experiences with social identity while consistently remaining objective.

In summary, because the research investigated the social identities of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs), IPA was the descriptive approach used to make meaning of and interpret the lived experiences of the study participants.

**Research paradigm.** Wellington (2000) suggested that paradigms are the lens of a study through which the data collected will be interpreted. For this particular study, the interpretive-
subjective research paradigm was used (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The interpretive-subjective paradigm aligned with this research study because it sought “to understand and explain the social world primarily from the point of view of the actors involved” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 226).

Using this research paradigm lens, the researcher was immersed in the study and engaged with the participants, absorbing the significance of understanding their social identity and lived experiences. The interpretive-subjective paradigm was the identified research paradigm for this study because it also aligned with the purpose of understanding the lived experiences of the participants from their own perspective.

**Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach.** This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a methodological approach. IPA was an appropriate methodological approach for this study because it concentrated on making sense and meaning of lived experiences. More specifically, IPA helps make sense into understanding the participants’ life and experience in the world. Hofhuis, Van Der Zee & Otten’s (2012) research proves why a study that concentrated on making sense and meaning of social identity lived experiences was warranted, suggesting that many leaders in higher education often, do not understand or are unaware of how their lived experiences affect how they lead. Guerrero, Sylvestre & Muresanu, (2013) research suggested that because of this social identity unawareness and lack of understanding, leaders often marginalize individuals they lead, particularly individuals of historically underrepresented social identities. For this study, the research question intended to allow the researcher to interpret how participants experience and describe their social identity experiences.

IPA is a moderately new research tradition. IPA was developed by Professor Jonathan Smith, Department of Psychology at Birkbeck, and University of London in 1996. Most
commonly used in psychology research, since 1996, IPA has evolved to reach multiple academic disciplines. Recently, more researchers started using IPA in multiple social science disciplines (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Breakwell, Smith, and Wright (2012) articulate that IPA aligns closely with cognitive psychology and social cognition. Further, seminal theorists such as Fade (2004) named IPA as being theoretically established in critical realism and the social cognition paradigm, justifying that critical realism acknowledges that reality occurs separate of human conceptualization.

Similar to a phenomenological study, IPA offers a deeper way to gather rich information and meaningful qualitative data, which provide an understanding researchers can use to analyze and make meaning of a particular phenomenon, shared by participants (Thomas, 2006). IPA explores participants’ perception or account of the lived experience (Creswell 2013). This qualitative research approach also focuses on gathering data that draws on participant lived experiences and creates the space to develop personal meaning and sense-making of a specific phenomenon (Thomas, 2006).

Employing IPA allowed the researcher to critically analyze and interpret the phenomenon. The researcher identified social identity experiences related to race, gender and sexual orientation as common phenomena being studied among participants during the data collection phase of this research study (Thomas, 2006). This ability to use interpretation to analyze a phenomenon added significant value to this level of interpretation and the overall study. Ultimately, this approach contributed to a deeper level of understanding as it related to the topic being studied.
Participants and Site

For this study, the researcher sought to identify 5-6 participants for this study. The sample population size aligned with the methodology that was used for this study, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). When using IPA Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) suggests between 4-10 participants. According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), “IPA studies usually have a small number of participants and the aim is to revel something of the experience of each of those individuals” (p. 3). Further, IPA is committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 1). By employing the IPA approach, the researcher described in-depth social identity experiences of the participants and connected it to their leadership approach in an organization.

Upon approval of the Institutional Review Board, the researcher use a Script Contact form (Appendix C) for indication of participants and contact a leader in student affairs who identified participants for the researcher to recruit. The point of contact identified participants and made initial contact with them. The researcher contacted prospective participants and used a Recruitment Call document (Appendix A).

Participants of this study served as a Vice President for Student Affairs at a college or university in the United States and met the following criteria: A Vice President for Student Affairs (VPSAs) at a college or university in the United States who served as a VPSA for at least three years. VPSAs represent the most senior position within the organizational structure of the Division of Student Affairs at their college or university. The identified VPSA were encouraged to speak directly to their social identities as it related to their race, gender or sexual orientation. In addition, participants were asked to think critically about social identity and how it impacted their leadership approach. The researcher identified at least one participant to interview that
aligned with each of the following social identities: 1) historically underrepresented male (non-White), 2) historically underrepresented female (non-White), 3) a lesbian; gay; bisexual; transgender or queer (LGBTQ) individual, 4) a participant that identified as a White male and 5) a participant that identified as a White female. Each of the participants for this study were at least thirty-five years old. The researcher intended for this study to offer a specific lens into the experiences of VPSAs across race, gender and sexual orientation social identities to understand how those social identities impacted how VPSA lead in their organization. These descriptors are critical and intentionally employed in this study in order to represent diverse voices of growing demographics on college and university campuses. Bowman (2013) discussed this demographic shift in a study that indicated an increase in racial diversity, which is a significant indicator of why racial identity should be explored among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs.

The racial diversity shift is creating a college community that is less white subsequently the ability to interact effectively across multiple forms of difference has become increasingly important for today’s college campuses (Bowman, 2013). Alvarez and Schneider (2008) discussed in a study that while universities are noticing an increased presence in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (GLBTQ) community and inclusive norms toward gender diversity and while some may say that a college environment is a safe space for GLBTQ students, faculty and staff, there are challenges of acceptance and inclusion that this population encounters. With the growth of gender identities and its intersection with sexual orientation, the challenge of openly identifying as GLBTQ, women or transgender on a college campus needs the attention of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. Therefore, an opportunity for these leaders to reflect and explore sexual orientation identity was critical. This was important to the outcome of the study because there was a need for colleges and universities to draw attention to and address
these changes in diversity. This study achieved this need by exploring this problem of practice more closely and brought attention to social identity among leaders such as Vice President’s for Student Affairs (VPSAs). While this was not an exhaustive study of all social identities, one possible limitation of this study, it used a critical lens to increase awareness of race, sexual orientation and gender identities while also considering the identities of others within a college environment. The researcher intended for this study to provide outcomes for further exploration regarding how leaders in higher education made meaning and were impacted by other social identities. This data informed researchers and practitioners of new knowledge and increased awareness of how social identities impacted leadership. Experiences across various social identities affect how someone leads in an organization. These were also identified in this study.

**Sampling Strategy**

The researcher employed a convenience sample of Vice Presidents for Students for this study (Creswell, 2012). This sampling strategy was appropriate because this study approach specifically used a Scripted Call to a senior administrator that was connected to potential participants that would conveniently help identify participants. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs who were identified as participants agreed to participate in the study because the researcher had access to them or they were willing, available, and able to serve within the capacity of this study (Creswell, 2012). Each of these possible reasons why a Vice President for Student Affairs would participate in the study aligned with the researcher’s approach to identifying participants.

**Data Collection**

The data was collected during 60-90 minute one-on-one in-depth and in person semi-structured interviews with each participant. The semi-structured interview approach allowed the
researcher to ask follow-up questions to the initial open-ended questions that were submitted with the IRB approved interview schedule. The semi-structured interview process was important because, as the researcher, one does not want to limit the possibility for exploration of responses during the interview.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) recommends for an IPA study that the researcher include an interview schedule, allowing the researcher to create a semi-structured agenda for the interview, allow for engaging dialogue to occur, revealing of sensitive issues related to the topic and also will provide some structure to the questions in an appropriate way. Based on the suggestion of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), the researcher included six to ten open-ended interview questions per social identity (along with prompts). During the data collection process, the researcher was always mindful to consider potential themes of the study and also maintain a non-bias approach to anything that arose during conversation, while maintaining a listening ear and a high level of engagement and active presence (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

The data was collected during a face-to-face interview in a meeting space, (hopefully) chosen by the participant. For this study, the researcher employed a semi-structure interview approach, which included an informal and interactive interview experience with open-ended questions, follow-up questions and opportunity for both the researcher and participant to respond to one another. Smith and Osborn (2007, p. 57) contest “semi-structured interview is a form of interviewing that allows the researcher and participant to engage in dialogue whereby initial questions may be modified in the light of possible responses from a participant. The researcher was able to understand interesting and important points that evolved during each interview.” While Smith and Osborn (2007) indicated multiple ways to collect data using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), semi-structured interviews would be most appropriate for this
study because it created an opportunity for the researcher to gather and analyze data of how participants understood and made sense of the lived experiences that occurred.

In an effort to maintain methodological uniformity, the researcher framed each interview by employing a three-part framework. The researcher modeled this approach from Seidman’s (2006) framework suggesting in-depth, open-ended, phenomenological interviewing. With this framework, the interviewer conducted one extended interview that included three components, rather than three separate interviews for each participant. This interview approach for data collection was adapted from Seidman’s (2006):

1. The context of the participants’ social identity experiences will be established and shared.
2. The participants will be asked to recreate the details of their social identity experiences and share in detail what those lived experiences looked like, felt like and how it shapes and informs that as a leader.
3. The participants will be asked to reflect on the meaning of their social identity experiences and how it impacts their approach to leadership within their current organization.

Recording procedures included using an iPad digital audio recorder and note taking during the interview. This approach assisted in organizing thoughts, prompting follow-up questions and drawing conclusions (Creswell, 2012). If the researcher decided not to self-transcribe, a paid confidential, third party would transcribe all interviews. Participants were able to review transcripts upon completion. All interview documents (consent forms, transcriptions and coding) were secured on a password protected Apple MacBook Pro laptop and only accessible to the researcher. In addition, the researcher additionally secured all documents in a safe stored in the
researcher’s personal home. All research documents were uploaded to a password protected Google Drive site. These layers of secured backups are important to note for the safety and security of the participants. To maintain trustworthiness, participants signed the IRB approved consent form before the start of their interview. Participants of this study had access to written materials of their interview to assure validity. The researcher approached the data collection process critically as it was an integral component of this study. This part of the research investigation framed the findings of the study and assisted in the development of themes that emerged with each interview.

**Procedures**

The recruitment and access of participants’ process was completed in stages. Upon obtaining approval from the Northeastern University Internal Review Board (IRB) to conduct this study, the researcher used a Script Contact form (Appendix C). A contact a leader in student affairs helped to identify participants for the researcher to recruit. This point of contact provided participants and made initial contact. The researcher was able to follow-up by contacting prospective participants by using a Recruitment Call document (Appendix A). The researcher made sure that the participants met the criteria of the study; participants of this study were working at a college or university in the United States and had served as a VPSA for at least three years. This criterion was important because VPSAs represent the most senior position within the organizational structure of the Division of Student Affairs at their college or university. Having at least three years of experience allowed the participant to be familiar with the position.

At this stage of the initial contact, interested participants received a letter of invitation, which included a description of the study, the purpose of the inquiry, participant requirement and
a copy of the consent form. In an effort to protect participant confidentiality, a pseudonym was used for each participant throughout the study’s duration. In the invitation letter, additional information was shared such as, 1) understanding that a participant may withdraw from participating in the study at any time, 2) explaining how the study may impact them and 3) possible advantages for participating in this study. For this particular study, no rewards or incentives were given to participants. Upon agreeing to participate in the study, each participant signed the letter of consent and returned it to the researcher in person. Participants then received a background of the researcher’s personal and professional experiences. Upon completion of these procedural stages, the study commenced.

**Data Analysis**

Prior to the onset of the formal data analysis process, the researcher recorded each one-on-one face-to-face interview with an iPhone digital audio recorder. The researcher also used an iPad digital audio recorder as a backup during each interview. Once the interviews were completed, the formal data analysis process began. Researchers recommended various programs to assist in the data transcribing, analysis and coding process of a qualitative study. To this end, the researcher utilized a third party online vendor, Rev Recorder, to transcribe each interview. After the researcher received the transcriptions, the researcher listened to the interview recordings and simultaneously reviewed the transcriptions, taking notes and reading the transcripts closely to compare and ensure accuracy. All of the data from each interview was collected and stored on the researcher’s laptop and under the researcher’s Google Drive account, which are both secured with a password. Multiple readings and note taking occurred for each transcript (see Step 1 below).
Once the audiotapes and transcriptions were critically evaluated, the researcher initiated a comprehensive data analysis process. Based on Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) recommendation, the researcher employed a six-step process of analysis as a methodical procedure that found critical insights, experiences, and perceptions. Their recommended steps are as follows:

Step 1 – read and reread the data
Step 2 – make initial notes
Step 3 – develop emergent themes
Step 4 – search for connections across emergent themes
Step 5 – move to the next case
Step 6 - identify patterns across cases (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009)

This data analysis process required a descriptive approach to identify key findings and themes, therefore the researcher was charged to read and reread transcriptions and take detailed notes. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), the researcher engaged with the data, analyzed and interpreted grammatical placement of why and how a participant stated a particular response. This interpretative analysis required the researcher to fully engage in understanding each participant in order to fully interpret and analysis the experiences, perceptions and insight shared during each interview. To assist with the data analysis process and to add credibility to the study, ensure accuracy and gather a rich analysis of the data, the researcher manually coded and recoded the data several times to identify themes from each interview without Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software programs. This approach contributed to the validity and reliability of the study. From this analysis approach, the initial themes identified served as a standard for other themes that emerged during the analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). This investigation of the data connected the participants’ experiences, which revealed patterns
related to each individual. This stage of the data analysis process was critical because the researcher identified themes, which informed the outcome of the study. As themes emerged, the researcher connected themes that aligned with participant’s experiences with social identity and its’ impact leadership approach.

This data analysis process approach informs the researcher of the participants’ experiences, perceptions and insights which contributes to a shared and descriptive interpretation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007; Fade, 2004). Naturally working in student affairs, employing IPA required the researcher’s positionality with participants to understand the potential of bias during the study. Despite this, the researcher remained as non-biased as possible and established this at the onset of the interview process. Fade (2004) recommends that IPA researchers eliminate preconceived assumptions and bias during the data analysis process while also navigating the ability to interpret the phenomenon being study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Creswell (2012) and Chenail (1995) suggested that ethical practices should be at the forefront of every research study. Given this, the researcher agreed that maintaining ethics and identifying a secure process for data storage of this study was critical. Butin (2010) also supports the idea of maintaining ethics of a study, indicating, “protection for participants goes beyond confidentiality and anonymity” (p. 106). The researcher submitted the appropriate paperwork for approval of this study to the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once approved by the IRB, the researcher identified Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSA) who would voluntarily agree to participate in the study. This IRB process was critical to promise privacy and confidentiality for each participant.
In an effort to consistently maintain a high level of ethics and integrity throughout the study, each participant received an informed consent form. The informed consent form articulated that study participants’ institutional role or performance was not affected by being involved in this research. Once completed, the informed consent form was filed in a secure data storage location. The researcher used pseudonyms throughout the study to protect the participant’s confidentiality and identity. The researcher maintained culturally sensitive throughout the study and advised participants that they had the ability to withdraw from the study and/or opt to not answer any questions at any time during the interview. Before beginning the interview, the researcher shared information with each participant about their background to help create an inclusive space for participants. The participant could seek clarification about the study at any time. After the interview and transcription of the interview was complete, participants had access to read their interview transcript. The researcher had no prior knowledge of the participants’ personal or educational background. Lastly, the researcher ensured that all interview materials such as transcripts; audiotapes, consent forms, written and verbal communication were securely stored.

Creswell (2012) contested that it is critical to carefully secure and manage all data during the research process. For this particular study, data was stored and managed electronically and in hard copy format. After the transcription process was completed, the data collected for each interview was backed up electronically on a password-only, home computer and two, secured hard drives for one year after the study was completed. A hard copy was also secured for five years in a password locked safe. In addition, any signed documentation such as the informed consent form was also securely managed and stored. After the five-year period expires, the data and any related documentation will be permanently deleted.
Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of this study was critical. Yardley (2008) considers four criterions to maintain trustworthiness of a particular study. Those considerations include: 1) sensitivity to context, 2) commitment and rigor, 3) coherence and transparency and 4) impact and importance (Yardley, 2008). For trustworthiness of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research, Smith (2004) suggests that studies should be clear, specific and focused on a topic. Smith (2004) also encourages that data is collected from a small sample. The data collected was thick and saturated with rich descriptions that could be interpreted and developed into multiple themes. This foundational understanding of trustworthiness informed the researcher how to approach the study appropriately and accurately for credible findings and outcomes.

Given the importance of maintaining trustworthiness throughout the study, several strategies were employed. These strategies assured considerations such as reliability; rigor, transparency and validity are met. Morse, et al (2002) suggested that rigor of a study provides validity and credibility which are important for the researcher. Further, Morse, et al (2002) argued that in order to create trustworthiness in the study reliability and validity must consistently be part of each research phase. Therefore, the researcher maintained an accurate account during the data collection and analysis process.

A strategy the researcher must conduct is to share their background and positionality of the phenomena being studied at the beginning of the interview process. Another approach that was used to ensure trustworthiness of this study included a reflective observation of the alignment of the theoretical framework with the data shared during each interview (Shenton, 2004). Grounding the data collected provided greater credibility to the study.
Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher identified an appropriate sample population of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to ultimately be able to effectively analyze the findings from each interview in a methodological approach. The researcher analyzed the transcriptions accurately and identified themes from the data. The themes were identified through a detailed coding and data analysis process where the researcher cross-referenced the data. To assure complete trustworthiness of this study, the participants reviewed their transcripts and provided necessary feedback. To guarantee trustworthiness maintain credibility, the researcher ensured that the timeline of the interviews aligned with each participant’s timeline. The researcher employed strategies to garner rich information and thick descriptions during the member checking of participants at each interview location. The researcher adhered to the criterion for participant selection in the study with an all-encompassing description of the study to provide transferability to each participant. In an effort to achieve the trustworthiness of this study the researcher accounted for the data and shared the transcript of the interview with each participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Potential Research Bias**

In phenomenological research, it is important for the researcher and the participant to have a positive relationship. Smith and Osborn (2007) note that this is especially significant in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research; however, there is greater responsibility on the researcher to make sure a positive relationship is created. Briscoe (2005) noted that the researcher should always make sure study participants feel like they matter and have a sense of belonging during any research investigation. Most importantly, the researcher must understand how the positionality and problem statement are aligned during the research process and also be
able to include an inclusive and holistic lens when conducting empirical scholarly research (Briscoe, 2005).

Machi and McEvoy (2009) suggests researchers that have a personal connection to their problem of practice often carry a bias that one must be aware of and be able to control while understanding that it cannot be must be separated from you throughout your investigation. Pannucci and Wilkins (2010) emphasized, “bias can occur in the planning, data collection, analysis, and publication phases of research. Understanding research bias allows readers to critically and independently review the scientific literature” (p. 525).

From the beginning stages of this research process, the researcher provided an informed consent form and use pseudonyms for each participant in an effort to maintain integrity and an accurate account of the study. The researcher provided participants access to their individual interview transcript and were assured that all materials were securely stored. The researcher engaged with each participant and became immersed in learning about each participant equally and fully, while also sharing their own background and the social identities that are most salient in their role as a leader. As a black heterosexual male, the researcher often considered their race when leading groups or members in their organization while also being conscious of their gender and sexual orientation privilege. Given the context of the researcher sharing personal experiences with social identities and leadership, it became critical as it helped facilitate a positive relationship with each participant.

For this IPA study, the researcher included the concept of the other, which is comprised of three components: 1) demographics, 2) ideologies, and 3) identity (Briscoe, 2005). In research, there is always an exclusive relationship between a scholar’s positioning and their representation of the other (Briscoe, 2005). Pascal, et al (2010) supported the concept of the
researcher being able to identify with the “other” during the study alluding to the fact that a deep connection between researcher and participant would display authenticity during the research process. This would help avoid any potential disconnection between participant and researcher during the study.

Understanding one’s positionality as the researcher was critical because it helped reveal more insightful and rich information. It also maintained a relationship between the participant and researcher, which was significant to the study. The researcher was always aware of demographics, identities, and ideologies and understood that these components were not inclusive. As the researcher and because of my lived experiences and diversity practitioner work, I was very aware of my social identities, my position as a student affairs administrator and my dominant and subordinate identities with regard to my race, gender and sexual orientation, which all influence my ideology. This level of awareness was a critical component for the researcher as learning from the participants as it related to their social identities, lived experiences and approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs. The researcher disclosing self to the participants supported the importance of researcher’s transparency during this study. The researcher was consistent with each participant, sharing their background, positionality, and ways in which they would address bias that may develop during this research.

**Limitations of the Study**

With reference to the social identities explored in this study, a major limitation is that the social identities that were used in this study are not exhaustive of all social identities. However, considering the researcher’s extensive knowledge to social identities such as race, sexual orientation and gender, for this particular study, the researcher had a vested interest to gain insight and perspective from others lived experiences. The researcher hoped this study offered a
specific lens into the experiences of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) across race, gender and sexual orientation social identities and how those social identities impacted how they lead in their organization. While the researcher was also concerned with social identities such as class, ability status, nationality, age or ethnicity, the researcher decided to focus on race, gender and sexual orientation.

A second limitation returned back to the researcher’s positionality and the fact that the researcher named their race, gender and sexual orientation identities; Black, male, heterosexual, respectively. While the researcher asked objective questions, the researcher’s social identities during the data collection process could potentially open up response bias. Creswell (2012) explained response bias as the possibility of participants offering responses they believed the researcher wants to hear. This influence suggested a possible limitation of the study.

A third limitation relied on the methodology. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research tradition offered a deeper way to gather rich information and meaningful qualitative data. This provided an understanding researchers could use to analyze and make meaning of a particular phenomenon, shared by participants (Thomas, 2006), a notable limitation was that this methodological approach was vulnerable to researcher bias. This researcher bias had the potential to influence the outcome of how a participants’ response. Also, while IPA has evolved to reach multiple academic disciplines, this research tradition is moderately new and its novelty as a new research tradition could influence how credible it may be viewed by other researchers in comparison to other, more notable qualitative methodological approaches. (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

A fourth and final possible limitation mentioned of this study was related to the idea that the number of participants was not fully representative of a more diverse and larger pool of Vice
President for Student Affairs. While IPA focused on smaller sample sizes, a more comprehensive collection of participants could offer a more widely recognized and diverse perspectives of the social identities discussed in the study. Therefore, the participants’ experiences are not being generalized to all Vice Presidents for Student Affairs, but rather to share the experiences of five individuals.

Summary

This chapter presented a description of the research design as well as the data analysis procedures that were used for this study. The purpose of this study was to explore how social identity impacted the leadership approach of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. Six semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted to understand how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs made sense of their social identities and of its impacts, if any, on their leadership approach. This study evolved and delved deeper into the phenomenon of how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs perceived their social identity experiences as leaders of their organizations on a college campus. Those results are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis

This chapter presented the descriptive accounts of six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and their interpretation of how they made meaning of their social identities and its’ impact on their approach to leadership. First, a description of the study was provided. The subsequent sections contain a profile of each participant and an analysis of the emerging themes and concepts identified. Most importantly, this chapter includes the research question analysis, which support how the data were validated. The final section of this chapter discusses key findings of the study.
Study Context

This was a qualitative study that used an interpretative phenomenological analysis methodological approach exploring how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs make sense of their social identities and of its impact, if any, on their leadership approach. A qualitative study was used to provide documented and in-depth insight of the accounts of six participants social identity lived experience. Merriam (2001) suggests that a qualitative research design allows an investigator to explain social phenomenon without interrupting the current situation of its environment. Moreover, qualitative studies allow researchers to gather data that provides a thick description and is rich in content, which helps develops themes and descriptive conclusions (Merriam, 2001). More specifically, employing an interpretive-subjective paradigm was most appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to seek “to understand and explain the social world primarily from the point of view of the actors involved” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 226).

The researcher explored the lived experiences of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs social identities among race, gender and sexual orientation. Collecting data on the social identity lived experiences of the study participants contributed to understanding how each participants’ social identities impacted their approach to leadership in their current role as Vice President for Student Affairs. Participant accounts were analyzed using an interpretative perspective that methodologically explored their critical insight and lived experience. More specifically, the participants’ accounts were investigated as part of a process that explored their race, gender or sexual orientation and social identities within their Vice President for Student Affairs leadership role at a public college or university. Six participants were interviewed and each individual provided detailed accounts of their social identity lived experience as a Vice President for
Student Affairs. Each participant interview focused on self, others and social identity’s impact on leadership. Specifically, the participants elaborated on their understanding of social identities, self, others and the intersectionality of social individuality and leadership, which led to participants connecting experiences to conceptualize how their social identities across race, gender or sexual orientation impacted their approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs.

The study occurred at six public universities; three universities in the Northeast, two universities in the Mid-Atlantic region and one university on the west coast. Public universities were selected to prove the phenomenon under investigation because it currently represents a more diverse institutional profile across students, faculty and staff. Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive description of how changing social environments in the United States is quickly becoming more prevalent on college and university campuses, particularly public institutions of higher education and more specifically among students, which was why this particular study of campus senior leaders at public colleges and universities was warranted. As higher education communities continue to mirror the increase in diversity within the country’s changing social environment, senior leaders such as Vice Presidents of Student Affairs, must have a better understanding of self and its’ impact on their approach to leadership because this approach ultimately influences the inclusive design of the campus community.

In this qualitative study, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to conduct the study’s research. IPA was an appropriate methodological approach for this study because it concentrated on making sense and meaning of lived experiences. More specifically, IPA helped make sense into understanding the participants’ life and experience in the world. Hofhuis, Van Der Zee & Otten’s (2012) research proves why a study that concentrated on
making sense and meaning of social identity and lived experiences was warranted, suggesting that many leaders in higher education often, do not understand or are unaware of how their lived experiences affect how they lead.

The researcher used a continuous process to code, analyze and interpret the data. This data analysis process required a descriptive approach to identify key findings and themes, therefore the researcher was charged to read and reread transcriptions and take detailed notes. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), the researcher engaged with the data, analyzed and interpreted grammatical placement of why and how a participant stated a particular response. This interpretative analysis required the researcher to fully engage in understanding each participant in order to fully interpret and analyze the experiences, perceptions and insight shared during each interview. The researcher concluded this chapter interpreting the data and identifying key findings of the study.

**Study Participants**

Creswell (2012) explains that an interpretative phenomenological analysis methodological approach provides insight into how an individual’s lived experience is interpreted and how one makes sense and meaning of a particular phenomenon. The information shared in this study revealed the personal lived experiences of each participant in relationship to their race, sexual orientation and gender social identities and how those lived experiences impacted the participants approach to leadership. The participants involved in the study were Vice Presidents for Student Affairs who had served as a Vice President for at least three years. Six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs were interviewed for the study.

The sense making of each Vice President for Student Affairs began with an understanding of self. Then, the conversation shifted to Vice President for Student Affairs understanding of
others and how their lived experiences influenced their understanding of others. Finally, all Vice Presidents for Student Affairs described how their understanding and awareness of self-identity and the identity of others impacted how they approach leadership.

**Overview of Participants**

The Vice President for Student Affairs position typically aligns with leaders who identify as white, heterosexual and male. To reframe this narrative, the researcher of this study intentionally and purposefully identified participants that mostly represented rich diversity and celebrated difference in identity. To summarize, of the group of six participants interviewed in this study, three identified as female and three identified as male. Three participants described their race as White; two as Black and one as Latino. Five participants identified as heterosexual and one identified as lesbian. The participants chosen for this study embodied effective and inclusive leadership qualities, skills and characteristics and demonstrated an interest in reflecting on their identity and recreating those lived experiences to identify ways in which they can make meaning to better understand and be aware of how their identity impacts their leadership approach. These participants approach to leadership was greatly impacted by their social identities and each provided a compelling story to showcase how their learning of self and others was consistently part how they approached leadership and lead their organization.

Participants included six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs), who all served as the Chief Student Affairs Officer for their institution. In this role, VPSAs are the senior student affairs professional who leads the division of student affairs on their campus. The VPSA typically reports to the college or university chancellor or president. A large part of their portfolio is strategic planning, fiscal management, global perspective and institutional perspective versus divisional perspective (Bass, 2006). In addition, Dung (2003) emphasizes that
the Vice President for Student Affairs “responds to student, faculty, staff, parents, community members and others concerned with student-related issues or concerns that arise on campus” (p. 346). VPSAs are also charged with leading a division of diverse members, creating community while also reinforcing community and institutional standards to maintain a safe and welcoming community for everyone (Dungy, 2003). Traditionally, VPSA’s are responsible for overseeing student affairs functional units such as residence life, student life, cultural centers, assessment, student conduct, Dean of Students office and counseling services, to name a few.

For this particular study, participants had served at least three years in their current VPSA role. Two of the six participants had served as a Vice President for Student Affairs in a previous role at another institution. All six participants held a terminal degree, either a doctorate of philosophy or a doctorate of education. To protect privacy and maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for this study for each participant.

**Candace.** This woman leader is an accomplished senior student affairs administrator in higher education. Candace identifies as a black heterosexual female. She serves as a Vice President for Student Affairs at a large public research university. Candace is currently in her second Vice Presidency role. Candace provides leadership, vision and strategic direction for a large division of student affairs. Her colleagues and students see her as someone who consistently remains student-centered and forward thinking in her philosophy and approach to creating and sustaining student success. Candace has excelled in leadership beyond her institution, having served in leadership roles for student affairs professional associations. Candace noted in her interviews that much of her childhood and lived experiences being a black woman significantly impacted her approach to leadership.
**Maggie.** As a success-driven student affairs leader, Maggie has risen to leadership over the years at both the institutional, regional and national level. Maggie is a Vice President for Student Affairs at a mid-size public institution of higher education, located in a suburban community. As a student affairs leader who identifies as a white heterosexual woman, Maggie first developed a true sense of self and awareness of her social identities in college and during her graduate study. This understanding of self has greatly impacted how she approaches her current leadership role and seeks to understand others. In her role, Maggie is committed to ensuring that students learn and appreciate who they are, while recognizing their potential to reach their highest level of success and engage in student involvement that develops their leadership skills outside of the classroom.

**Sean.** Sean’s rise to leadership has been faced with challenges. In his interview, he suggested that those challenges were because of his race. His compelling story of how race plays into his experiences as a leader in student affairs draws attention to how he constantly considered how his identities impacted his approach to leadership. Sean identifies as a black heterosexual male. He is currently serving in his first Vice Presidency role as the Vice President for Student Affairs at a historically black university in an urban setting. Prior to this role, Sean served as Dean of Students for several years. Sean’s leadership on the campus has generated action and discussion to support historically underrepresented students, particularly students of color and students who identify with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community. He is an advocate on campus and uses his voice and position to influence change to create an inclusive campus community.

**Ruth.** Ruth’s charm and honesty made her story both captivating and raw. The imagery shared of her coming out to her family and friends and the lived experiences of identifying as a
lesbian and woman in a senior student affairs leadership role were compelling. While gender and sexual orientation are most salient for Ruth, much of her understanding of race as a white person came later in her life during graduate school and early on in her career. She currently serves her campus community as the Vice President for Student Affairs at a rural public university. She considers herself fortunate to work at an institution that values diversity and creates an accepting environment for members of all social identity groups. As a lesbian, this sense of comfort allows her to excel as a leader and approach her leadership in a way that gives voice to marginalized identity groups.

*Jason.* Jason’s story is fascinating as he navigates his understanding of privilege and identity as a leader. Much of his learning of self and others occurred during his days in college, in graduate school and as a new professional. Jason, who identifies as a white heterosexual male currently serves as the Vice President for Student Affairs at a large, public university in a racially diverse, urban community. Interestingly, but not uncommon in student affairs, Jason’s Vice Presidency position is coupled with also serving as the Dean of Students for his university. In his senior leadership role, Jason is committed to creating an environment where people of marginalized identities feel comfortable and welcomed, but also an environment where people of all identities can comfortably name injustice when it occurs, acknowledge privilege and proactively do something to create change.

*Mark.* Mark empowers college students and aspiring senior student affairs administrators with his story of growing up Latino in a rural community. He uses his story of overcoming adversity, racism and poverty to demonstrate to those in similar situations, that they too can also reach their highest level of potential and achieve success both personally and professionally. In addition to identifying as Latino, Mark also identifies as heterosexual and male. With over 20
years of student affairs experience, Mark currently serves as the Vice President for Student Affairs at a richly diverse public university. Mark had previously worked in a variety of senior leadership roles, including serving as a Vice President at other colleges and universities. Mark’s personal lived experiences across race, gender and sexual orientation significantly impacts how he approaches leadership and shapes the organizational culture. Mark is actively involved in institutional initiatives, national leadership roles and creating space to use his story to inspire young people to achieve their highest potential, despite any potential challenges and adversity.

**Overview of Data Collection and Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to increase awareness of how social identity impacts leadership by exploring how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs make sense of their social identities and of its impact, if any, on their leadership approach. One research question guided this study:

(1) *How do Six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) of colleges and universities make sense and develop awareness of their social identities?*

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were designed to explore the phenomenon. Following guidelines for effective qualitative IPA research, the study was conducted by collecting data of six in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzing the data multiple times to identify emerging themes and concepts. Data were examined and coded according to the data analysis process outlined in Chapter 3. The next section discusses the concepts and themes that emerged through data analysis.
Emergent Themes and Subcategories

The data analysis revealed five themes with thirteen different subcategories. The major concepts that emerged as themes included 1) identity learning experience, 2) environment, 3) graduate program or as a new professional role, 4) storytelling and 5) advancing cultural competency. These themes were explored in-depth by highlighting relevant interview quotes provided by six study participants.

Review of Emergent Themes and Subcategories

The themes that emerged after concluding data analysis offered insight into understanding how Vice President for Student Affairs made meaning of their social identities and the lived experience impacted their approach to leadership. To summarize, the following themes and subcategories were generated:

- Theme 1: identity learning experience, supported by the subcategories privileged or marginalized identity revelation;
- Theme 2: environment, supported by the subcategories social location, family and school;
- Theme 3: graduate program or as a new professional role, supported by the subcategories critical self-work and increased awareness;
- Theme 4: storytelling, supported by subcategories truth teller, empowering others, creating relationships and understanding others; and
- Theme 5: advancing cultural competency, supported by subcategories strategic planning, training/professional development and self-reflection
Significance of Themes

**Theme 1: Identity Learning Experience.** Vice Presidents for Student Affairs must learn how to become comfortable with the uncomfortable and engage in critical and meaningful identity learning experiences that raises their social identity awareness of privileged and marginalized identities among self and others. These revelations provide a lens for them to engage across difference, create inclusive organizations and foster a leadership approach that is accepting and welcoming. Participants of this study validated that awareness of privileged and
marginalized identities promoted a more effective approach to leadership. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs must model the approach of these participants as a way to respond to increasingly more diverse work environments and student body on college and university campuses.

**Theme 2: Environment.** Vice Presidents for Student Affairs should consider how their environment, as early as childhood to current day experiences informed and shaped their identity and how that subsequently impacted their approach to leadership. Considering the environment such as an individuals’ social location, school and family settings are a way for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to unpack what and how they learned about their understanding of self and the identity of others from the environments they have previously been a member. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs need to make sure they are actively reflecting on how environmental factors informed their understanding of social identity and used this learning to help others become more aware of the significance of the environment on social identity awareness and learning.

**Theme 3: Graduate Program or as a New Professional.** For many Vice Presidents for Student Affairs, especially those of multiple privileged identities (i.e. white, heterosexual, male, etc.….) who experience those privileges throughout childhood, adolescent years and young adulthood, will not be exposed to social identity and diversity-related topics until their graduate studies and for some, their role as a new professional. This was evident for three of the Vice Presidents for Student Affairs who participated in this study. Much of their critical work and increased awareness of social identity began in graduate school and/or as a new professional. As a result of this, graduate programs and new professional training must include increased comprehensive social justice curriculum to reflect the incoming population of graduate students
and new professionals who were previously unexposed social identity concepts. This is critical preparation for advanced roles in student affairs where inclusive leadership of diverse organizational members and student bodies is imperative. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs should engage in reflective exercises, discussions and learning about social identity with their organization. Therefore, a conceptual knowledge of social identity in graduate program curriculum and new professional training is effective preparation.

**Theme 4: Storytelling.** The power of storytelling proved to be another significant theme in this particular study. Participants emphasized how being a truth teller, creating relationships, understanding and empowering others contributed to the ability to be a storyteller. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs should share their stories; how they learned about social identity and increased their awareness of their identities and the identities of others. This storytelling will empower other Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to consider social identity in the context of leadership and be a truth teller so others that follow will lead in a way that is inclusive and provides the space for others to tell their story. This will also challenge Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to critical reflect on the continued identity work they need to do. This practice promotes learning, engagement and a belief that everyone has a story about their identity if they take the time to reflect, think critical and process the social self. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs will also have a greater sense of social identity awareness if they considered their own story and then used that story to empower others. The Vice Presidents for Student Affairs in this study illustrated the significance of storytelling as leaders.

**Theme 5: Advancing Cultural Competency.** Social identity awareness for the participating Vice Presidents for Student Affairs of this study facilitated an interest and commitment to developing cultural competency. Participants emphasized the importance of
creating an organizational culture that was centered on cultural competency development. The outcome of developing cultural competency created a leadership approach that included social justice curriculum and language in strategic planning, training and professional development and self-reflection. Vice Presidents for Students Affairs must create the infrastructure for a culture that challenges organizational members to develop cultural competence. In order for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to approach their leadership with a cultural competent lens, one must engage in social identity awareness learning of self and others. Thus, explains the significance of the preceding four themes. If Vice Presidents for Student Affairs engaged in learning about and being aware of their social identities similar to the participants of this study and commit to the themes identified from this study’s data collection, then they will develop cultural competence and facilitate a leadership approach that mirrors one of a culturally competent leader.

**Research Question Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to explore how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs made sense of their social identities to better understand its impact, if any, on their leadership approach. Specifically, the study sought to draw attention to social identity lived experiences of six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and increase social identity awareness among senior student affairs administrators on college and university campuses. Tajfel & Turner (1986) Social Identity Theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study. The main research question used for this study: *How do Six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) of colleges and universities make sense and develop awareness of their social identities?* The researcher intentionally developed and used a research question that was general to learn factors about how the lived experiences of Vice President for Student Affairs influenced how they developed an
awareness and made meaning of their own social identities and what impact does those experiences have on their approach to leadership. Below, table 3 illustrates the alignment of the purpose of the study, research question and theoretical framework.

Table 3 – Alignment of Research Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose Statement</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Framework Alignment</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To explore how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs make sense of their social identities and of its impacts, if any, on their leadership approach.</td>
<td>How do Vice Presidents for Student Affairs make sense and develop awareness of their social identities?</td>
<td>This theory driven study uses Social Identity Theory as the framework. This framework aligns well because it helps make meaning of the data collected by describing intergroup behavior and privileged based on group status, difference and the ability to have access to move from one in-group to another (Tajfel &amp; Turner, 1986). For the purposes of this study, social identity is defined as an individual’s self-concept resulting from his or her perceived membership in a social group such as race, gender or sexual orientation (Burford, 2012).</td>
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The interviews aimed to answer the over-arching question that is the foundation of this research study. Maxwell (2005) suggests that interview questions help the researcher gain an understanding that supports and answers the study’s research question. The interview questions used for this particular study are the following:

1) In thinking about your different identities, please tell me how you identify among the following social identities: race, gender and sexual orientation.

   a. Of these three social identities, which identity you think about most often and why?
b. Of these three social identities, which identity do you think about least often and why?

c. Of these three social identities, which identities are you interested in learning more about?

d. Of these three social identities, which identities impact your role as a leader the most, specifically in your current role as Vice President for Student Affairs?

2) Can you tell me about your experiences with your race, gender and/or sexual orientation growing up?

3) Tell me about the time when you were targeted, marginalized, stereotyped or discriminated because of your race, gender and/or sexual orientation.

4) Tell me about the time when you benefited from an opportunity, experienced privilege, access and resources because of your race, gender and/or sexual orientation.

5) What do you think could have helped you feel better at that time?

6) How did these experiences increase your ability to be aware and understand what others experience with regard to race, gender and/or sexual orientation?

7) As a result of these experiences with your racial, gender and/or sexual orientation identities, can you share how your experiences with one or more of these identities helps and challenges you to lead and create inclusive initiatives on your campus and create an inclusive organizational culture as the Vice President for Student Affairs?

8) Can you share concluding thoughts that you believe it important to note in connection to your experiences with race, gender and/or sexual orientation and its impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs within your organization?

The research question, “How do Vice Presidents for Student Affairs make sense and develop
awareness of their social identities?” The research question was answered by participants through the interview process. For some participants, early childhood introduced messages about race, gender and sexual orientation. For others, those messages continued to persist which shed insight as to how they made sense and developed an awareness of their social identities and if it impacts their approach to leadership. For example, Mark, a Latino heterosexual male, stated, “I have experienced being on campuses where I am one of a few Latinos on those campuses and how that is difficult sometimes, where you are constantly having to explain who you are and what your background is and all of the misperceptions and misunderstandings that people have… I think the way this has impacted me is that I think am more empathetic about some things, having experienced them. I think it has been really great stuff for me to hopefully be a better leader because of the experiences that I’ve had.”

Vice Presidents for Student Affairs shared a variety of lived experiences where they were the only one marginalized because of their identity either throughout childhood or in professional roles. The researcher sought to understand how those experiences helped them develop an awareness of their own social identities and the social identities of others. This learning was seen as a source of empowerment for the participants in their own development, but also in a way where they could help develop others because of their own lived experiences.

In relationship to her social identity development and sense of awareness Ruth, a self-identified white female Lesbian, noted, “I think I was pretty depressed not understanding or knowing a lot about what was happening…one of the key things for me was, ‘what if I can make a college experience better than what I had for someone else?’ because it was a pretty lonely experience for me…I say all that to come back around to being out as a lesbian woman, speaking about race outwardly, talking about it as a white person, certainly being a woman in a position
of power...all have led from my various personal experiences and mostly painful places of being so isolated and lonely and not understanding a lot...and if I can help students have a better college experience and help them understand themselves...I understood myself later in life.”

This example empowered the participant to ensure students developed their social identity awareness and were able to make meaning of it. This leadership approach is critical to help students create more meaningful experiences about their social identities and be in an environment where that sense of understanding self and others was valued. To overcome personal challenges to understand race, sexual orientation and gender and its impact on their own lived experience and how it may impact their approach to leadership is significant in how one develops a sense of social identity awareness and makes meaning of their social identities and the experiences of others identities.

In his interview, Jason, a white heterosexual male, reflected by indicating “I would say that I haven’t consciously been thinking about my identity when making decisions...I need to think about how my identity is influencing decisions, because clearly, it is as I go back to those lessons my father taught me around identity...everybody has a lens and you have to be conscious of your lens...how much of my identity is influencing me and my own decisions, and maybe it’s time to think about where that is and whether there’s anything that needs to change.” This reflection highlights that while Jason, a white heterosexual male, has not spent significant time reflecting on his social identity, this interview experience helped him become aware of how his identities and earlier childhood experience across race and gender might have impacted how he subconsciously leads his current organization. Jason proved the importance of developing identity consciousness as a leader, increasing one’s awareness of social identity and the significance of making meaning of lived experiences across identities such as race, gender and
sexual orientation when leading diverse organizations.

Candace, a black heterosexual female, answers supported the research question of this study with the following excerpt from her interview: “It’s work to really know yourself, but once you know yourself, then be yourself. For me, that’s been what I’ve learned. It’s really work to know yourself and to understand who you are and why you do what you do. Once you know yourself and you can connect that, it demystifies a lot...who I am at my core is who I bring to work with me...but I have learned and I’m continuing to learn how to mold my identities together.”

Candace challenges herself and others to know and understand self and engaging in revelations that help one become aware of their privileged and marginalized identities. Developing this awareness of social identities facilitates a learning environment where one can make meaning of lived experiences and empower others to do the same. As a leader of an organization, this perspective is critical. It creates a culture where identity development and acceptance is embraced and people feel comfortable showing up in workplace environments as their authentic self.

Maggie didn’t begin to have significant experiences of developing social identity awareness and making meaning of her identities until college and as a new professional. As a white heterosexual woman, as a child, Maggie didn’t face significant gender oppression. Maggie didn’t have to consider what impact those identities may have. However, she became more connected to developing her social identity awareness in college and in graduate school which has impacted how she leads her organization today. As a result of her social identity learning she has been able to shift the culture and create diversity offices in her current position. In her interview, Maggie affirmed that, as a graduate student, identity development and awareness impacted her leadership approach. This excerpt from Maggie’s interview summarizes how she
developed social identity awareness and now makes meaning leading her organization: “If I had not done that exploration myself, I don’t think that I would be able to do that with students…I think that as a leader who is really aware of my privilege…I have the power to make a priority for something that I feel very strongly about…and making more comprehensive student diversity spaces…was one way to create some great programs.”

Sean, a black heterosexual male, summed up his interview experience saying, “participating in this study reconfirms why I am doing what I am doing as a Vice President for Student Affairs.” Sean spent a significant portion of his interview reflecting on how his identity as a black male had impacted his approach to leadership; a leadership approach that was committed to cultivating the lives and experiences of students of color and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community. Immersing in his own development of understanding and increasing social identity awareness impacted how he worked to create college environments where historically underrepresented students feel connected and part of the community. This was evident during the interview when Sean mentioned the following: “Race, gender all play a role in the leadership experience of the Vice President. Like I said, some are more pertinent than others. My race and identity as a male has played a big role for me because of what is happening out there with our young black males. I just feel compelled to be the best I could be in terms of a role model, a signpost, an example so people can say, ‘hey man, if that brother could do it, I can do it too.” The ability to make meaning of your own identity, have an awareness of self and others and use that cultural competency to empower young people on a college campus has a significant impact and is wonderful to see displayed by Vice Presidents for Student Affairs, like Sean.

The six participants of this study illustrated how critical it is for leaders to have an
understanding of self and others in order to lead inclusively and create organizational cultures that foster and sustain an environment of social identity awareness and acceptance. Table 4 below illustrates that the findings were validated and grounded with evidence-based data. The data were verified from the data collection during each participant interview. First, categories were developed and, as a result, themes emerged that supported the research question. Findings were then discussed to support the themes and subcategories related to the study research question.

The researcher previously noted that thirteen subcategories, structured under five themes were confirmed. Table 4 provides a synopsis of the codes that were used to identify categories/themes and patterns among participants. Table 5 provides an overview of the evidence-based data where interview participant quotes are presented to validate the themes and subcategories found from data collection.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th># of Respondents</th>
<th>Qualitative Comments</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity Learning Experience</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“People couldn’t understand why my parents spoke another language or they had an accent... I think the experience was difficult at times. Being Latino, I think sometimes people thought less of what your possibilities could be... I believe that they expected less or thinking I couldn’t do as much because of my ethnicity. I could see that, it was kind of hurtful and to be honest, it kind of fueled me. I really got a sense of drive from that and a sense of urgency that I was going to show them that we were every bit as smart, every bit as good, every bit as talented.”</td>
<td>Social Identities = SI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“I never had to think about race. Again, my awakening around the fact that I never had to think about it. You don’t think about it. You never had to think about it. My parents were very open-minded and nonjudgmental. There was never anything racist, or sexist or any of those kinds of things happening in my house. I didn’t grow up in a very diverse community.”</td>
<td>Self = S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Program Curriculum/New Professional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>“I moved to a major city right after grad school for a new professional role and really was doing a lot of exploration on identity. I recall walking into a room and I was not only the only White person, I was pretty much the only woman in the room. It was when I realized what our students of color were saying about going into a room and being the only one in the room. It’s not very comfortable.”</td>
<td>Others = O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“I do use the fact that first-generation Latino, underrepresented very much in my storytelling and in a way of inspiring students that they can do anything they set their minds out to do if they are dedicated, hardworking and push the limits of their different gifts and abilities to get to where they want. I use that a lot in my storytelling and in my discussions in leadership.”</td>
<td>Social Identity &amp; Leadership = SI&amp;L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advancing Cultural Competency</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“We need to build our cultural competence and that we need to understand people and not just expect them to get in our box... I want to know the people I work with and understand them... I try to listen to understand something about them and to be more informed. I think that acknowledging social identities helps build a sense of team and acknowledging what people being with them as part of their life is important.”</td>
<td>Coding Table</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 5: Key Evidence-Based Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category #1: Identity Learning Experience</th>
<th>Category #2: Environment</th>
<th>Category #3: Graduate Program Curriculum/New Professional</th>
<th>Category #4: Storytelling</th>
<th>Category #5: Advancing Cultural Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Privilege or marginalized identity revelation</td>
<td>(social locations, family, school)</td>
<td>Critical self-awareness and increased awareness</td>
<td>(tells to others, empowering others, creating relationships, understanding others)</td>
<td>(reflective planning, self-reflection, training)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Key Findings

This section names key findings as a result of the aforementioned subcategories and themes. The subcategories and themes, which support the research question - how do Six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) of colleges and universities make sense and develop awareness of their social identities? – is now grounded with key findings that were gained from the results of the study. The following five key findings relate to how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs social identity awareness impacts their approach to leadership.
(1) The *revelation of marginalized and privileged identities* is a fundamental foundation of learning among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) for continuous reflection and increased awareness of the social identities of self and others. VPSAs gained an understanding of social identity through their lived experiences, recognizing when they might have benefited from privilege because of their identity or have been marginalized because of their identity. All participants of this study were able to speak from the position of privilege and five of the six VPSA participants were able to speak from a marginalized identity. These accounts revealed an understanding of self which helped raised their identity consciousness. Drawing upon previous experiences informed their cultural competencies as well as opened their lens to how privilege and marginalization showed up in the lived experiences of themselves and others. This revelation and sense of awareness prepared the participants of this study to have a more inclusive approach to leadership as a VPSA.

(2) Unlearning and critically examining early childhood and adolescent *environment* experiences in family and educational settings and other social locations increased social identity awareness among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. Growing up in racially homogenous environments was common among the participating VPSAs of this study, therefore much of the familial and educational experiences growing up unconsciously informed their understanding of social identity. Unknowingly, environment was a central source of learning and years later VPSAs found them more reflective of their lived experiences and how it impacted their present-day leadership. Depending on their social identity, VPSAs spend time now unlearning or reflecting on much of what they have learned to ensure their social identity lens of self and others is inclusive in leadership.
(3) Vice Presidents for Student Affairs engaging in *storytelling* helps develop authentic relationships among organizational members. Engaging in the art of storytelling encourages individuals to explore the social identities of self. This was particularly true among the three VPSAs of color in the study. These participants were more likely to use their experiences being racially marginalized growing up to empower students or organizational members to overcome racial oppression and reach their leadership aspirations. Storytelling cultivated mentoring relationships for the VPSAs of this research study, which was significant in their ability to lead with their story. However, in order for VPSAs to engage in social identity storytelling specific to their lived experiences across social identities, they need to commit to critical ongoing self-work and reflection of how past experiences impact their leadership approach and their role as a VPSA.

(4) *Advancing cultural competency* among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs increased their awareness to provide inclusive leadership, advocating and supporting staff and organizational policy and practices. When VPSAs engaged in cultural competency professional development and training they were more likely to develop visionary, inclusive and intentional leadership characteristics. These characteristics centered their leadership to be more conscious and increased their ability to be engaged in the learning process of self and others. Additionally, when VPSAs engaged in cultural competency training related to identity, they were also more likely to engage and challenge organizational members to lean into discomfort and become comfortable with difficulty and to collectively carry out a more inclusive organizational agenda that meets everyone’s needs.
(5) Vice Presidents for Student Affairs engaged in practical skills and theoretical knowledge to increase social identity awareness of self and others during their *graduate program or as a new professional*. While the six VPSAs of this study demonstrated a commitment to creating inclusive spaces for everyone in their organization across all social identities, half of the participants, specifically the three white VPSA participants first encountered the need to critically explore social identity of self and others in graduate school or as a new professional. This practical and theoretical learning in graduate school or as a new professional compelled them to participate in future learning opportunities related to the social identity of self and others and, furthermore, adjusted their approach to creating inclusive leadership.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter four presented the findings of an interpretative phenomenological analysis study focused on the exploration of how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs made sense of their social identities and of its impact, if any, on their leadership approach. Specifically, this study examined how social identity impacted leadership. One research question guided this study: (1) *How do Six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) of colleges and universities make sense and develop awareness of their social identities?* Six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Through data analysis, the researcher concluded that Vice Presidents for Student Affairs made sense and developed awareness of their social identities as a result of identity learning experiences, environment, graduate program or as a new professional, storytelling and advancing cultural competency. Developing an awareness of privileged or marginalized identities, social location and increasing awareness as a result of critical self-work, understanding others and
engaging in training are an example of identified subcategories extracted from the data collection of participant interviews.

Chapter five will connect the literature review and theoretical framework and integrate the two with the research findings of this particular study. Additionally, implications for future practice and recommendations for new research will be discussed by the researcher.

**Chapter V: Interpretations, Recommendations and Conclusions**

**Introduction**

This final chapter provides concluding interpretations and recommendations of this study. First, a brief introduction of the study is provided with a discussion of the purpose of the study. Next, an interpretation of the key findings is discussed and connected to the theoretical framework and scholarly literature. The researcher then discusses implications of the study and recommendations for future practice and research. The following section includes a discussion of the study’s limitations. Finally, a reflection and summary will be presented to conclude the chapter and overall research study.

This was a qualitative study that used an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) methodology to explore how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) at institutions of higher education made sense of their social identities and of its impact, if any, on their leadership approach. The outcome of this study was meant to increase awareness of how lived experiences across social identity impacted leadership among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. An interpretative phenomenological approach qualitative methodology was used to investigate and gain an understanding to the participants’ experiences and perceptions.

According to Merriam (2001) utilizing a qualitative research design allows an investigator to explain social phenomenon without interrupting the current situation of its
environment. IPA was the most appropriate methodology for this qualitative research study because it aligned with determining how persons made sense of lived experiences and used a detailed approach to investigate the participants’ life and experience in the world (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Using IPA there is a critical effort to acquire insight with the individual’s subjective reports of events (Fade, 2004).

The purpose of the study was to better understand how the how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) on public college and university campuses made sense of their social identities and of its impact, if any, on their leadership approach. Specifically, the study sought to increase awareness of social identity and how it impacts leadership. Furthermore, this study also attempted to discover a new understanding of social identities that Vice Presidents for Student Affair should consider when leading their organization. The research question investigated in this qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach study was “How do Six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) of colleges and universities make sense and develop awareness of their social identities?”

This research study included six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs at six different public colleges and universities. The researcher used pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and protect the identity of each participant. Participants represented diverse social identities across race, gender and sexual orientation. The criteria that participants had to meet included serving as a Vice President for Student Affairs for at least three years, be at least 35 years of age and currently serving as a Vice President for Student Affairs at a public college or university in the United States.

After collecting the data through six semi-interviews with each participant, the researcher used a continuous process to code, analyze and interpret the data. This data analysis process
required a descriptive approach to identify key findings and themes. To ensure credibility and validity of the study, the researcher read and reread transcriptions and took detailed notes. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), the researcher engaged with the data, analyzed and interpreted grammatical placement of why and how a participant stated a particular response. This interpretative analysis required the researcher to fully engage in understanding each participant in order to fully interpret and analyze the experiences, perceptions and insight shared during each interview. This approach helped the researcher gain valuable insight and understanding of how the participant’s responses answered the research question. For this study, the interpretation of participant’s lived experiences across identities such as race, sexual orientation and gender demonstrated how each approached leadership because of how social identities had impacted them. Reflecting on their childhood, adolescence and adulthood lived experiences; participants offered a realization into how significant it was to be aware of the social identity of self and others in their approach to leadership. As a result of this data gathering, five themes and subcategories emerged.

- Theme 1: identity learning experience, supported by the subcategories privileged or marginalized identity revelation;
- Theme 2: environment, supported by the subcategories social location, family and school;
- Theme 3: graduate program or as a new professional role, supported by the subcategories critical self-work and increased awareness;
- Theme 4: storytelling, supported by subcategories truth teller, empowering others, creating relationships and understanding others; and
- Theme 5: advancing cultural competency, supported by subcategories strategic planning, training/professional development and self-reflection
Interpretation of Key Findings: In Relationship to Theoretical Framework & Literature

The framework for this study was based on Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory provides one lens colleges and universities can use to respond to this shift in diversity and help make their campuses more inclusive (Burford, 2012). This framework incorporates cognitive processes to understand how identities are perceived within a larger community (Stets & Burke, 2000). Social Identity Theory describes intergroup behavior and privilege based on group status differences, in addition to the access and ability to move from one in-group to another while additionally exploring intergroup relations, group process, and the social-self (Stets & Burke, 2000). According to Burford (2012) social identity theory is an individual’s self-concept resulting from his or her perceived membership in a social group such as race, gender identity or sexual orientation. Further, Hechanova (2012) indicates that Social Identity Theory provides the ability to explore intergroup relations, group process, and the social self on the individual, group and organizational level.

The literature for this study identified three predominate cognitive processes of social identity: 1) social categorization, 2) social identification, and 3) social comparison (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). Social categorization is the process of determining which group membership you or someone else identifies with (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). Social identification explores the affiliation with a group that is perceived in a more obvious form (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). There is a strong connection with members within that group because of the identification. Social comparison examines your understanding of self and is closely connected to how you are perceived by others who are not connected to that particular group membership (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). In social comparison, individuals are conditioned to act a certain way to be accepted in society.
These definitions of Social Identity Theory and the cognitive processes of social identity aligned succinctly with the research question and findings of this study. There was clear evidence that exploring individual self will increase not only one’s awareness and understanding of social identities, but also the social identity lived experiences of others. This exploration also impacted the leadership approach of an individual, such as the participants of this particular study, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs.

Vice Presidents for Student Affairs today are leading diverse organizations and increasingly diverse campus communities. As a result of this phenomenon, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs must be equipped with the cultural understanding to effectively lead diverse groups. This study provided a perspective and lens as to how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs learned the value of using social identity as a framework that impacted how they approached leadership. In an effort to doing so, the data collection process asked of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to understand how they made sense and developed awareness of their social identities. This self-awareness was interpreted by exploring how they understood social identity among the self, others and how this understanding impacted how they lead organizations. The outcome of this study increased awareness of how lived experiences across social identity impacted leadership. Social identity experiences discussed during each participant interview across race, gender and sexual orientation affected the way in which Vice Presidents for Student Affairs lead their organization. As a result of this study, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs can now adjust how they approach leadership to include individual and group social identity learning, which is guided by the five themes that this study revealed. With this increased awareness and understanding of social identity and how it impacted leadership approaches, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs can now make informed choices to embrace the lived experiences
of those they lead and serve to make the organizational environment more inclusive.

The Vice Presidents for Student Affairs that participated in this study helped other Vice Presidents for Student Affairs identify ways in which they could incorporate and learn an approach to leadership that considered and embraced social identity to help make meaning, sense and increase a level of awareness among self, others and the organization. The leadership approach affected the overall experience of how members felt within an organization. Therefore, by blending individual, group and organizational social identity learning to understand and increase social identity awareness, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs were able to critically consider how their own lived experiences impacted their approach to leadership and be reflective and open to learning about the social identity lived experiences of those they lead. An inclusive Vice President for Student Affairs would be willing to embrace how their lived experiences influenced a particular understanding of identities such as race, gender or sexual orientation and how those experiences unconsciously impacted their approach to leadership. The ability to make sense, meaning and increase awareness of how one describes Social Identity Theory concepts all impacts how one will subsequently approach leadership when leading organizations. (Stets & Burke, 2000). Because of the diverse needs of a campus community, particularly among students, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs conceptualized their understanding of the individual’s self and others and how their lived experiences impacted how they may perceive others.

This research study aimed to draw awareness to the importance of understanding and being aware of social identity as a Vice President for Student Affairs and also developing the ability to use this social identity learning to reflect upon how it impacted their approach to leadership. The study suggested identity learning experiences, environment, participation in a
graduate program or new professional role, storytelling and advancing cultural competency as key findings that were all important aspects to consider when reflecting on how a Vice President for Student Affairs made sense and meaning of social identity awareness and how it impacted leadership approaches. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs have the challenge of learning self, others and organizational experiences of social identity to lead inclusively. The participants of this study helped identify best practices for other Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. As a result of this study, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs learned the importance of how one understands and increases social identity awareness impacted leadership in a variety of ways. The interpretation of the five key findings that emerged from the data analysis process in relation to the theoretical framework and literature review are discussed next. Table 5 below shows the findings of this study in relation to the theoretical framework and literature.

Table 5: Findings in Relationship to Theoretical Framework

The literature for this study identified three predominate cognitive processes of social identity: 1) social categorization, 2) social identification, and 3) social comparison (Knobloch-
Westerwick, 2010). Social categorization is the process of determining which group membership you or someone else identifies with (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). Social identification explores the affiliation with a group that is perceived in a more obvious form (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). There is a strong connection with members within that group because of the identification. Social comparison examines your understanding of self and is closely connected to how you are perceived by others who are not connected to that particular group membership (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). In social comparison individuals are conditioned to act a certain way to be accepted in society.

**Theme 1: Identity Learning Experience.** Most research participants used the interview process as a way to reflect and share the process of making meaning of their social identities. This revelation of becoming aware of privileged and marginalized identities was significant because most Vice Presidents for Student Affairs do not dedicate time for this type of learning. For some participants, (particularly those of marginalized identities), they had identity learning experiences as early as childhood, whereas, those of privileged identities did not have a revelation of their identities until they had a chance to learn more about self and others in graduate school or as a new professional in student affairs. A few participants mentioned childhood and adolescent experiences where they first became familiar with one or more of their social identity. This notion of these identity learning experiences aligned with the social categorization cognitive process of the social identity theoretical framework. There is literature that points to the notion that social categorization is a production of group distinctive stereotypes, normative perceptions, and actions, highlighting experience, which is subjectively meaningful in a specific context (Stats & Burke (2000). Vice Presidents for Student Affairs developing awareness and making meaning of their social identities is an example of how this
increased understanding could be used to deepen the misperceptions of how people are socially categorized simply based on identity. Current literature continued to articulate that in this cognitive development process of categorizing social identities, individuals or groups are able to establish power and status. The Vice Presidents for Student Affairs of this study were able to not only make meaning and recall specific identity learning experiences of self and others, but they were able to process and reflect on how this understanding enlightened them on how people are perceived, stereotyped and categorized based on identity (Ortiz and Behm-Morawitz, 2015). The alignment of social identity to social contexts, which is the main component of categorization, was particularly evident in the theme of identity learning experiences for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs.

**Theme 2: Environment.** The Vice Presidents for Student Affairs articulated how the environment influenced how they made meaning and increased their social identity awareness. Environmental settings such as school, family or geography all played a role in the lived social identity experiences of this research study participant group. To connect this environmental influence with recent literature, one draws from the notion that changing social environments are beginning to mirror that on college campuses, it seems appropriate for higher education institutions to consider ways in which they create opportunities for students and administrators to develop a greater openness to diversity and strengthen their diversity awareness (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn & Terenzini, 1996). Utilizing this notion as a framework, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs must consider their social identity lived experiences and how the environment played a significant role in helping them make meaning and develop social identity awareness to create educational environments that facilitate a similar social identity learning experience for the students and staff they lead on college campuses.
According to Bergerson and Hufalin (2011) suggests that the goal of higher education is to provide students with the tools, experiences and interactions to help them develop a greater understanding and acceptance of self and also others, particularly those who are different from them. This expectation in turn, provides members of the higher education community the knowledge, skills and experiences to live and work in an increasingly diverse world (Bergerson & Hufalin, 2011). This example from the literature was an effective leadership approach Vice Presidents for Student Affairs must employ to create inclusive educational environments and use their past lived experiences in different environments within school, family and geographic settings to continue to make sense of their own social identities and create spaces for others to do the same. A heightened sense of awareness among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs now promoted greater inclusion on college campuses overtime. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs needed to learn how to use all forms of environment and their lived experience within their various environmental settings to have a more inclusive approach to leadership.

Theme 3: Graduate Program or as a New Professional Role. For many participants of this study, their first introduction to making sense and increasing social identity awareness was in a student affairs graduate program and/or in their first role as a new professional. Often, this was true of the research study’s white participants. As the literature of the theoretical framework notes, social identification occurs when an individual explores an affiliation with a group that is perceived in a more obvious form of identity (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). This social identification was discovered for many of the participants of the study. Graduate school or a new professional role was the first time they encountered the opportunity to do critical social identity work and assess their own understanding social identity. There was a strong connection with members within that group because of the identification. The participants began to understand
how they identified but also then socially identified with a particular group because of an identity. For example, social identity across race would indicate that individuals that identify as Black typically affiliated with members of a group that also identify as Black, particularly in social environments. This social identification provided a level of comfort for members in groups. An assumption identified in the literature suggested individuals’ self-concept and social behavior are structured by perceived social relationships where social identification plays a dynamic role to how an individual responds and affiliates in the social world (Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, Haslam & Jetten, 2014).

This revelation for participants helped them to understand why an individual may align themselves with a particular identity. The data collection process allowed participants to unpack why they visually saw certain identity groups identifying with same-identity peers. This “unpacking” was a significant increase in social identity awareness for my participants during their graduate school or new professional role. It was during this time that this exposure allowed them to unlearn some beliefs and ideologies taught earlier on in life as to why certain identity groups identified with one another. This misperception tainted many participants for the majority of their life until they entered a graduate school setting where curriculum taught them to think differently. There are significant implications for an individual based on how they socially identify in the social world that can be both beneficial and harmful to an individual (Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, Haslam & Jetten, 2014). Therefore, advanced education in graduate school or professional development and training for new professionals will expose individuals to see things differently. The Vice Presidents for Student Affairs of this study reflected on how significant graduate school and their first professional position played a role in how they made meaning and increased social identity awareness, all which has informed how they approach leadership.
**Theme 4: Storytelling.** Storytelling was a consistent theme among research study participants. Storytelling occurred in different forms such as the ability to empower others and be a truth teller as a leader or to create relationships and understand others were all used by Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. This research study identified that when Vice Presidents for Student Affairs tell their story, it aligns them with in-groups or out-groups, based on their social identities (Jans, Postmes and Van der Zee, 2012). When a story is told, the social identity of the storyteller frames intergroup relationships because those listening to your story will connect with you, engage in group processing and understanding more about the social self as part of social identity formation (Jans, Postmes and Van der Zee, 2012). For example, a participant during the data collection process shared how their ability to overcome adversity as a Latino and earn a Vice President for Student Affairs role empowered other Latinos aspiring to similar leadership positions. Sharing this story also allowed this particular Latino Vice President for Student Affairs to be reflective of their own social identity lived experiences. Therefore, the storytelling becomes empowering for both the person sharing the story and the individual or group listening to the story.

By way of storytelling, in-group and out-group relationships are formed based on the connection to a particular social identity. According to the literature on Social Identity Theory, Burford (2012) suggest that social identity is defined as an individual or group based on similarities and differences among one another. Burford (2012) also contends that social identity is shared within a particular social identity group and also provides an understanding for shared social action. So when this shared understanding of identity was connected through storytelling, which was evident from the findings of this research study, individuals felt empowered, created
relationships and understood self and others, which impacted how they will move forward with this social identity learning when leading their organization.

**Theme 5: Advancing Cultural Competency.** Vice Presidents for Student Affairs of this research study wholeheartedly believed that continued efforts engaging in cultural competency training and professional development is critical. Many research participants were able to effectively reflect and share how they made meaning and increased social identity awareness because of prior cultural competency training and professional development. They have made it a priority in their organization to ensure members they lead advance cultural competency. This is conducted via trainings, assessments or professional development conferences and institutes. The Vice Presidents for Student Affairs who participated in this study all placed advancing cultural competency as a core to their organizational goals.

Drawing back to the literature and theoretical framework, the social comparison cognitive process of the Social Identity Theory aligns directly with this particular theme. This social comparison is when an individual, for example Vice President for Student Affairs, compares self to another in the evaluation of an individual (Boen, Vanbeselaere, Pandelaere, Dewitte, Duriez, Snauwaert, Feys, Diercky, & Van Avermaet, 2002; Snyder, Higgins, and Stucky, 1983). Literature theorizes that the process of social comparison is considered fundamental where it supports the opportunity for individuals to learn about themselves, specifically their characteristics, values, abilities, opinions, behavior, actions, accomplishments and also failures, to name a few (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Willis, 2000; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). This conveys that individuals conduct self-evaluations to continually consider ways in which their own self-knowledge may not always be a reflection of what others in various social contexts such as organizational or personal environments may see (de Hoog, 2013). This type of reflection will
help individuals overcome the constant challenge of social comparison, particularly within the experiences of complex social identities (de Hoog, 2013). This shows the importance of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs evaluating how their approach to leadership with a social identity lens compares to that of other Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and other organizations and identifying ways in which they could improve their efforts to create an organization where cultural competency advancement is embraced and individuals within the organization are collectively working to make meaning and increase social identity awareness. This level of accountability will hold Vice Presidents for Student Affairs at a higher standard of developing and becoming a culturally competent leader.

**Implications for Practice**

As a result of the findings, literature and theory of the study, implications for practice that could be useful for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs are offered. These recommendations are aimed to improve ways in which senior student affairs officers, such as Vice Presidents for Student Affairs consider how they might implement strategies and practices as a result of an increased understanding of their social identity in relation to their approach to leadership.

At the individual level, one recommendation for practice would be for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to often identify ways in the workplace to reflect on lived experiences across all social identities. As organizational leaders, this meaningful and intentional practice and learning of self and others would subsequently teach Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to have sympathy, empathy and an understanding and ability to be a better human being and leader. This inclusive approach to leadership would allow Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to effectively put their heart into leadership. Organizational members would know and feel as if they matter and their identities are valued and accepted. Therefore, implementing a practice that
demonstrates active learning of self and others among identity conscious Vice Presidents for Student Affairs leaders would create an environment where social identity awareness and understanding was an integral component to the organizational culture.

On the community level, an implication for practice that Vice Presidents for Student Affairs should consider is how they could raise their social identity awareness and use it as a way to diversify the recruitment and hiring of staff for their organization. This is a significant reason why Vice Presidents for Student Affairs should consider how they make meaning and sense of their social identity and its impact on their approach to leadership because this increased understanding of self and others can influence their approach to recruitment and hiring. Diversifying the staff could add tremendous value to community within the organization and make members feel like they fit and have a place within the organization regardless of their identities. Being more critical and intentional of the diversification of recruitment and hiring process is a practical approach to creating more inclusive and diverse work environments. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs can use their level of identity consciousness to identify competent, diverse and skilled staff with their own understanding and awareness of social identity to be on the search committee so this group of people are aware of identifying the type of candidate that reflects the inclusive vision and values of the organization. Implementing strategies that diversify hiring and recruiting practices is a result of increased social identity awareness among organizational leaders such as Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. As a result, this improves the community and demonstrates that leadership values the diversity and identity of others during the recruitment and hiring process.

For the organizational level, a final suggestion for practice that Vice Presidents for Student Affairs may implement as a result of an increased understanding and awareness of social
identity lived experiences is to consider increased cultural competency training and professional development. Many staff are passionate about diversity and identity learning of self and others, but don’t know where to begin their learning and development. Staff need more structure and guidance in order to effectively reflect and learn about their own identity and the identity of others to have these conversations and address issues of injustice and oppression because of an individual’s identity. This guidance and structure must come from leadership such as Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to serve as a role model and a resource in this form and stage of development. Therefore, it is critical for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to do their identity work in order to effectively lead and create an environment where those they lead can critical consider their own identities in relation to their professional role in the organization. Alongside this suggestion of increased cultural competency training and professional development, Vice Presidents for Student Affairs could include a contribution of identity work to graduate program curriculum and new professional training material. It was commonly noted during the data collection process of this study, that participants believed that more needs to be done at the student affairs graduate program level and new professional role. Participants suggested that there is a generation of emerging student affairs professionals that have not done this important identity work. Individuals may be passionate, advocates and allies, but lack structure and guidance in doing this type of learning of self and others and understanding what it means to lead and interact with people who are different from them. Utilizing their identity work as a way to influence scholarship and training curriculum for graduate students in student affairs programs and new professionals transitioning to student affairs would increase cultural competency among organizational members earlier on in their career. In turn this would influence more student affairs professionals to maintain cultural competency learning throughout their career and once
these members earn senior level positions such as Vice Presidents for Student Affairs, the
student affairs profession would have an increased body of senior student affairs professionals in
leadership roles with continuous training and development related to cultural competency and
identity learning. On an organizational level, leaders should want to aim to a point in leadership
where decision are made with a level of social identity awareness and understanding that
ultimately influence how and why decisions are made, where all members of the organization
benefit and the decisions are equitable and inclusive for everyone.

These implications for practice at the individual, community and organizational level
would significantly increase social identity awareness among all organizational members and
offer strategic leadership approaches for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to consider in order
to lead with an identity conscious lens. These recommendations for practice should be
considered across all student affairs organizations to help increase social identity awareness and
understanding among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs, but also to work towards developing
the social identity awareness and understanding of self and others among all organizational
members. The impact of social identity on the leadership approach of Vice Presidents for Student
Affairs should continue to be deeply explored. This research and data should be used as a
blueprint for other student affairs professionals, especially Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to
consider their identity and its’ impact on how they approach leadership in their organization.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study offered considerations for further research that contributed to student affairs
and generated better practices for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and other senior leaders on
college and university campuses. First, this study provided an introduction to how social identity
awareness impacted leadership approaches among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs by
exploring race, gender and sexual orientation. However, additional research that explored social identities such as class, religion, ability, national origin or language could strengthen the level of social identity awareness among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. Secondly, more studies related to understanding of social identity from the perspective of student affairs professionals in roles outside of the Vice President for Student Affairs role could heighten the consciousness of social identity and its impact on leadership across a larger population of student affairs professionals.

This study sampled Vice Presidents for Student Affairs at public colleges and universities. Nonetheless, research could be conducted on this topic to interpret the understanding and awareness of social identities among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs at private, minority serving institutions or community colleges. Once data from these varying institutional types are gathered, a comparative analysis could be conducted to explore the outcomes of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs understanding and awareness of social identity based on the type of institution.

It would be invaluable to expand this research beyond this initial study. While this current study offers insight on how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs make sense and meaning of their racial, gender and sexual orientation social identity awareness and how that impacts their approach leadership, increased understanding, additional factors into understanding how social identity impacts leadership is critically necessary to advance cultural competency among student affairs professionals.

**Limitations**

While the study offers a lens of awareness into understanding of how lived experiences across social identities impacts the leadership approach among Vice Presidents for Student
Affairs, the researcher must also consider potential limitations for the overall outcome of findings from this particular study. Four potential limitations are described below.

**Social Identities.** Given the diversity across race, gender and sexual orientation on college and university campuses, particularly among students, this study served as an exploration of those specific identities among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. Specifically, the problem of practice of this study explored how the lived experiences across race, gender and sexual orientation impacted the leadership approach among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. The results of this study presented factors that were significant into how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs lead their organizations. However, despite the comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of these particular social identities of this study; race, gender and sexual orientation, considering the absence of the social identities unexplored in this study may be considered a limitation. The social identities used in this study do not reflect an exhaustive exploration of all social identities. The researcher hopes this study offered a specific lens into the experiences of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) across race, gender and sexual orientation social identities and how those social identities impacted how they lead in their organization. While the researcher was also concerned with how leadership is impacted among social identities such as class, ability status, nationality, age or ethnicity, for this particular study the researcher decided to focus on race, gender and sexual orientation.

**Positionality.** According to Creswell (2012) response bias can influence what participants offer in their responses based on what they believe the researcher wants to hear based on positionality. This influence suggests that positionality may be a second limitation of the study. The researcher’s positionality as a Black, heterosexual male was named in the study. While the researcher used objective questions, the researcher’s positionality related to the social identities
explored in this study during the data collection process could potentially open up participant response bias. However, the study increased awareness of the lived experiences of race, gender and sexual orientation among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. This is significant into understanding how this awareness impacted their approach to leadership.

**Methodology.** A third limitation relied on the methodology chosen for this particular study. While the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research tradition offers deeper way to gather rich information and meaningful qualitative data, which provide an understanding researchers can use to analyze and make meaning of a particular phenomenon, shared by participants (Thomas, 2006), a notable limitation was that this methodological approach was vulnerable to researcher bias. This researcher bias may influence the outcome of how a participants’ response is interpreted and analyzed. Also, while IPA has evolved to reach multiple academic disciplines, this research tradition is moderately new and its novelty as a new research tradition could influence how credible it is viewed by other researchers in comparison to other more notable qualitative methodological approaches disciplines (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

**Participant Sample.** A fourth limitation considered the notion that the six participants identified and selected for this study are not fully representative of a more diverse and larger pool of Vice President for Student Affairs. While IPA focuses on smaller sample sizes, a more comprehensive collection of participants would have possibly offered a more widely recognizable and diverse perspective of the social identities discussed in the study. Therefore, the participants’ experiences should not be generalized to all Vice Presidents for Student Affairs, but rather share the experience of six individuals.
Reflections

This study focused on understanding how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs made sense and developed social identity awareness of self, others and the impact it had on their approach to leadership. The research found that identity learning experiences, the environment, graduate program or as a new professional, storytelling and advancing cultural competency were common and consistent themes. As a scholar-practitioner and change agent on college and university campuses, the findings of this study revealed insightful and rich information for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and other college and university administrators, including the student researcher, to consider. Through these findings, participant revelations and the overall research process, the student researcher identified the following new insights:

1. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs can greatly benefit from an increased awareness and understanding of social identity among self and others. It was clear that in order for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to be an inclusive leader, cultural competency and understanding must include the social self, but also extend beyond self to include the identity experiences of the other.

2. For Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to be identity-conscious leaders, their social identity learning must include an understanding of privileged and marginalized group membership and how those experiences are impacted for members in their organization.

3. Colleges and university should consider spending more time developing cultural competency among senior student affairs administrators, such as Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to improve professional development plans, strategic goals and leadership competency building.
4. Colleges and university must consider financial and technology investments to increase cultural competency training and professional development to better support advancing social identity learning among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs.

5. Colleges and universities must consider how key department leaders can collaborate with each other to align diversity and inclusion departmental goals.

6. Colleges and universities must identify assessments strategies to improve diversity and inclusion practices among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs.

7. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs must be comfortable owning their positionality and disclosing self in order to role model identity revelation and reflection for others.

8. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs must critically consider and understand why certain identities are most salient in their personal and professional life and why other identities are least salient.

9. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs must consistently be evaluated based on their cultural competency development.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how Vice President for Student Affairs made sense and developed awareness of social identity and its’ impact on their leadership approach. The interpretative phenomenological analysis used for this study explored this research topic with six Vice Presidents for Student Affairs at six colleges and universities. This study contributes to higher education institutions exploration of social identity development among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and suggests several potential research recommendations for future practice and exploration. Colleges and universities are becoming increasingly diverse and members Vice Presidents for Student Affairs lead are bringing more diverse perspectives and identities to the organization. Therefore, making sense and developing
awareness of social identity among self, others and its’ impact on leadership approach is critical for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to consider and integrate into their role. With such new perspectives and insights found in this study, further research studies should be explored to deepen this level of social identity awareness and understanding. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and other key university leaders and stakeholders must develop and apply to their leadership approach.

Summary

The study successfully draws attention to why it is significant for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to consider their social identities within their leadership capacity. In addition, the study effectively sheds light on the lived experiences of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs across race, gender, and sexual orientation and how those social identity experiences impacted their approach to leadership.

The researcher intentionally developed and used a research question that was general to learn factors about how the lived experiences of Vice President for Student Affairs influenced how they developed an awareness and made meaning of their own social identities and what impact those experiences had on their approach to leadership. The research question analysis discovered that it was critical for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to have an understanding of self and others in order to lead inclusively and create organizational cultures that fostered and sustained an environment of social identity awareness and acceptance. The findings supported the research question that aimed to understand how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs made meaning and sense of their social identities. The findings of this study, 1) identity learning experiences, 2) environment, 3) graduate program curriculum or as a new professional, 4) storytelling and 5) advancing cultural competency were each identified as facilitators as to how
Vice Presidents for Student Affairs made meaning and sense of their social identities. These findings impacted how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs approached leadership.

The study also introduced the literature gaps that exist on social identity specific to Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. There is a need for more research that draws specifically on the social identity experiences of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and its impact on leadership. Current research and literature discusses social identity in a broader scope as in relationship to leadership. In the study, the literature offered a foundation on social identity. This foundation ignited the further exploration in more specific areas of social identity such as exploring social identity of Vice Presidents for Students Affairs and how experiences related to their social identity impact their leadership approach on a college campus. The study begins to fill this gap in the research which will now contribute significantly to existing literature on social identity. Additionally, this study also contributes to practices administrators can implement on their respective diverse college and university campuses.

As a result of this study, it is clear that making meaning and having a sense of social identity awareness particularly related to an understanding of privileged and marginalized identities, social location and of self, others and also engaging in cultural competency training is critical and necessary in order for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to effectively approach leadership inclusively. With the increasingly diverse populations that are prevalent on today’s college and university campuses, this level of sense-making, understanding and awareness of social identities among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs was a critical need as these key leaders and decision makers addressed diversity needs for students, faculty and staff.

There is significant value for Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to reflect and critically consider how they make meaning and sense of their social identities and how this awareness and
understanding impacts their approach to leadership. Exploring social identity of self and others can be a challenging process but is extremely critical for leaders working on diverse college campuses. The value of having this level of understanding and awareness equips Vice Presidents for Student Affairs to be more effective leaders and able to respond to the needs of diverse students. The revelation that the participants of this study experienced will add value to their leadership approach moving forward. It is important that Vice Presidents for Student Affairs consider engaging in this reflective journey of understanding self and others and share best practices with one another to collectively help advance cultural competency among student affairs professionals. Making meaning and sense of social identity to increase an understanding and awareness of self and others should be a practice more Vice Presidents for Student Affairs consider when deciding effective leadership approaches.
Definitions of Key Terminology

_Vice President for Student Affairs_ – is defined on most campuses as the senior student affairs professional who leads a division of student affairs at a college or university. This individual serves as the Chief Student Affairs Officer for the institution and typically reports to a vice chancellor or president. In addition to leading the division of student affairs, a large part of their portfolio is strategic planning, fiscal management, global perspective and institutional perspective versus divisional perspective (Bass, 2006). In addition, Dung (2003) emphasizes that the Vice President for Student Affairs “responds to student, faculty, staff, parents, community members and others concerned with student-related issues or concerns that arise on campus” (p. 346). The Vice President for Student Affairs is also charged with leading a division of diverse members, creating community while also reinforcing community and institutional standards to maintain a safe and welcoming community for everyone (Dungy, 2003).

_Leadership_ – is generally defined in multiple ways, but for the purposes of this study it is an approach that maintains a critical understanding and consideration of the social context in which processes of leadership take place in an organization (Alvesson, 2011). Leadership uses meanings and interpretations of what is said and done in a culture to help frame the social context among members of an organization (Alvesson, 2011). Leadership is closely related to culture, on the individual, community and organizational level (Alvesson, 2011).

_Social Identity_ – is defined as an individual’s self-concept resulting from his or her perceived membership in a social group such as race, gender identity or sexual orientation (Burford, 2012).

_Categorization_ - is a production of group distinctive stereotypes, normative perceptions, and actions, highlighting experience, which is subjectively meaningful in specific context (Stets & Burke, 2000).
Self-enhancement - guides the categorization process by distinguishing in-groups and out-groups (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Social Group – Hardiman, Jackson and Griffin (2007) define social group as a “group of people who share a range of physical, cultural, or social characteristics within one of the social identity categories” (p. 56). For the purposes of this present study, social group refers to social identity groups such as race, gender or sexual orientation.

Marginalized – also coined as marginality refers to when an individual or groups of people that are excluded from a community or group in society and leads to departure from a particular space because of exclusionary practices (Hardiman, Jackson and Griffin, 2007).

Race – is a social construction that signifies groupings of people that share a commonality among physical basis and traits. Bell (2007) suggests race as a social construction is “created to interpret human differences and used to justify socioeconomic arrangements in way that accrue to the benefit of the dominant social group (p. 118).”

Gender Identity – Griffin (2007) refers to gender identity meaning “how we identify ourselves and is typically based on our biological or birth sex such as woman, man, boy and girl” (p. 170).

Sexual Orientation – Griffin (2007) defines sexual orientation as an individual that identifies with “one’s predominant sexual and romantic attractions toward someone of the same sex (lesbian or gay), another sex (heterosexual) or any sex (bisexual) (p. 171).”

Social Comparison - examines your understanding of self and is closely connected to how you are perceived by others who are not connected to that particular group membership (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010).

Social Categorization - is the process of determining which group membership you or someone else identifies with (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010).
Social Identification - explores the affiliation with a group that is perceived in a more obvious form (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2010). There is a strong connection with members within that group because of the identification.
References


Appendix A: Recruitment Call

Dear Vice President [name],

Thank you for taking the time for this phone call. Your name was given to me by (Referrer). As a part of my doctoral studies at Northeastern University, I am studying Vice Presidents for Student Affairs as my sample population. The goal of this study is to interview the current Vice Presidents for Student Affairs about their life experiences related to their social identities to understand how their identities and identity experiences impact their approach to leadership within their organization. I would like to hear your life experiences and stories and their possible influences and impact on your leadership perspective. Those selected for the study will take part in a 90-120-minute interview. Each interview will take place at a comfortable and private place that you select and that it is convenient to you. The consent letter and interview protocol explains in detail what the interview will entail; I will send those to you for your review if you meet the participation criteria.

In order to be part of this study you must be a Vice President for Student Affairs in the United States and have served as a Vice President for Student Affairs for at least three years and be 35 years of age or older. May I ask you: Do you meet these criteria?

If you would like to participate or have any questions, please feel free to contact me…
Appendix B: Script Contact for Indication of Participants

Script Contact for Indication of Participants (Phone Call)

Hello, [name].

First of all, thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me regarding my study of social identity among Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and its’ impact on their approach to leadership. I am calling to ask for your recommendation of potential participants for my study. The goal of this study is to interview the current Vice Presidents for Student Affairs in the United States about their life experiences connected to their identities specifically; race, gender and sexual orientation to increase awareness and understand how these identities impact, if any, their approach to leadership within their organization as a Vice President for Student Affairs. The general criteria for participation in this study includes serving as a Vice President for Student Affairs at college or university in the United States where the participant has served as a Vice President for Student Affairs for at least three years and be 35 years of age or older. The participant must also be based at a college or university in the Northeast or Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. I am interested in identifying participants to interview that aligns with each of the following social identities: historically underrepresented males (non-white), historically underrepresented females (non-white), lesbian; gay; bisexual; transgender or queer (LGBTQ) individuals, participants that identify as white males and participants that identify as white females.

Selection for this study is not guaranteed, but will be determined during a brief phone call. If you can recommend potential participants that would meet the above criteria to speak with me I would be grateful. Upon receiving your recommendation, I would kindly ask you to contact these potential participants and let them know that I will be in touch with them with specifics of the research and to schedule an interview should they agree to participate. During my contact with them I will also make available to them an unsigned letter of consent. This letter explains in details how the interview will be conducted. The letter of consent will state that their information will be confidential. I will send to you that letter for your records. Would you prefer that I fax or e-mail you the letter?

If you have any questions, please email jones.david@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you very much for your time.

David E. Jones
Appendix C: Interview Guide

Interview Protocol  Institution: Northeastern University
Interviewee:  
Interviewer: David E. Jones
Location of Interview:  

Thank you very much for taking the time from your demanding schedule to be part of my dissertation study. I choose you because of your prominent position as the Vice President for Student Affairs at a higher education institution, your rich life experiences, and because you meet the participation criteria. The purpose of my research is to learn about the social identity experiences in your lifetime; specifically race, gender and sexual orientation and its’ impact on your leadership approach as a Vice President for Student Affairs.

All information that I collect during our interview will be handled with confidentiality. I will not use any personal identifying information. Before we start, it would be great if we can select a pseudonym for you and your institution. Do you have any preference? In documenting these interviews, I will refer to you by this pseudonym. With your permission, I will record this session. Afterward, I will provide you a copy of the transcript for your review and you will have the opportunity to make any adjustments or comments to it.

Just to recap, your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time and for any reason. If you don’t feel comfortable with any question I ask, you don’t need to answer, we can just move to the next question. During this interview I may from time to time look at my notepad. My notepad has some questions that I wrote for this interview. Before we start I will share my personal and professional background with you so you can become more familiar with me. Now that you’ve had the opportunity to learn a little about me it is at this time that we can begin the interview. First, do you have any questions for me, or is there anything else you need to know? May we start? Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the interview will be semi-structured. Below are the general research questions for the interview followed by questions, which serve as a guide for the interview, which the researcher may consider using which may yield, in-depth, detailed and authentic data.

Research Questions:
  1) How do Vice Presidents for Student Affairs make sense and develop an awareness of their social identities?

Guide for Interview Questions:

Understanding Social Identities
In thinking about your different identities, please tell me how you identify among the following social identities: race, gender and sexual orientation.
  ▪ Of these three social identities, which identity you think about most often and why?
  ▪ Of these three social identities, which identity do you think about least often and why?
  ▪ Of these three social identities, which identities are you interested in learning more
Of these three social identities, which identities impact your role as a leader the most, specifically in your current role as Vice President for Student Affairs?

**RACE:**

**Understanding Self**

- *Can you tell me about your experiences with your race growing up?*
  - What kind of experiences with race did you have?
  - Please provide examples of significant events or experiences that increased your understanding of race, and your race in particular, within the larger society.
  - How did these experiences make you feel?
  - How did you interpret these experiences?
  - Why do you think these experiences happened at that time of your life?
  - What was going on in your mind when these experiences happened?
  - How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?
  - How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

- *Tell me about the time when you were targeted, marginalized, stereotyped or discriminated because of your race.*
  - What was it like? How did it feel?
  - Why did you think you were targeted, marginalized, stereotyped or discriminated against?
  - How did it change your thinking or understanding of race?
  - Can you tell me how you interpreted these experiences with regard to your race?
  - What factors might have caused these experiences and events to happen to you?
  - How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?
  - How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

- *Tell me about the time when you benefited from an opportunity, experienced privilege, access and resources because of your race.*
  - What was it like?
  - Why do you think you were able to benefit from privilege, access and resources because of your race?
  - How did it change your thinking or understanding of race?
  - How did it change your thinking or understanding of race?
  - Can you tell me how you interpreted these experiences with regard to your race?
  - What factors might have caused these experiences and events to happen to you?
  - How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?
  - How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

- *What do you think could have helped you feel better at that time?*
  - How did you process the experience?
  - Who did you talk to for processing?
What do you should be done to help you or others overcome the experiences of race that you experienced?
How do you think your perspective might have changed if this had happened to someone else you know like a family member, friend or colleague and not you directly?

**What was your first and subsequent reaction(s)?**
- How did you decide to react or think about race after these experiences and events where you were impacted by race?
- Where did you seek help? Did you seek help?

**Understanding Others**
- How did these experiences increase your ability to be aware and understand what others experience with regard to race?
  - Can you tell me how your perspective of others identities and experiences changed?
  - Can you tell me how you have been an advocate for others?
  - Can you tell me what you have done to increase your knowledge and awareness to be supportive of others who experience race similarly or differently?
  - How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?
  - How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

**Understanding Social Identity & Leadership**
- As a result of these experiences with your racial identity, can you share how your experiences with race helps and challenges you to lead and create inclusive initiatives on your campus and create an inclusive organizational culture as the Vice President for Student Affairs?
  - How do these personal experiences impact your professional role and values?
  - What changes in your approach do or will you employ to ensure that the community you lead on your campus is understanding and aware of race and the experiences of others with regard to race?
  - As a result of these experiences with your racial identity, what inclusive initiatives do you implement to create a welcoming organizational culture do you implement?

**Concluding Thoughts:**
- Can you share any concluding thoughts that you believe it important to note in connection to your experiences with race and its impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs within your organization?

**GENDER:**
**Understanding Self**
- Can you tell me about your experiences with your gender growing up?
  - What kind of experiences with gender did you have?
  - Please provide examples of significant events or experiences that increased your understanding of gender, and your gender in particular, within the larger society.
  - How did these experiences make you feel?
  - How did you interpret these experiences?
Why do you think these experiences happened at that time of your life?

What was going on in your mind when these experiences happened?

How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?

How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

Tell me about the time when you were targeted, marginalized, stereotyped or discriminated because of your gender.

What was it like? How did it feel?

Why did you think you were targeted, marginalized, stereotyped or discriminated against?

How did it change your thinking or understanding of gender?

Can you tell me how you interpreted these experiences with regard to your gender?

What factors might have caused these experiences and events to happen to you?

How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?

How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

Tell me about the time when you benefited from an opportunity, experienced privilege, access and resources because of your gender.

What was it like?

Why do you think you were able to benefit from privilege, access and resources because of your gender?

How did it change your thinking and understanding of gender?

Can you tell me how you interpreted these experiences with regard to your gender?

What factors might have caused these experiences and events to happen to you?

How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?

How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

What do you think might have helped you feel better at that time?

How did you process the experience?

Who did you talk to for processing?

What do you should have been done to help you or others overcome the experiences of gender that you experienced?

How do you think your perspective might have changed if this had happened to someone else you know like a family member, friend or colleague and not you directly?

What was your first and subsequent reaction(s)?

How did you decide to react or think about gender after these experiences and events where you were impacted by gender?

Where did you seek help? Did you seek help?
Understanding Others

- How did these experiences increase your ability to be aware and understand what others experience with regard to gender?
  - Can you tell me how your perspective of others identities and experiences changed?
  - Can you tell me how you have been an advocate for others?
  - Can you tell me what you have done to increase your knowledge and awareness to be supportive of others who experience gender similarly or differently?
  - How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?
  - How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

Understanding Social Identity & Leadership

- As a result of these experiences with your gender identity, can you share how your experiences with gender helps and challenges you to lead and create inclusive initiatives on your campus and create an inclusive organizational culture as the Vice President for Student Affairs?
  - How do these personal experiences impact your professional role and values?
  - What changes in your approach do or will you employ to ensure that the community you lead on your campus is understanding and aware of gender and the experiences of others with regard to gender?
  - As a result of these experiences with your gender identity, what inclusive initiatives do you implement to create a welcoming organizational culture do you implement?

Concluding Thoughts:

- Can you share any concluding thoughts that you believe it important to note in connection to your experiences with your gender and its impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs within your organization?

SEXUAL ORIENTATION:

Understanding Self

- Can you tell me about your experiences with your sexual orientation growing up?
  - What kind of experiences with sexual orientation did you have?
  - Please provide examples of significant events or experiences that increased your understanding of sexual orientation, and your sexual orientation in particular, within the larger society.
  - How did these experiences make you feel?
  - How did you interpret these experiences?
  - Why do you think these experiences happened at that time of your life?
  - What was going on in your mind when these experiences happened?
  - How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?
  - How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

- Tell me about the time when you were targeted, marginalized, stereotyped or discriminated because of your sexual orientation.
- What was it like? How did it feel?
- Why did you think you were targeted, marginalized, stereotyped or discriminated against?
- How did it change your thinking or understanding of sexual orientation?
- Can you tell me how you interpreted these experiences with regard to your sexual orientation?
- What factors might have caused these experiences and events to happen to you?
- How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?
- How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

Tell me about the time when you benefited from an opportunity, experienced privilege, access and resources because of your sexual orientation.
- What was it like?
- Why do you think you were able to benefit from privilege, access and resources because of your sexual orientation?
- How did it change your thinking and understanding of orientation?
- Can you tell me how you interpreted these experiences with regard to your sexual orientation?
- What factors might have caused these experiences and events to happen to you?
- How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?
- How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

What do you think might have helped you feel better at that time?
- How did you process the experience?
- Who did you talk to for processing?
- What do you think you should have been done to help you or others overcome the experiences of sexual orientation that you experienced?
- How do you think your perspective might have changed if this had happened to someone else you know like a family member, friend or colleague and not you directly?

What was your first and subsequent reaction(s)?
- How did you decide to react or think about gender after these experiences and events where you were impacted by sexual orientation?
- Where did you seek help? Did you seek help?

Understanding Others
- How did these experiences increase your ability to be aware and understand what others experience with regard to sexual orientation?
  - Can you tell me how your perspective of others identities and experiences changed?
  - Can you tell me how you have been an advocate for others?
  - Can you tell me what you have done to increase your knowledge and awareness to be supportive of others who experience sexual orientation similarly or differently?
  - How has this awareness and understanding impacted your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs in your organization?
How has this awareness and understanding had a lasting impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs?

**Understanding Social Identity & Leadership**

- *As a result of these experiences with your sexual orientation identity, can you share how your experiences with sexual orientation helps and challenges you to lead and create inclusive initiatives on your campus and create an inclusive organizational culture as the Vice President for Student Affairs?*
  - How do these personal experiences impact your professional role and values?
  - What changes in your approach do or will you employ to ensure that the community you lead on your campus is understanding and aware of sexual orientation and the experiences of others with regard to sexual orientation?
  - As a result of these experiences with your gender identity, what inclusive initiatives do you implement to create a welcoming organizational culture do you implement?

**Concluding Thoughts:**

- *Can you share any concluding thoughts that you believe it important to note in connection to your experiences with your sexual orientation and its impact on your approach to leadership as a Vice President for Student Affairs within your organization?*
Appendix D - Informed Signed Consent Letter

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Institution:
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Investigators:
David E. Jones Doctor of Education Candidate, and
Dr. Bryan Patterson Principal Investigator

Title of Project:
The Lived Experiences of Vice Presidents for Student Affairs: A Study Exploring How Social Identity Impacts Leadership

Dear Research Participant,

Thank you very much for taking the time from your demanding schedule to be part of my dissertation study. I choose you because of your prominent position as the Vice President for Student Affairs at a higher education institution, your rich life experiences, and, because you meet the participation criteria. The purpose of my research is to learn about the social identity experiences in your lifetime; specifically race, gender and sexual orientation and its’ impact, if any, on your leadership approach as a Vice President for Student Affairs.

Literature show leaders spend too much time exploring self in terms of experiences and values but must reframe their approach to look beyond those aspects and begin to examine social identities as a way to assess self to increase awareness of how lived experiences across social identity impacts leadership. Yet, little is known about how the impact of social identity on an individual approach to leadership, specifically leaders in student affairs such as Vice Presidents for Student Affairs. An understanding of this phenomena will suggest a lens of awareness and understanding for Vice Presidents for Students Affairs to consider in their attempt to create inclusive organizational culture.

The goal of this study is to interview current Vice Presidents for Student Affairs of colleges and universities in the United States about their life experiences connected to their identities specifically; race, gender and sexual orientation to increase awareness and understand how these identities impact their approach to leadership within their organization as a Vice President for Student Affairs.

This letter will explain what the participation in the study means, but if you have further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 718-637-7798 or by email at jones.david@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Bryan Patterson at b.patterson@neu.edu for clarifications.

First of all, your participation is entirely voluntary and you do not have to participate if you wish not to participate. After you have read this document, and make a decision, I ask you to kindly
notify me of your decision. If you decide to participate, kindly sign this letter and return to me electronically. I will provide you a fully signed copy for your records.

I am asking you to participate in this study because you meet the following criteria: The general criteria for participation in this study includes serving as a Vice President for Student Affairs at a college or university in the United States where the participant has served as a Vice President for Student Affairs for at least three years and be 35 years of age or older. The participant must also be based at a college or university in the United States. The participant will be asked to answer questions specific to race, gender or sexual orientation.

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to participate on one interview, which will last approximately 90-120 minutes.

The following actions will be taken in order to maintain confidentiality of your responses:

✓ Pseudonyms will be used. This means that I will not compromise your identity by sharing your name and identifiers in my study.
✓ All data from the interview will be placed on a locked cabinet as well as saved as an encrypted file in my computer, in addition to being saved in an external hard drive.
✓ A separate, locked cabinet will hold the list of participants’ names, their pseudonyms, and their signed consent forms, as well as the external hard drive.
✓ At the conclusion of the study all digital recordings of the interviews will be destroyed.
✓ After three years all of the consent forms you signed will be also destroyed.

I anticipate that the possible risk, harm, discomfort, or inconvenience to you from participating in this study is nearly non-existent or at the very least very minimal. But, it is possible that you may feel a slight discomfort during personal reflection when thinking about your experiences connected to race, gender and sexual orientation. It is important to mention that your personal identity as a participant in this study will be confidential. No reports or publications will use personal information such as your name and the institution you currently work. If for any reason, you would like to be identified in this study, please let me know in writing of such, otherwise everything will be kept confidential.

Last but not least, it is important to let you know that your participation in this study is voluntary. You may opt out of this study at any time and for any reason. You also may refuse to answer any interview questions. There will be no anticipated direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may be valuable for leaders interested in increasing their awareness of social identity and understanding how it impacts their approach to leadership within their organization.

If you have questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact David E. Jones at 718-637-7798 or by email at jones.david@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Bryan Patterson at b.patterson@neu.edu

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: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.
If you agree to participate in this study, please kindly read, initial directly below and sign at the bottom of the page.

Sincerely Yours,
David E. Jones

Documentation of Informed Consent
* Read the statements that follow and place your initials in the box to the right of the statement, then proceed to the signature area further below

* I understand the information presented on this form.

* I have discussed this study, its risks and potential benefits, and other options with the student researcher, David E. Jones.

* I have received answers to the questions I have asked up to this point.

   My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study. My signature below confirms my understanding that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

   ___________________________  ___________________________
   Signature of participant            Date

   ___________________________
   Printed name of person above

   ___________________________  ___________________________
   Signature of person obtaining consent            Date

   ___________________________
   Printed name of person above
Table 1: Social Identity Framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)
Table 2: Key Categories and Themes

How does 6 Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (VPSAs) of colleges and universities make sense and develop awareness of their social identities?
Table 3: Alignment of Research Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose Statement</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Framework Alignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To explore how Vice Presidents for Student Affairs make sense of their social identities and of its impacts, if any, on their leadership approach.</td>
<td>How do Vice Presidents for Student Affairs make sense and develop awareness of their social identities?</td>
<td>This theory driven study uses Social Identity Theory as the framework. This framework aligns well because it helps make meaning of the data collected by describing intergroup behavior and privileged based on group status, difference and the ability to have access to move from one in-group to another (Tajfel &amp; Turner, 1986). For the purposes of this study, social identity is defined as an individual’s self-concept resulting from his or her perceived membership in a social group such as race, gender or sexual orientation (Barford, 2012).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Coding Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th># of Respondents</th>
<th>Qualitative Comments</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity Learning Experience</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“People couldn’t understand why my parents spoke another language or they had an accent... I think the experience was difficult at times. Being Latino, I think sometimes people thought less of what your possibilities could be... I believe that they expected less or thinking I couldn’t do as much because of my ethnicity. I could see that it was kind of hurtful and to be honest, it kind of fueled me. I really got a sense of drive from that and a sense of urgency that I was going to show them that we were every bit as smart, every bit as good, every bit as talented.”</td>
<td>Social Identities = SI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“I never had to think about race. Again, my awakening around the fact that I never had to think about it. You don’t think about it. You never had to think about it. My parents were very open-minded and nonjudgmental. There was never anything racist, or sexist or any of those kinds of things happening in my house. I didn’t grow up in a very diverse community.”</td>
<td>Self = S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Program Curriculum/New Professional (critical self-work and increased awareness)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>“I moved to a major city right after grad school for a new professional role and really was doing a lot of exploration on identity. I recall walking into a room and I was not only the only white person, I was pretty much the only woman in the room. It was when I realized what our students of color were saying about going into a room and being the only one in the room. It’s not very comfortable.”</td>
<td>Others = O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“I do use the fact that first-generation Latino, underrepresented very much in my storytelling and in a way of inspiring students that they can do anything they set themselves out to do if they are dedicated, hardworking and push the limits of their different gifts and abilities to get to where they want. I do use that a lot in my storytelling and in my discussions in leadership.”</td>
<td>Social Identity &amp; Leadership = SI&amp;L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advancing Cultural Competency (strategic planning, self-reflection, irony)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“We need to build our cultural competence and that we need to understand people and not just expect them to get in our box... I want to know the people I work with and understand them... I try to listen to understand something about them. It helps me be more informed. I think that acknowledging social identities helps build a sense of team and acknowledging what people being with them as part of their life is important.”</td>
<td>Coding Table</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5: Key Evidence-Based Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme #1: Identity Learning Experience</th>
<th>Theme #2: Environment</th>
<th>Theme #3: Graduate Program Curriculum/New Professional</th>
<th>Theme #4: Storytelling</th>
<th>Theme #5: Advancing Cultural Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| "I never had to think about race. Again, my awakening around the fact that I never had to think about it. You don’t think about it. You never had to think about it. My parents were very open-minded and nonjudgmental. There was never anything racist, or sexist or any of those kinds of things happening in my house. I didn’t grow up in a very diverse community." | "I moved to a major city right after grad school and really was doing a lot of exploration on identity. I recall walking into a room and I was not only the only white person, I was pretty much the only woman in the room. It was when I realized what our students of color were saying about going into a room and being the only one in the room. It’s not very comfortable." | "I do use the fact that first-generation Latino, underrepresented very much in my storytelling and in a way of inspiring students that they can do anything they set themselves out to do if they are dedicated, hardworking, and push the limits of their different gifts and abilities to get to where they want to be, but use that a lot in my storytelling and in my discussions in leadership." | "Race and gender are really big factors for me when I look at identity. Sexual orientation is a privilege for me. And I addressed sexual orientation at my institution, co-chairing the LGBT advisory council and I’ve had a chance to make some impact on the campus and let people know it’s okay to be who you are." | "We need to build our cultural competence and that we need to understand people and not just expect them to get in our box...I want to know the people I work with and understand them,...I try to listen to understand something about them it helps me be more informed. I think that acknowledging social identities helps build a sense of team and acknowledging what people being with them as part of their life is important."

Mark: “People couldn’t understand why my parents spoke another language or they had an accent. I think the experience was difficult at times. Being Latino, I think sometimes people thought less of what your possibilities could be...I believe that they expected less or thinking I couldn’t do as much because of my ethnicity, I could see that. It was kind of hurtful and to be honest, it kind of fueled me. I really got a sense of drive from that and a sense of urgency that I was going to show them that we were every bit as smart, every bit as good, every bit as talented.”

Maggie: “I moved to a major city right after grad school and really was doing a lot of exploration on identity. I recall walking into a room and I was not only the only white person, I was pretty much the only woman in the room. It was when I realized what our students of color were saying about going into a room and being the only one in the room. It’s not very comfortable.”

Candace: “I do use the fact that first-generation Latino, underrepresented very much in my storytelling and in a way of inspiring students that they can do anything they set themselves out to do if they are dedicated, hardworking, and push the limits of their different gifts and abilities to get to where they want to be, but use that a lot in my storytelling and in my discussions in leadership.”

Jason: “I do think I’m conscious always of the lens where I am viewing issues of identity, but I don’t know that I have sat in reflection with that...maybe it’s because you get so busy and you don’t think about things in that way, how much identity is influencing me and my own decisions, maybe it’s time to think about where I am and whether there is anything that needs to change.”

Ruth: “Being a lesbian feeling targeted in different locations and yah, really hurtful and really in a place of my sexual orientation should only be in places where it’s really private, no public displays of affection. It took me a long time, it still does, I think it still takes me a really long time to actually feel like I can show affection to my partner in public.”

"I grew up in a pretty white neighborhood and went to high school that also was a pretty white, even more I would say, privileged community, so it wasn’t really until I got to college. I always knew that there was diversity. My father always instilled in me this respect for difference, but it wasn’t until college, where you’re seeing more and more of that.”

Jason: ‘...Where I built my identity about how to help...how to be fair, how to help, how to be equal...although I think your identity is constantly changing...”

Candace: “What made a difference to me in my career was that there were people who invested in me, who helped me...I want to give that back to others. I have a real commitment to access and want to make sure that economically disadvantaged students have an opportunity to attend the university.”

Sean: “Race and gender are really big factors for me when I look at identity. Sexual orientation is a privilege for me. And I addressed sexual orientation at my institution, co-chairing the LGBT advisory council and I’ve had a chance to make some impact on the campus and let people know it’s okay to be who you are.”

Ruth: “I think I probably have a pretty typical white identity development in that I really wasn’t aware of even being white as a child even though I went to a very diverse high school. When I think about college, that was a very white institution and master’s degree the same.”

Mark: “It wasn’t until I got my first job after grad school where I started to be confronted by staff of color, but still being in the stage of like ‘I don’t see color, I don’t know what your talking about.’ They pushed me and helped me see what they were talking about in terms of what I have to do to learn about racial identity. It was strictly women of color actually who really were able to push me and really challenge my thinking about all that.”

"I moved to a major city right after grad school and really was doing a lot of exploration on identity. I recall walking into a room and I was not only the only white person, I was pretty much the only woman in the room. It was when I realized what our students of color were saying about going into a room and being the only one in the room. It’s not very comfortable.”
Table 6: Findings In Relationship To Theoretical Framework