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Multicultural students and civic education: A qualitative analysis of multicultural graduate college students' experiences of civic engagement

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Multicultural students and civic education: A qualitative analysis of multicultural graduate college students' experiences of civic engagement

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

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Ames, Iowa

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DEDICATION

To my beloved mother,
Tatyana Dmitrievna Kokoza,
who inspires me with her intelligence, warmth and kindness.

Her dedication to the teaching profession is
one of the most amazing things that I have witnessed.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the civic engagement experiences of six student participants who identify as African American, Asian, Latino/a and Native American. Considering the emphasis the previous research has put on multicultural students' lack of participation in civic engagement (Foster-Bey, 2008; Levine, 2009; Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1995) and current efforts to reform civic education (Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010), the specific goal of this thesis is to bring the voices of the multicultural student participants into current discussions on civic engagement.

Using phenomenology as a methodological framework, the participants were purposefully selected from a large, land-grant, Midwestern university to take part in semi-structured interviews. Data were coded, thematically analyzed and organized into two areas: (1) sense of belonging; and (2) making sense of civic engagement.

Sense of belonging was found to have a profound impact on the participants' experiences of civic engagement. Defined by the participants as a feeling of connectedness, sense of belonging motivated them to seek out civic engagement opportunities and to stay focused to perform their civic-related activities. At the same time, the participants described how a feeling of disconnect and inability to "fit" in negatively affected their attitude towards civic engagement and discouraged their participation in civic service activities. Three factors were found to be instrumental in shaping the participants' sense of belonging in relation to civic engagement: (1) community; (2) discourse, and (3) university.

The findings of the study have implications for various constituencies, including student affairs professionals, faculty and institution administrators. Recommendations for future research include exploring multicultural and international students' civic engagement experiences in

relation to such factors as geographical location, public and private institutions, socio-economic status and ethnic culture. Furthermore, continued exploration of multicultural students' experiences of civic engagement would help to get a more nuanced understanding of the varied ways in which students of color are contributing to the civic life in the United States.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

President Barack Obama has proclaimed that by 2020 America will have the highest portion of college graduates in the world. Obama's historic decision to expand higher educational opportunities for American students and families has coincided with a resurgence of interest in the civic mission of higher education. Campus Compact, a national consortium of university and college presidents committed to the renewal of civic mission of higher education, issued a report urging educators to "re-examine [university's] public purposes and its commitments to the democratic ideal ...to become engaged, through actions and teaching, with its communities" (National Campus Compact, 2007, p.2).

Calls for promoting civic mission of higher education are not new. At the beginning of the twentieth century, John Dewey strongly advocated the view that the purpose of higher education in the United States was to strengthen students' commitment to active civic life. It is through civic participation that students could learn to become informed, socially responsible, ethical citizens and leaders (Dewey, 1916). Dewey's ideas of civic service have gained momentum in current social justice educational paradigm and civic engagement programs abound on American college campuses.

The abundance of scholarly literature puts forward a convincing argument that civic engagement is not only beneficial for promoting the values and ideals of participatory democracy; it also benefits students themselves, both academically and personally. Civic engagement was found to have a positive impact on students' leadership (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000) , communication and critical thinking skills (Astin & Sax 1998; Colby,

Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003; Rhoads, 1997). Furthermore, the students who took part in civic engagement activities were reported to have developed a better understanding of themselves, their communities and their role in society at large (Prentice & Robinson, 2007).

While the research documents the positive developmental outcomes that are associated with civic engagement, little is known about the actual lived experiences of civic engagement of different groups of students, such as Black, Asian, Latino/a, Native American and Multiracial. Sparse research that is available on the subject registers multicultural students' limited participation in civic affairs (Foster-Bey, 2008; Levine, 2009; Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1995) and focuses on the barriers they need to overcome in order to become civically engaged (Youniss & Levine, 2009). Thus, the conventional wisdom is that multicultural students are less civically engaged than mainstream White students due to their low socio-economic backgrounds and lack of interest in political affairs. These assumptions have remained unchallenged until recently.

Scholars in the emerging field of action research on civic engagement (Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010; Torney-Purta, Almadeo, & Andolina, 2010) are beginning to suggest that mainstream America may have misunderstood multicultural students' unique perspective on civic engagement. In particular, they argue that multicultural students' perceived lack of participation in civic-related activities was drawn from the quantitative studies based on election polling data and census figures. Application of the qualitative paradigm to the terrain of civic engagement research is needed to get a more nuanced understanding of the varied ways in which multicultural students are contributing to the civic life of the nation (Torney-Purta, Almadeo, & Andolina, 2010). Additionally, there are calls for rethinking educational approaches to the definition of civic engagement to encompass civic endeavors of minoritized populations (Foster-Bey, 2008; Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010).

The scholarly considerations, highlighted in the paragraph, framed the purpose and determined the specific goal of the present study.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of the study is to explore how multicultural graduate college students experience civic engagement. Given current efforts to reform educational approaches to civic engagement by expanding its definition to include civic behaviors of marginalized students (Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010; Torney-Purta, Almadeo, & Andolina, 2010) and scarcity of research on multicultural students' actual lived experiences of civic engagement (Kyriacopoulos, 2011), the specific goal of this thesis is to bring the voices of multicultural students into current debates on civic engagement.

Research Questions

The following research question guided the study: What are multicultural graduate college students' actual lived experiences of civic engagement? The following sub-questions emerged from the review of the relevant literature:

- 1) How do the participants conceptualize civic engagement?
- 2) What aspects of their civic engagement activities did the participants find challenging?
- 3) What aspects of their civic engagement activities did the participants find fulfilling?

Significance of the Study

This study operates on the premise that multicultural students have unique understanding of the civic engagement phenomenon that is shaped by complex history of racial and ethnic minority interactions with mainstream U.S. culture. It is important to uncover these conceptualizations of civic engagement in order to encourage meaningful and constructive discussions on the subject (Kyriacopoulos, 2011). In this regard, information about the participants' actual lived experiences of civic engagement can shed light on how they define it and what civic behaviors they associate with it. Additionally, better insight in the participants' experiences of civic involvement provides more information as to how the engagement process looks like for them and what affect it has on their personal and professional development. Student affairs practitioners, faculty and staff can utilize this information to make civic engagement experiences more inclusive and beneficial for diverse groups of students.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined for use in this study:

Multicultural Students: Domestic students of color who identify as Black, Asian, Latino/a, Native American and/or Multiracial. Throughout the study the term “multicultural students” is used interchangeably with the terms “marginalized students of color” and “minoritized students” due to the common theme: being different from the mainstream. According to the literature, students who are different from mainstream White middle-class students have the status of outsiders and are prone to marginalization and institutionalized oppression (Ladson-Billings, 2000). The status of an outsider also means that these groups of students are perceived to be having a deficit and have “at risk” label attached to them (Youniss & Levine, 2009).

Civic Engagement: A person's involvement with his or her community that can take the forms of civic, political and electoral behaviors (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002). Civic behaviors include participating in service-learning and community service programs, taking part in community events, such as attending church, community gatherings, fundraising initiatives, house parties, mentoring other community members. Political behaviors are associated with rallying, protesting, boycotting as well as being affiliated with a particular political party. Electoral behaviors encompass voting, campaigning and donating to political parties.

Conceptual Framework

In order to lay the foundation for this research, the study examines the existing literature related to the topic. It starts with a brief overview of the contemporary educational approaches to civic engagement and synopsis of the current research on multicultural students and civic engagement. Drawing on the works of Peter Levine (2009), Lonnie Sherrod, Judith Torney-Purta, Constance Flanagan (2010) and Sidney Verba (2003; 1995), I argue that much of the literature on civic engagement and multicultural students focuses on the lack of civic participation by marginalized students of color. Furthermore, I discuss how multicultural students' perceived lack of participation in civic-related activities was drawn from the quantitative studies based on election polling data and census figures. I conclude the literature review by emphasizing the need for more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the concept of civic engagement. This means going beyond quantitative instruments of civic participation assessment and requires the comprehensive application of qualitative paradigm to get a more nuanced understanding of the varied ways in which students of color are contributing to American democracy.

Given the fact that civic engagement is often associated with values and behaviors promoted by student development theories (Houston, 2008), I discuss how Astin's Involvement Theory (1984) and Schlossberg's Theory of Mattering and Marginality (1989) can enhance our understanding of multicultural students' experiences of civic engagement. As these person-environment theories posit that in order to get fully engaged students have to develop a sense of connectedness to their environment, I explore the concept of sense of belonging. My discussion of the sense of belonging in relation to multicultural students is informed by the works of Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Faye Carter (1997), Terrell Strayhorn (2008, 2012) and Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000).

To provide methodological framework of the study, I selected the qualitative paradigm. The research questions explore the participants' experiences of civic engagement to gain a deeper, richer understanding of the phenomenon. This focus on the process rather than the outcome is line with phenomenological qualitative approach, which seeks to uncover "the essence or structure of an experience" by demonstrating "how complex meanings are built out of simple units" (Merriam, 2002, p. 10). Given the fact that the study examined how the participants made meaning out of their civic engagement experiences, I used the epistemology of constructivism as a lens to interpret the findings. It states that the reality is independent of human thought, but knowledge and meaning are constructed by people (Crotty, 1998).

The data were obtained from six "purposefully selected" (Creswell, 2009, p. 179) participants during semi-structured interviews. Data interpretation methods included open and focus coding (Esterberg, 2002) and thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Chapter 3 provides a more thorough description of the research design and procedures.

Researcher Positionality

Creswell states that: “qualitative researchers approach their studies with a certain world view that guides their inquires” (1998, p. 74). Researcher’s worldview is shaped by a number of factors including gender, race, culture, society, discourse as well as professional and personal experiences. In other words, who we are determines what we want to study and how we approach our studies (Merriam, 2002). Given that in qualitative research meaning and knowledge are mutually constructed by participants and researchers (Rogers, 2003), it is important for researchers to tell their personal story and to be aware of their personal biases, after all “interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher” (Denzin, 1986, p. 12).

My interest in the project grew out of my professional and personal experience. As a Fulbright graduate exchange student, I was encouraged by my program advisor to participate in civic engagement activities, to form a connection with my host community and to get to know American culture. I was thrilled at the prospect of serving others and making a positive difference in my host community. Soon, I found two positions that I particularly liked: one in the local library and the second one in a homeless shelter. They neatly combined my love of children with my enjoyment of books. Eager as I was to start, I had to wait for a considerable amount of time for the legal paper to go through. As an international student, I had to prove that I was not seeking employment and would not be financially rewarded for my services. Additionally, I had to get permission from the scholarship program and the university before commencement of my community services. I understood that most of it had to do with my legal “outsider” status in the US rather than with me as a person. Despite the rigmarole of paperwork, I enjoyed my community service activities. Though I interacted with people from different backgrounds and

took part in several civic-related events, somehow it was challenging for me to form a sense of connectedness with the community. I was the only international student there and some people mentioned that they found it strange that I should volunteer. I think that international students are sometimes viewed through “deficit” lens and are perceived to be needy and incapable of helping themselves. It was then that I became interested in the civic engagement experiences of students who are different from the mainstream. With my network of friends and mentors, I found the students who were willing to share their experiences with me, and I hugely indebted for their time and consideration. My participants identified as African American, Latino/a, Asian and Native American. I understand that with me being a white, middle-class female student from overseas, I may not render and/or interpret the participants’ experiences with complete accurateness. Therefore, the specific goal of this study is to bring the participants’ voices into the discussions on civic engagement. As a linguist, I believe that knowledge is socially constructed in discourse and approach this study from the epistemological perspective of constructivism.

To all intents and purposes, civic engagement is beneficial for students’ personal and professional growth, and therefore, all students should be given equal opportunities to take part in civic-related activities. I would like to hope the experience civic engagement and what should be done to make these experiences more inclusive.

Summary

This qualitative study explored the multicultural student participants’ experiences of civic engagement. Most of the research on civic engagement and students of color is based on the quantitative data that register multicultural students’ limited participation in civic life. This study is an attempt to document the multicultural student participants’ unique understanding of the

civic engagement phenomenon and bring their voices into the contemporary discussions of the subject.

The thesis comprises of five chapters: introduction, literature review, methods, results and discussion. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth discussion of the relevant literature and theories that conceptually frame the study. Chapter 3 describes methodology, epistemological considerations, rationale for methodological choices and overall research design of the study. Chapter 4 provides participant profiles and discusses emergent themes found in the data. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses how the results of the study can be utilized by student affairs professionals, faculty and staff in their work with multicultural students.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Civic Engagement Rhetoric

Civic engagement plays a crucial role in the formation of citizens and is an important precursor for promoting social justice and human rights (Arnot, 2008). The researchers (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Boyte & Kari, 2000; Dote, Cramer, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006; Prentice, & Robinson, 2007) assert that through civic engagement individuals acquire social and cultural capital that enables them to better their lives by participating fully and contributing to society. Additionally, participation in civic engagement activities has been closely associated with enhancing leadership and communication skills, developing multicultural competence and ethnic tolerance. Students who have been civically engaged report better understanding of their social identities (Rhoades, 1997).

While the abundance of empirical data supports the researchers' claims as to positive affect that civic engagement has on students' personal and professional lives, there is less certainty about what civic engagement actually is and what forms it can take. In the section below, I provide a brief overview of the contemporary definitions of civic engagement, its effect on students and discuss what forms it can take.

Civic engagement: a question of definition

John Dewey, a champion of American civic education, believed that the purpose of higher education in the United States was to renew and strengthen students' commitment to active civic life (Dewey, 1916). Most educators, faculty and staff tend to agree with Dewey's educational philosophy and civic engagement programs are thriving on American universities'

campuses. However, educators have different opinions on what civic engagement actually is and what forms it can take. In my literature review I came across several definitions of civic engagement. For the readers' convenience, I grouped them into two categories: general and specific.

General definitions of civic engagement tend to be somewhat broad and vague, they link the concept of civic engagement with broad existential categories and social constructs. Specific definitions of civic engagement are based on its one or two desired outcomes. Let us consider these examples more closely.

In general definitions, the researchers focus on many potential outcomes of civic engagement and define it broadly as a person's involvement with his or her community. The type of involvement itself is not specified. Campus Compact, for example, defined civic engagement as "the commitment of a citizen to his or her community" (National Campus Compact Glossary, 2007).

In specific definitions of civic engagement, the researchers, on the contrary, tend to focus on a particular outcome, concept or idea connected with participation in civic-related activities. Astin, Astin and Associates (2001) define civic engagement as "the act of becoming effective social change agents by making a positive difference in society to help solve the problems that plague America" (quoted in Lloyd, 2004, p.) According to Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (1998), the concept of civic engagement is intertwined with the notion of civic responsibility. Therefore, the researchers focus on civic engagement in the context of its social responsibility, which they define as a personal obligation to contribute to the welfare of one's community.

In attempt to define civic engagement, the researchers also try to determine which forms of community involvement can be considered as an expression of civic responsibility and which ones cannot. Thus, Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003) state that the most important form of civic engagement is political involvement. According to this assumption, politically engaged students can examine policy questions and become more aware of the root causes of many social problems. As a result, these students are more effective in bringing about a positive change.

Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins (2002) advocate for more comprehensive view of civic engagement activities. These researchers are of the view that civic engagement is essentially a behavioral construct and, as such, it encompasses different civic-related behaviors. Among them the researchers distinguish between the following three categories: civic behaviors, political behaviors, and electoral behaviors. Civic behaviors include participating in service-learning and community service programs, taking part in community events, such as attending church, community gatherings, fundraising initiatives, house parties, mentoring other community members. Political behaviors are associated with the forms of political expressions and include such behaviors as rallying, protesting, boycotting as well as being affiliated with a particular political party. Electoral behaviors are associated with voting, campaigning and donating to political parties.

Synthesizing different views on the subject of civic engagement and considering the purpose and specific goal of the study, I define civic engagement as a person's involvement with his or her community that can take the forms of civic, political and electoral behaviors.

Civic engagement: impact, experience and paradigm

The development of informed, socially responsible, ethical citizens equipped with skills and abilities that enable them to become leaders in their profession and society has been identified as the prime purpose of higher education (National Campus Compact, 2007). Many researchers in the field of education believe that in order to achieve this goal, higher education must restore its democratic mission (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003; National Campus Compact, 2007; Rhoads, 1997). Civic engagement is invested with high significance in this process. The researchers (Astin & Sax 1998; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003; Prentice & Robinson, 2007) state civic engagement is not only beneficial for promoting the values and ideals of participatory democracy; it also benefits students themselves, both academically and personally. Civic engagement allows students to develop better understanding of themselves, their community and their role in society at large. Several studies, mostly quantitative, have demonstrated a profound impact that participation in civic-related activities has on students.

Astin and Sax (1998) compared students who participated in civic-related activities with the ones who did not. Results of their study demonstrated that students who participated in civic-related activities were more engaged in the classroom, achieved higher grades, further developed their life skills and had better understanding of their community and their role in it. Students who did not participate in civic-related activities, on the contrary, reported experiencing more difficulty getting engaged in the classroom and with wider university community. The researchers also concluded that students who are not civically engaged run a greater risk of dropping out of university.

Prentice and Robinson (2007) study of the impact of civic engagement on community college students revealed that students' participation in civic-related activities had positive effect on their personal development. According to the researchers, student-participants reported better understanding of themselves, others and their civic responsibility. Students' understanding of the world also increased as well as their awareness of one's values and ideals.

The outcome-based research on civic engagement draws a clear distinction between the students who are civically engaged and those who are not, with approaching the latter through deficiency theory lens. Students who do not participate in civic activities are believed to have lower leadership and communication skills, lower understanding of their social identities in relation to community and lacking in multicultural competence in comparison with those who are civically engaged. Critics of this outcome-based approach state that it does not take into consideration complex history of racial and ethnic minority interactions with mainstream U.S. culture and neglects the actual lived experiences of civic engagement (Kyriacopoulos, 2011).

In her work *Aware, Empowered, Complacent, Discouraged: Students Diverse Civic Identities* (2006), Beth Rubin argues that students come to civic engagement from different racial, social and cultural backgrounds. Young people's racial and ethnical histories of interaction with mainstream U.S. society should be incorporated into the contextual understanding of civic engagement. Rubin conceptualizes civic engagement as a civic identity development. She suggests that four patterns of civic identity emerge when students' racial and ethnic backgrounds are incorporated into civic engagement activity: *Aware*, *Empowered*, *Complacent*, and *Discouraged*.

Aware students have not personally experienced discrimination but they are aware of the social injustices and institutionalized oppression and are involved in fighting it. *Empowered*

students have direct experience of the gap between declared civic ideals and the reality. “Yet these students remained passionate about the need to be civically active and work for change” (Rubin, 2006, p. 227-228). *Complacent* student is believed to be “reaping the benefits of her privilege statuses and is satisfied with the nation as it is” (Kyriacopoulos, 2011, p. 6).

Discouraged students are the ones who have had direct experience of discrimination and have witnessed the gap between what the nation proclaims as its civic ideals and principles and the way these ideals and principles are implemented in daily lives. These students, although profoundly dissatisfied with the system, believe that they are powerless to bring about the positive change and restore their civic rights. It is further argued that “both Complacent and Discouraged young people may be absent in the research on civic engagement, and that the contexts of these two groups need to be included in research results in order to provide a complete picture of youth participation” (Kyriacopoulos, 2011, p.6).

In order to provide a complete picture of students’ participation in civic-related activities researchers also need to address current civic engagement paradigms. As previously stated, the concept of civic engagement is closely connected with a notion of civic responsibility, which emphasizes volunteerism, service and assistance to those members of community who are in need of help. Given the emphasis on the volunteer ethos, the researchers perceive civic responsibility as a continuum that ranges from charity to social justice (Rhoads, 1997). It is argued that charity paradigm reinforces positions of privilege and dependence, whilst social justice encourages students to challenge existing status quo and take action to make a positive difference (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). In a charity paradigm service experiences are “infused with the volunteer ethos, a philanthropic or charitable viewpoint that ignores structural reasons to help others” (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002, p. 230). Absence of constructive reflection and emphasis

on participatory citizenship can further perpetuate social injustices and institutionalized oppression.

Social justice paradigm aims to promote the values of participatory democracy by encouraging all individuals to take action and engage in their roles as community leaders. It moves the idea of service beyond charitable acts of volunteerism (Rhoads, 1997). In addition to that, a social justice paradigm is closely connected with the concept of active citizenship. Political thinkers of the Enlightenment period (J. Locke, E. Kant, and J. Rousseau) advocated liberal concept of citizenship based on the social contract that entitled individuals to challenge and change existing societal and political structures. In spirit with these ideas, P. Freire (2000) argued that the purpose of citizenship education should be to prepare students to uncover unjust nature of society and take deliberate action. He argued that there was no such thing as neutral education: education can either function as an instrument that is used to indoctrinate young generations into the existing oppressive systems or education can become the “practice of freedom” that can help young people to critically assess societal injustices and transform them. “No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption (Freire, 2000, p. 54).

The general research on civic engagement and students tends to emphasize the positive outcomes that are associated with participation in civic-related activities. The next section explores how multicultural students are represented in civic engagement research.

Multicultural students in civic engagement research

My review of the literature related to the topic has led me to make three principal assumptions about civic engagement research in connection with minoritized groups of students:

- 1) much of the literature on civic engagement focuses on the experiences of middle-class White students and registers the lack of civic participation or limited civic participation by multicultural students;
- 2) most of the research on civic engagement is based on the quantitative data obtained from voter participation registrar, census figures and surveys;
- 3) researchers often connect the absence of civic participation of students of color with low socio-economic status, lack of cultural capital and the assumption that multicultural students live in the environments that are conducive to their limited participation in civic affairs.

Multicultural students' limited participation in civic affairs is a recurring theme in Sydney Verba's (2003; 1995) research on civic engagement. According to him, there is an increasing and troubling gap in civic participation between mainstream students and marginalized students of color. In 1995, Verba and his colleagues Scholzman and Brady conducted a quantitative study in which they compared civic engagement participation patterns of White students with Hispanic and African American students. Drawing upon census data and surveys, the researchers concluded that students of color were considerably less civically engaged than their White peers. African American and Hispanic students demonstrated lower rate of voting and lower interest in community service activities in comparison with mainstream White students. Therefore, the researchers concluded that students of color were less likely to get civically engaged.

More recent studies conducted by Peter Levine on high school and college students (2008; 2009) continue to register lower civic participation rates of multicultural students. In a move similar to Verba and his associates (1995), Levine describes an increasingly disturbing trend among marginalized students of color relying on the quantitative data obtained from census and surveys. In his research on non-college bound youth, Levin connects the lack of civic participation with the unequal distribution of resources and low socio-economic status. In Levine's study the majority of non-college attending students were African Americans. It was argued that the students, who do not go to college, subsequently do not vote and their contribution to the civic life of the nation is somewhat limited.

The above-mentioned researchers in their studies on marginalized students' involvement in civic engagement relied primarily on quantitative measures of assessment based on election polling data and census figures. While this approach is in line with the general trend in civic engagement research to use quantitative instruments of assessment (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002), there are researchers (Foster-Bey, 2008; Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010; Torney-Purta, Almadeo, & Andolina, 2010) who question the validity of this approach. In particular, they argue that examining multicultural students' civic endeavors through an isolated individual and-voter-roll oriented lens may be both inaccurate and inappropriate.

In the *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth* (2010) Sherrod, Torney-Purta and Flanagan argue that the perceived lack of civic participation of marginalized students of color has more to do with unequal distribution of opportunities for civic engagement rather than absence of internal motivation of multicultural students. The researchers also advocate a spectrum approach to civic behavior rather than creating a binary opposition: this is civic engagement/ this is not civic engagement. A balanced, spectral view of civic engagement will

create more opportunities for inclusion and provide better understanding of the breadth of civic behaviors displayed by multicultural students.

In order to reach these goals researchers need to move beyond quantitative instruments of civic participation assessment and start to apply qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observations to get a more nuanced and inclusive picture of civic engagement. In particular, Torney-Purta, Almadeo, and Andolina (2010) argue that polling data and census figures reveal only a portion of civic engagement activities that students are involved in and there is a need in applying a more comprehensive qualitative paradigm to civic engagement research.

Studying civic engagement practices of different racial groups, Foster-Bey (2008) found that mainstream White students indeed displayed more established patterns of civic participation: they volunteer more consistently and with less attrition in comparison with other racial groups. Instead of claiming that there is a gap in civic participation between mainstream White students and students of color, Foster-Bey argues in favor of the discursive shift: the emphasis should move from the perceived lack of civic participation to the lack of opportunities for civic engagement. The researcher draws attention to the various obstacles that students of color have to experience in order to become civically engaged. They include, but not limited to, institutionalized oppression, low socio-economic status, societal view of marginalized students of color as problems, “at risk”. Additionally, Foster-Bey argues that multicultural students may have their unique conceptualization of civic engagement that goes beyond voting and taking part in service-learning programs.

Most of students of color have experienced different forms of institutionalized oppression, discrimination and came from communities stricken with poverty and social

injustices. This, in return, shapes their view of community and civic activities. In the wake of these societal circumstances, it is prudent to hypothesize that students of color may view civic engagement as an attempt to preserve cultural and ethnic integrity by offering financial assistance to the needy members of community, hosting house parties, serving as mentors to their peers. Application of surveys and data from voter participation register in civic engagement research is more likely to ignore these civic endeavors.

Theoretical Framework

Following Sherrod, Torney-Purta and Flanagan's (2010) assertion that civic engagement is a crucial part of student development process and considering the connection between the discursive representations of minoritized populations and marginalized students' experiences of civic engagement (Youniss & Levine, 2009), I chose person-environment (Astin 1984; Schlossberg 1989) and social representation (Moscovici, 2001) theories to guide this study. Building on the theoretical assumptions of the importance of a feeling of connectedness in civic engagement, I discuss the concept of belonging in relation to students of color.

Discursive theory of social representations

Information is not generated in a vacuum. Instead, it is generated by particular people in particular contexts and is interpreted through a particular lens. Researchers approach their studies from certain epistemological standpoints and common assumptions that are disseminated in discourse. It is important to keep these common assumptions in mind when analyzing and interpreting research results (Dijk, 1988).

To account for the subjective nature of information and the importance of ‘common knowledge’ for the discursive interpretation of information, sociologist Sergi Moscovici (2001) proposed his theory of social representations. He called the common sense knowledge that people have about particular social and/or cultural phenomenon social representations. As members of a group people have to share common ideas and knowledge (social representations) in order to enable the process of interaction and cooperation. Therefore, the term ‘social representations’ refers to both: to cognitive structures that allow communication to take place through inter-subjective shared meanings as well as to the processes in whereby shared meaning are created and transformed. S. Moscovici posited that social representations were inherent in any society and community, hence collective ideas or concepts that have deep historical or cultural roots are adopted by the individuals and integrated into their way of thinking. “[Social] representations are prescriptive, that is, they impose themselves upon us with irresistible force. The force is combination of a structure which is present before even we have begun to think, and of a tradition which decrees what we should think” (Moscovici, 2001, p. 23).

In reviewing social representations of marginalized students of color in the discourse, Youniss and Levine (2009) concluded that multicultural students have been viewed through ‘at-risk’ lens, a specific negative lens that has characterized these young people as problems rather than asserts. Students of color have been perceived to be less committed to social justice and less civically engaged than their White peers. The authors described several media-enacted myths that have warped researchers’ understanding of multicultural students in relation to civic engagement: (a) essentializing a group based on perceived characteristics; (b) viewing students of color as problems; (c) seeing students of color as less civically engaged; (d) perpetuating negative characteristics of marginalized groups.

In assessing the impact these social representations of minoritized students have on their willingness to participate in civic-related activities, Youniss and Levine (2009) asserted that these young people can be prone to feel that their agency in relation to civic engagement is somewhat limited. In order to create a more positive civic engagement environment for marginalized students of color changing the lens to viewing multicultural students “having the potential for political engagement is fundamental to forging constructive policy for this and any youth cohort” (p. 17).

Social representations of students of color as problems rather than asserts can lead to further misconceptions about multicultural students’ unique understanding of civic engagement. Additionally, discursive view of minoritized students as having less commitment to social justice and civic engagement may discourage these groups of students from seeking civic involvement opportunities.

Person-environment theories of student development

In the *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth* (2010) Sherrod, Torney-Purta and Flanagan stated that civic engagement should be viewed as an important part of student development process. Assuming this view to be correct, the researchers further argued that student development theories promote values and behaviors that are often associated with civic engagement. The attempt to link student development theories with civic engagement is important as there is no central theory for civic engagement (Colby, et al., 2003).

For the purposes of the study, I chose to focus on person-environment theories, specifically Astin’s Involvement Theory (1984) and Schlossberg’s Theory of Mattering and Marginality (1989). Civic engagement is not an abstract notion, it takes place in particular

settings, which include institutional culture and the many environments that exist within an institution (Houston, 2008). Following Lewin's (1936) assumption that interactions between individuals and their environments influence behaviors and outcomes, I believe that the student development theories highlighted in this section can inform educators as to how create supporting civic engagement environments for all groups of students.

The basic tenet of Astin's Involvement Theory (1984) is that the more physical and psychological energy students invest in their academic and social activities, the more they learned and the more involved they become. According to Astin, student involvement is not limited to academic aspects of collegiate life and encompasses participation in student organizations and community service programs, interactions with faculty and peers and spending quality time on campus. In spirit with Sherrod, Torney-Purta and Flanagan's (2010) argument about unequal distribution of opportunities for student involvement, Astin stated that the more quality resources available, the more likely students are to get engaged and grow both personally and professionally. The absence of quality opportunities for student engagement is most likely to result in low student participation rates. Applying this concept to the terrain of civic engagement means that universities should offer meaningful and constructive civic engagement opportunities for all groups of students.

While Astin's Involvement Theory emphasizes the importance of a setting and quality opportunities for student involvement, Schlosseberg (1989) believed that the greater connection students forged with their environments, the more they focused on learning and development. In order to get engaged, students need to feel that they make an important contribution to their environment, in another words, they need to feel that they matter. Personal connection is another important precursor to getting involved in academic and social activities. Forming a sense of

connectedness to the environment increases the likelihood of student active participation in it. On the other hand, “the more students felt marginalized or not affirmed, the more time they spent trying to fit in” (Houston, 2008). Applying this assumption to this study of multicultural students’ civic engagement experiences I argue that multicultural students will find it hard to stay motivated to perform community service when they do not feel connected to community or fully accepted. In the next section, I further expand this argument by incorporating Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) study of sense of belonging in relation to students of color and Strayhorn (2008, 2012) more recent work on minoritized students and a feeling of connectedness.

Multicultural students and sense of belonging

Abraham Maslow (1954) proposed a theory according to which all human needs are organized in hierarchy starting from very basic ones, such as food, sleep, water, safety to sophisticated ones, such as self-actualization and identity development. Sense of belonging occupies a middle position in this hierarchy. According to the sociologist, the need to belong is a fundamental human need and motivation sufficient enough to influence behavior. Sense of belonging is important for human socialization in general and engagement in particular because “it offers a shared sense of socially constructed meaning that provides a sense of security and relatedness. People want to be accepted by others, valued and respected as competent and qualified individuals worthy of membership in a defined group or social context” (Strayhorn, 2012, p.).

While sense of belonging is a universal human need, it becomes of special significance in certain contexts and at certain times. For example, a person is more likely to feel the urgency to form a sense of belonging if he or she is a newcomer in an otherwise established group. Sense of

belonging takes on heightened importance for a young adolescent and a college student who are in search of their identities and considering whom they would like to be (Strayhorn, 2012).

Applying Maslow's ideas to college students, Strayhorn (2008, 2012) states that satisfying the need to belong is of paramount importance to college students and they have difficulty in discharging their academic obligations such as studying, attending classes and participating in student organizations if they cannot successfully resolve one of their most fundamental needs – to belong. In his work *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success* (2012) Strayhorn cites a number of studies that associate a sense of belonging with student prosocial behavior such as engagement, well-being, achievement as well student retention and persistence. The basic tenet of these studies is that the students are more likely to get engaged if they form a sense of belonging with their (campus) community. Expanding on Maslow's definition of sense of belonging, Strayhorn states that in the context of collegiate academic life sense of belonging "refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued, and important to the group" (p. 18). The researcher's definition of sense of belonging puts forward two important preconditions for sense of belonging to occur: social support on campus and the experience of mattering. While social support on campus refers largely to opportunities offered by various student services and support groups, the experience of mattering is associated with positive interactions with peers, faculty and community members that make students believe that someone cares. Given the diversity of US student population, one cannot help wondering how different racial and ethnic groups of students experience a sense of belonging.

In her research on racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies, Ladson-Billing (2000) asserts that in US academic culture students who are different from mainstream White middle-class students have the status of outsider and are prone to marginalization and institutionalized oppression. Additionally, the status of an outsider means that these groups of students are perceived to be having a deficit and have “at risk” label attached to them. It is believed that “at-risk” students are in danger of dropping out of college and having limited academic and social experience. These assumptions lead to further marginalization of students of color and perpetuate racial stereotypes. In the context of marginalization, sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (Strayhorn, 2012).

Hurtado and Carter (1997) studied how minoritized group of students form a sense of belonging in relation to their campus environments. The researchers argue that a sense of belonging “contains both cognitive and affective elements in that the individual’s cognitive evaluation of his or her role in relation to the group results in affective response” (p. 328). In another words “an individual assesses his or her position in relation to the group (cognitive), which in turn results in a response, behavior, or outcome. Sense of belonging, then, reflects the extent to which students feel connected [to a campus]” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 528). Applying this concept to marginalized students of color, Strayhorn (2012) introduces the notion of normative congruence – a theoretical construct that posits that students seek out environment of settings that are congruent with their own attitudes and expectations. Assuming this view to be correct, one can argue that diverse campuses create more supportive and inclusive environments for students and facilitate their sense of belonging in that environments. In terms of community, the more diverse and accepting it is, the more likely students find their niche within this community and get civically engaged. Conversely, inability to identify with a community and form a sense

of belonging in relation to it, is more likely to result in passive social behavior and students' unwillingness to seek out civic engagement opportunities.

Summary

The chapter provided a review of the literature relevant to the study. I organized the literature review in two sections. In the first – *Civic Engagement Rhetoric* – I discussed different contemporary educational approaches to civic engagement and provided synopsis of the current research on minoritized groups students in relation to civic engagement. On reviewing the studies highlighted in the section I concluded that: (a) multicultural students' perceived lack of participation in civic-related activities was drawn from the quantitative studies based on election polling data and census figures; (b) more comprehensive research approach is needed to get a nuanced understanding of minoritized students' civic engagement experiences. In the second section – *Theoretical Framework* – I concentrated on the discursive theory of social representations and person-environment theories. These theories help educators better understanding multicultural students' unique conceptualization of civic engagement and the ways in which they contribute to the civic life of the nation.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodology of the study, including epistemological and theoretical considerations, phenomenology and methods. It provides a rationale for methodological choices and explains how the study was conducted. Furthermore, the chapter addresses ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study.

Epistemological and Theoretical Considerations

I have selected a qualitative methodology for this study. My research questions explored the civic engagement experiences of the multicultural student participants to discover a deeper, richer understanding of the phenomenon. This quest for understanding is in accordance with qualitative research stance which seeks to uncover a deeper understanding of experience rather than an absolute truth (Creswell, 1998; Shram, 2006). By focusing on the experience rather than outcomes, a qualitative researcher can study a phenomenon holistically through “direct personal experience in real world settings” (Shram, 2006, p.7). Since this study sought to understand how the participants make meaning out of their civic engagement experiences, a constructivist approach was utilized.

The epistemology of constructivism focuses on “the meaning-making by the individual mind” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). It posits that reality and knowledge are constructed in the discourse by individuals. Constructivism also elevates the role of the researcher in the meaning-making process. Far from being a passive observer, the researcher is actively involved in the construction of meaning, as the meanings of the participant’s experiences are constructed between the participant and the researcher. Considering the postulates of the constructivist approach, I define

my exploration of the participants' experience of civic engagement as a mutual process of discovery that resulted in a holistic understanding of the complex phenomenon.

Within the qualitative paradigm there are several methodological approaches: phenomenology, case study, grounded theory, ethnography and narrative inquiry (Merriam, 2002). Grounded theory, ethnography, case study and narrative inquiry were not considered for this study as they are not consistent with the research questions. Phenomenology, on the other hand, "focuses on the essence or structure of an experience" and attempts to demonstrate "how complex meanings are built out of simple units" (Merriam, 2002, p. 10). Since the meanings the participants ascribed to their experiences of civic engagement were central to understanding what it was like for a multicultural student to be civically engaged, I chose phenomenology as the methodological framework for this study.

This approach posits that in order to fully understand the participants' experiences, the researcher must comprehend the essence of their experiences through in-depth interviews and observations (Patton, 2002). Through these interactions I gained a better insight into the participants' civic engagement experiences while remaining cognizant of my personal biases and presuppositions. Phenomenologists bring to their studies previous knowledge and/or experience, while it would be counterproductive to attempt to ignore these thoughts (Creswell, 1998), the researchers must examine their own presuppositions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The goal of a phenomenological study is not to prove hypothesis but to delve into the essence of an experience (Merriam, 2002). Keeping these considerations in mind, I carefully examined my own experiences and knowledge related to the topic. Through the research process I delimited my personal assumptions about the phenomenon from that of the participants by taking reflexive notes.

Data Collection

Recruitment of participants

Phenomenological studies involve analysis and description of the essence of the phenomenon that is studied in great detail (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, small and purposefully selected samples are considered sufficient for the conduct of rigorous qualitative research (Shram, 2006). Taking these assumptions into consideration, I recruited six participants for present study.

When selecting participants, I gave the greatest priority to those who best met the following criteria: (a) graduate college students who identify as Black, Asian, Latino/a, Native American or Multiracial; (b) participate or have participated in the past in civic-related activities. Through personal contacts, I came up with a list of 10 students who met the selection criteria for this research project. Upon securing approval from Iowa State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I made contact with potential participants through e-mail to determine their interest in the study (see Appendix A: Recruitment Email). The recruitment e-mail contained information about the study objectives, research procedures, anticipated time commitment and confidentiality measures. Eight students expressed their interest in participating in the project and eventually six of them were recruited. The selected participants were invited for an interview.

Acknowledging the importance of establishing a rapport (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), I used my interactions with the participants that took place prior to interview to build good working relationships with them. Through e-mails and phone calls, I gave the participants information about the research project and provided them with an opportunity to ask questions. Specific interview questions were not shared with the participants in advance, but I provided them with the general idea of the type of questions that would be asked during the interview

At the time of the study, all the participants were graduate students enrolled in Masters and PhD programs in various areas of study at a large land-grant Midwestern university. The interviews took place in spring 2013. Prior to interview the participants signed informed consent forms (see Appendix B: Informed Consent Document), thus authorizing me to include the information they provided into the study. Mindful of the power relations during the interview (Rogers, 2003), I let the participants choose interview time and the venue.

Interviews

In order to obtain an in-depth description of the phenomenon under consideration, each participant took part in one interview that lasted approximately one hour. Prior to the interview sessions, I explained research procedures and confidentiality measures to the participants. The participants also completed the demographic information (see Appendix C: Demographic Information Form) in which they provided information about their age, race, major field of study as well as briefly described the civic-related activities in which they participated. The interviews were semi-structured, guided by the interview script (see Appendix D: Interview Protocol), I occasionally interjected with the follow-up questions to clarify a certain point or to make a remark on the participant's comment. My interview guide emerged from the research questions and the results of the literature review. To develop an effective interview guide and obtain ample in-depth data necessary for the study, I utilized Price's (2002) ladder question interview technique.

A ladder question interview technique means that an interviewer begins with less intrusive, less personal questions and gradually delves deeper into the experience as respondents become more comfortable. I began the interview sessions by encouraging the participants to talk

about themselves, their area of study, their personal and professional aspirations. Then, I asked questions about the participants personal, educational and professional histories related to civic engagement. As the concept of civic engagement is closely connected with the notion of community, I explored the participants' definitions of community and encouraged them to reflect on the times when they felt most connected to their communities. Once, I gleaned this initial information, I focus the participants' attention on the details of their actual experiences of civic engagement. Thus, I asked about the specifics of their civic involvement, its challenging and beneficial aspects. In the final stage of the interview sessions, I asked the participants to reflect on their civic engagement experiences: what personal and professional outcomes they associate with their civic participation, what they gained as a result of their civic-related activities.

My previous educational background as a linguist and brief experience as a communication officer at a charity organization, I believe, equipped me with interview skills necessary to establish a good rapport with participants and to create a welcoming atmosphere of trust. Through verbal and non-verbal channels, I communicated my empathy, acceptance, concern and respect for the participants. I was genuinely eager to learn about their experiences and they were willing to provide me with full accounts of their civic engagement experiences. Each interview session was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

I began the data analysis with identifying emerging themes in the participants' narratives of their civic engagement experiences. Given the constructivist epistemology that I applied to the study and willing to immerse myself in the data, I purposefully eschew utilizing qualitative data analysis software programs. To organize the data and to identify themes I used methods of

coding and thematic analyses. Coding starts with reading the data and dividing it into categories. Esterberg (2002) distinguishes between open coding and focus coding. Open coding is associated with reading of the data line by line without applying predetermined codes. The themes that emerged in open coding are further organized. The process of finding themes within the data is called thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Application of the methods highlighted in this paragraph enabled me to come up with a dozen of themes related to the participants' experiences.

To organize them further and to establish patterns, I had to identify the key themes of the study. For this purpose, I employed Strauss's (1987) taxonomy of prevailing themes. According to the researcher, there are four criteria that distinguish key themes for any study: (a) it is an idea that appears frequently; (b) it is not forced; (c) it is phrased in a way that could be further researched in other studies, and (d) it develops in its depth to explain a phenomenon.

It was through this data analysis process that I understood the essence of the participants' lived experiences of civic engagement. After coding, thematic analysis and organizing the data, three key themes of the findings emerged: sense of belonging, university, and discourse. They are discussed in chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a crucial component of any qualitative research. It refers to overall quality of the study (Merriam, 2002). Given the subjective nature of a qualitative inquiry, the scholars are at variance as to how best measure the validity and reliability of a qualitative study.

Since qualitative studies seek to uncover deeper understanding of an experience and operate on the assumption that there is no one right methodology to be used in the construction

of knowledge (Shram, 2006), authenticity of the findings depends on the transferability of the data collection process and analysis, thick rich descriptions, member checks and peer debriefing.

To ensure transferability, I provided readers with sufficient description of the research design and the methods that I used to collect and analyze the data. The strategies to enhance the internal validity of the findings included spending considerable amount of time with the participants to gather reliable data and providing them with the opportunity to verify the transcript and the initial analysis of the data. During member checks process, I contacted the participants and send them via e-mail summary of the thematic analysis, my interpretations of the data and participant profiles. It was not obligatory for the participants to go through these materials, however, by sharing this information with them, I gave them ample opportunities to ensure accuracy. All six participants replied back to me and indicated that they were pleased with the results and requested only minor changes.

Throughout the process of data analysis, I was aware that my personal experience and assumptions about the phenomenon were a threat to the internal validity of the study. Being an “outsider” international student on campus and having had a somewhat mixed experience of civic engagement myself, it was crucial for me not to make assumptions about the data based on my own experience. In order to “bracket” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006) my thoughts and experiences related to the subject of the study and allow the participants’ stories to shine through, I kept taking reflexive notes and stayed in regular contact with the committee members, discussing my findings with them. Additionally, throughout the study I included detailed descriptions and extracts from the interviews to ensure the authenticity of the findings.

While I acknowledge that there is no such thing as a perfect study and no study is free from a researcher’s personal biases, it is my hope that by utilizing trustworthiness enhancement

strategies highlighted in this section, I did the best I could to minimize threats to the internal validity of the study.

Ethical Considerations

In qualitative studies “researchers are commonly involved in long-term and relatively intimate relationships with participants that are both research and social relationships...” (Rogers, 2003, p. 56). I was aware of my role as a researcher and partner in the construction of meaning of the participants’ experiences. It entails additional obligations to protect participants and to ensure their confidentiality.

Protecting the participants was central this study. Prior to approaching prospective respondents, I completed “Protecting Human Research Participants” NIH web-training course. The next step was obtaining approval from Iowa State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). After approval was granted, I contacted the potential participants. Though very little risk, if any, was associated with taking part in the study, I took the following measures to ensure that the research project was conducted in an honest and ethical manner:

- 1) Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. Additionally, I used general terms when referring to the participants’ geographical locations, field of study and civic-related activities.
- 2) Involvement in the research was voluntary. Participants’ right to withdraw from the study at any time was made clear to them at the beginning of the project.
- 3) The participants were not obliged to answer all the questions posed during interview sessions. They could skip interview topics if they felt uncomfortable discussing them.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The results of the study are presented in this chapter. First, participant profiles provide brief description of the participants' professional lives and their civic engagement activities. Second, the data from the study are presented and explained. When exploring and describing the participants' civic engagement endeavors, the results are organized in two major sections which are described below. Throughout the chapter, participant quotations are extensively used to provide examples and illustrations of their experiences.

The first section – *Sense of Belonging* – explores the participants' civic engagement experiences in connection with community, discourse and university. It provides important information about the conditions that are necessary for positive civic engagement experience to occur. The participants stated that in order for them to get civically engaged, they needed to feel connected to their respective communities, receive adequate encouragement from the university and to have people of color positively represented in the discourse on civic education. Given the significance the participants attached to the sense of belonging, this section explores how a feeling of connectedness is formed in three important domains: community, discourse and university.

The second section – *Making Sense of Civic Engagement* – focuses on the participants' actual experiences of civic engagement and how they make sense of it. In particular, the section explores the participants' dichotomous view of civic engagement and their place in it. In addition to that, the section provides information related to what steps should be taken to make civic engagement experience more beneficial and inclusive for all groups of students.

Participant Profiles

Brief descriptions of the participants' professional lives and their civic engagement activities are presented in order to introduce them prior to explaining the findings of the study. All the participants selected their pseudonyms, which are used throughout the chapter to provide confidentiality and protect their identities. Generalizations are employed in the description of the participants' civic engagement activities for the reasons of protecting their privacy and confidentiality.

Roxanne

Getting higher education degree has always been one of the priorities for Roxanne. A daughter of immigrant parents who came to the United States shortly after she was born in search of a better life, Roxanne recognized the difference that having higher education degree would have made for her parents. She became determined to pursue higher education. However, as a first generation African American student, she admitted to feeling somewhat at a loss with a diverse life of a university. It was seeing other African American women succeed professionally that kept Roxanne focused on achieving her goals. To pursue her graduate degree Roxanne recently moved from southern part of the United States to Midwest and formed a close connection with the community of African American women there. Most of her current community services activities are associated with the church: Roxanne volunteers regularly at the nursing home. As an undergrad, Roxanne served as a student leader and community service coordinator in the Caribbean's Student Association.

Gloria

As an Asian American student, Gloria said that she was expected to excel at math and physics and her choice of major – Fashion and Design – came as surprise to many. “*‘You are Asian, you should be good at math!’ they would tell me*”, she said. It was of many stereotypes that Gloria felt she needs to break in order to achieve her higher education goals. As an immigrant who came to the United States during her high school years, Gloria admits that the idea of ‘civic service’ is new to her. Nevertheless, she has taken part in the community services initiatives organized by her church and served as a treasurer and PR representative for her department student association.

Alfonso

A first generation Latino student, Alfonso said that the idea of serving others had been instilled in him during his undergraduate years when he became closely involved in the work of his Latino-based fraternity. As a member, Alfonso participated in the community service activities organized by the fraternity. Alfonso especially enjoys the civic-related activities that give him the chance to represent his Latino heritage and culture. Thus, he is a regular contributor to Latino Heritage Month events.

Julius

A first generation Native American student, Julius believes that he had a somewhat unconventional path to civic engagement. Unlike his peers, who were mostly middle-class white students, Julius felt that he was not encouraged to serve a student leader in student organizations or to take part in civic-related activities organized by the university. Instead, Julius found himself

drawn to the community of *'other minority students, who come from low-income families and think that education is not for them'*. He started to volunteer at the community organizations that aim to empower underrepresented populations serving as a mentor for Men's Anti-Violence Campaign and taking part in the work of an American Indian Organization. In addition to that, Julius volunteers at a homeless shelter.

Deenah

Aspiring higher education professional, Deenah hopes to make a positive difference in the lives of multicultural students. Her own experiences as a female Asian American student made her aware of the shortcomings of the educational system in relation to underrepresented populations. As a graduate student Deenah participated in alternative spring break service-learning program and served as a student leader in a multicultural student association.

Tim

Music is one of Tim's greatest passions in life and he uses it to help those less fortunate than himself. As an African American graduate student, Tim developed strong links with his fraternity and the campus community of other African American professionals. He volunteers as a musician for church-related events and participates in philanthropic events through raising money for various charities. As a member of fraternity, Tim takes part in the fraternity community service events.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging has emerged as an essential component of the participants' experiences of civic engagement. Defined by the participants as a feeling or sensation of connectedness, sense of belonging was found to have a profound effect on their willingness to participate in civic events and activities.

The participants described how a feeling of connectedness, acceptance, being valued and respected as well as the experience of mattering helped them to stay focused and motivated to perform their civic-related activities. At the same time, the participants revealed how limited social support on campus, a feeling of disconnect with a university and community at large as well as inability to 'fit in' negatively affected their attitude towards civic engagement and discouraged their participation in civic-related activities.

Three factors were found to be instrumental in shaping the participants' sense of belonging in connection with civic engagement. They are community, discourse and university. In the section below I will explore how each of these factors affected the participants' experiences of civic engagement.

Community

The participants' experiences of civic engagement were closely connected with their respective communities. In their recollections of their civic engagement activities the participants spoke at length about what it meant for them to be members of a community and how they formed a sense of belonging to a community. They discussed multiple communities they live in and the effect these communities had on their willingness to participate in civic engagement activities. So, how do the participants define community and what factors contribute to them forming a sense of connectedness to a community?

What is community?

The data analysis reveals that for the participants community is a multi-layered concept that encompasses cognitive, physical and affective domains. In describing community the participants often referred to a collective of people who are alike, share similar goals and support one another. Thus, Alfonso described community as ‘*a group of people with shared or similar goals where members of community support one another*’ while Roxanne associated community with ‘*people who share similar interests and goals and are working together to reach those goals*’. Tim took this definition of community one step further and described community as a universal entity. According to him almost anything can be considered a community as long as it has a purpose:

I think community is universal, it is a group of people that believe in something that [is] like-minded, [people] are connected for a reason and have some kind of goals, like community of musicians who want to perform, or students who want to achieve something, community can be any collective of individuals who are like-minded and support one another to succeed together but also know if one succeeds it is okay too. There are different levels of community, but is it universal and you can consider almost anything a community.

While there was general consensus among the participants that community refers to a group of people who have common goals and support one another in trying to reach those goals, each participant singled out particular aspects of community that made them feel more affiliated with certain collective of people over the other. In another words, there is more to community than just a group of people with similar goals and interests.

Roxanne, for example, in her definition of community stressed the importance of shared experiences for a sense of belonging to occur. Having moved to Midwest from the southern part of the United States, Roxanne initially struggled to find a community for herself as Black woman. Interactions with other Black women on campus and her church members made her

realize that her experience was no different from the experience of other Black women. These shared experiences formed a cornerstone of her community and made her grow both spiritually and socially:

...for me one of the most important communities is the community that I have with my church as well as with other black women. It is something that is really important to me as I feel there is [this] shared experience and usually when I find the way to intersect the two, like be surrounded by church members who are black women, then it is even better, because it is an opportunity to address who I am both spiritually and religiously, but who I am socially as well. ...so when I find people, it is like 'Oh, I do not have to explain why I do not do x y and z because you understand'. And then with being a Black woman ... I've learned more about my racial identity, my identity as a woman. And as I learned about that I want to spend more time with other black women who understand how that process looks for me.

Similarly, Alfonso considered shared experiences to be an important part of his Latino-based fraternity that helped him stay connected to his community and deal with occasional outbreaks of bigotry:

I mean everyone in our communities, I mean fraternity, like, we all share similar experiences and we all had stories of some kind of bigotry in our lives. And having people around and being able to share those experiences, stories with other members, brothers, and see how they still moved forward, I think it really allows you to continue to move forward yourself.

For Julius to be feel a member of a certain community, there need to be opportunities '*for you to succeed, opportunities for ownership, involvement and if I do not feel at home, if I do not feel like I belong to the community it is because there are no opportunities there for me*'. In her definition of community, Gloria emphasized that it is important for community members not only to share similar goals but also to be in similar life circumstances. Being an immigrant herself, Gloria found that she gets along much better and feels comfortable around people who are also immigrants and can understand her experience and relate to it. As she further explains:

...community it is where you can be comfortable and people, like you know, are in similar life circumstances. I feel more connected to community of 1.5 generation, I mean people like me who came to America but were born in a different country. In our community of

immigrants we have this hierarchy, for example FOB - 'fresh out of boat', this how we call international students and newcomers, then there is 1st generation - immigrants who came [to the United States] when they were already middle-aged and spent considerable chunk of their life in another culture. ... So yes, I feel mostly connected to a community when I am around similar people and in my case, I mean Korean young people who are 1.5 generation.

The participants defined community as a collective of people who share similar goals and support one another in trying to reach those goals. Shared experiences between community members were essential as they helped the participants formed a sense of belonging to a community. The importance of similar life situations and opportunities were also mentioned as the crucial attributes of community.

Multiple communities

The participants acknowledged that they live and interact within multiple communities. Immediate family, friends, cohort, church, student organizations, university and ethnic culture were identified by the participants as their multiple communities. Alfonso, for example, stated that a person can be a member of several communities '*I do consider cohort to be a community that I am involved in. ...We talk about Greek community daily, so that consisting of Latino-based fraternities and sororities, my fraternity being a subset of that. Then I would say my family is definitely a community*'. On top of immediate family, student organization and university, Deenah identifies ethnic culture as one of her multiple communities '*...you can be part of multiple communities...For me one of these [multiple] communities is culture. When I say that community is a culture, I mean like community is your ethnic culture*'.

Additionally, the participants' discussion of multiple communities revealed the distinction that they draw between the communities made for them and the communities they

make for themselves. The participants did not get to choose their church, university or cohort communities, for example, but they chose their niche within those communities by identifying people to whom they could best relate. These people formed the cornerstone of the participants' sub-communities within larger community. I will use Alfonso's example as it best illustrates this concept.

Being the oldest sibling and not having close friendships growing up, I was hungry to get involved with people, to get connected if you know what I mean, I was really longing for community and was willing to join any community to be honest...Now I am a little bit more picky in terms who I allow to be a part of my community. Sometimes community is made for me, I did not get to choose my cohort, but the members of my cohort who I am particularly close to I did chose. Again, I did not choose members of my fraternity, however the members of my fraternity that I am particularly close to I did chose and I value those handful of people that I am close to and that community than broader community

Although the participants are members of multiple communities, the cited examples reveal that within this multiplicity of communities the participants chose the communities in which they felt most comfortable and formed a connection to them. What made the participant choose one collective of people over the other? What factors contributed to the participants forming a sense of belonging to one community and a sense of disconnect with the other?

In discussing the times the participants felt most connected to their communities, two common themes emerged: multicultural values and being around other people of color. The participants associated multicultural values with inclusivity, being open-minded and acceptance, which meant that a person does not need to shut down certain parts of his or her identity in order to be welcomed into a community. Furthermore, the presence of multicultural values in a community broadened the scope of community for the participants: they did not feel they need not to stay within the community of people of color in order to feel accepted. A community with strong emphasis on multiculturalism promotes a safe space and environment of acceptance for all

its members. Thus, Alfonso found himself drawn to the diverse New York City community, where he was able to shed his minority status and blend in with the rest of the community members. He credits strong multicultural values of his host community as the factor that helped him form a bond with this increasingly diverse community. As Alfonso further explains:

It [time in New York City] was very beneficial for me. What really stood out to me was multiculturalism and how inclusive the place was! It is the city bustling with diversity, Spanish language is spoken everywhere, people are open-minded, same sex couples freely and publicly express their affection, it was all very inspiring for me, because you see, never did I consider myself a minority once I was there. In NYC I could be myself, just myself and I felt really connected to that community.

Being around other people of color was found to be another important precursor to the participants forming a sense of connectedness to a community. Drawing on the binary opposition us vs. them, the participants stated that it did not matter whether it was a community of African Americans, Asian Americans or Latino/a for them to feel included and connected as long as it was not a white community. Thus, Deenah who identifies herself as Hmong American mentioned that she gets along better with other people of color than with members of white community. During her service-learning experience, which took place in a predominantly white community, she felt immediate connection and formed a bond with a fellow Latino student. She believed that her civic engagement experience would have been a lot better had her community been more diverse.

The person with whom I work best was a Latino man who worked in the center for Latino/a Americans and I do not know exactly why. I guess it happened because he was a person of color and I immediately felt connected because our cultures are a bit similar. If my students or staff had been more diverse, I would have had a better experience.

Deenah raises an interesting point about the role of culture in forming a sense of connectedness to a community. Further expanding on the dichotomy us vs. them, she states that people of color share collectivist culture that help them identify with one another regardless of

their race and ethnic culture. This collectivist culture stands in sharp contrast to the individualist culture associated with American white community.

Everything we [people of color] do is based on the collectivist idea and in everything I do I represent my community. My community and culture represents who I am as Hmong American. And for multicultural students, you know, I think we share collectivist culture, whether you are African American, Asian, Latino/a, our culture is collective. However when you look at the American culture, American community, it is more individualistic, so there is dissonance.

Being around other people of color who are successful professionally was found to be beneficial for multicultural students, as it reaffirmed their beliefs that they can succeed as well. For Tim, seeing other Black people who succeeded in his program of study and got to the executive positions was a crucial factor in forming a sense of connection to this community. He stated that having these Black people as role models helped him stay in his chosen field of study. As Tim further explains:

These last two years there has been a preconference that is hosted by African American Male and Female Summit. And I would say that it was for the last couple of years the most beneficial support group. With a room full of professionals who are African Americans, it was rejuvenating, reenergizing, it was worth the money that I spent. Even if I had gone there by myself, I still would have been satisfied by the level of connectedness that I felt. ...There were multiple of times during the program when I felt like quitting, and being part of the collective of people, that organization really kept in the program, the example of African American professionals helped me to stay focused, helped stay in the program. It made me realize that I had a purpose within [his chosen field of study] that my experiences were validating, that there are individuals who go through the same thing. Overall it was also great to see other Black professionals in executive positions and knowing that there is a possibility for me.

While the participants acknowledged that they live multiple communities, they chose themselves the communities to which they formed connection. Multicultural values and being around other people of color were identified by the participants as the important precondition for forming a sense of belonging to a community. Given the significance of community in the lives of the participants, what effect did it have on their civic engagement experiences?

The role of community in civic engagement

In discussing their civic engagement experiences, all the participants acknowledged the importance of community and its influence on their willingness to seek out civic engagement opportunities and to stay motivated to perform their civic-related activities. When the participants felt connected to a community on social, cultural and spiritual levels, were able to identify with other community members and be accepted into a community as they were, their experiences of civic engagement were mostly positive. On the other hand, inability to ‘fit’ in the community and lack of spiritual, cultural and social identification with other community members resulted in the participants feeling discouraged to take up civic engagement initiatives.

As Deenah pithily observed:

You have to identify with the people in the community. And if you do not identify, [if] you do not feel like you belong, you will probably not want to get civically engaged. For me, if I did not identify with the community, if I did not feel like I fit it, I probably would not want to be an active citizen in that community. I probably would just, like, breeze through, like whatever, because I think it is human nature, if you do not feel like you belong, you do not want to put that much effort into it.

Reflecting further on her civic engagement experiences, Deenah acknowledged that it was hard for her to stay motivated to perform her civic activities in the community with which she did not identify. Upon graduation, she moved into a small town with a predominantly white population to take up a position of a service-learning coordinator in a small private college. She was somewhat discouraged by the fact that there were only a handful people of color on campus. Her white colleagues showed little interest in her ethnic culture. When Deenah tried to remain true to her ethnic roots and share some aspects of her ethnic culture with her colleagues and community members, she got stared at and comments like ‘*oh, it is weird*’ were rife. Deenah said that she felt so alienated and misunderstood that every weekend she took a long trip home just to get away from that community. Although Deenah is passionate about community service

and has volunteered in numerous student and community organizations, in that particular case her inability to 'fit in' the community discouraged her from seeking civic engagement opportunities. As Deenah explains:

My colleagues were white, all my students were white, maybe I had two or three African American students, and I think that for me it was kind of uncomfortable. Whenever I went to a grocery store I would get stared up because I was different, I looked different, and they are just not used to seeing people of color. When I went to work I stood up as a sore thumb because I was the only person of color working with the white students. And for me, it was hard to feel like I was really engaged in my work with student engagement service. It was like, um... really hard to work with the population that you do not identify with. Not because you do not want to but because you do not feel that immediate connection already. I did not feel connected with my staff, my students and community at large. So I think it was very difficult for me to be like 'Let's do service', I mean have this kind of attitude when I felt like I do not belong here. It is like everybody was nice, but you do not feel accepted. ...So I left that institution thinking I did the best that I could, but I did not put much effort into it, you know, I did a great job, my evaluation say that I did a great job, but for me personally I will never go back and work for that institution because it was not a good fit for me.

Positive civic engagement experiences, on the contrary, allowed the participants not only to serve the needs of their community but contributed to their personal and professional growth. Roxanne, for example, revealed that it was a sense of belonging to a community in the first place that made her take up civic engagement initiatives that were not required by the university curriculum. She described how a feeling of belonging to the community motivated her to volunteer in a nursing home in a predominantly white community:

It [feeling connected to one community] is probably happened the most here in [Midwest], of all places, which is very strange as there are so few Black people here...Every Sunday I go to church and there are three other Black women who attend the same church that that I do and, you know, every other week we have potluck or if there is no potluck in the church, we go to somebody's house and just chat. And we had a few afternoons, where we just sat down and we ate, we chatted for hours and hours and in those moments I would say I felt my most complete self, like inspired and content. ...I was very happy to find this community and I, you know, wanted to give something back, and so I gladly joined the community service activities that my church does. Like, once a month, we go down to one of the nursing homes in [one of the Midwestern towns] and we sing and we tell stories to some elderly people, like, you know to cheer them up ...and you know, in those moments I feel most connected to my community.

Deenah echoed that sentiment when she described her civic engagement experience as an undergraduate student. Serving as a student leader in Hmong Student Association, Deenah learned more about her culture and ethnic identity and felt most connected to the community. Having grown up in a predominantly white community she knew that there was something different about her although she had little opportunities to explore that at the time:

In high school a big part of me was just missing. With my white friends, there was a part of me that they did not understand. I just had like this foreign part of me that they did not understand. Or Deenah is Hmong and that's that, you know, and there is something different about her. I think they wanted to learn, but they essentialized it, 'Oh, that is so cool' or 'It is so weird'. They wanted to know but they did not want to understand.

College gave Deenah the opportunity to meet with other Hmong students and discover the part of her identity that she felt had been missing. Having formed a sense of belonging to this community, Deenah joined the student organization. It proved to be a positive learning experience for her:

When I came to college my immediate circle was like 40 Hmong American students and I suddenly discovered that I do not know how to be Hmong, because I did not grow up in that community. And so it was not before I joined the Hmong student association that I got involved with that and it was like 'wow, it is a big part of me'. ... Being part of that organization definitely helped to bring this out. I learned more about my own culture and I learned about my culture by sitting down and interacting with people. [It was] a big learning experience for me and I really identified with this community.

The participants' reflections revealed the dichotomous role of community in their experiences of civic engagement. It either inspired them to take part in civic activities, or made them feel marginalized and discouraged to do community service all together.

Discourse

The data for this study makes it clear that the participants' sense of belonging in connection with civic engagement is influenced by the general discourse on civic education and

the way minoritized groups are presented in it. In the context of this study, the discourse on civic engagement emerged as of set of stereotypical assumptions about multicultural students' limited agency in relation to civic engagement activities. These assumptions are believed to be further perpetuated by the popular culture and academia. The participants spoke about how often in the discourse on civic engagement multicultural students are portrayed as needy and unable to help themselves let alone be able to address the needs of the community. Similarly, the participants appeared to be aware how research literature presents students of color as less civically engaged in comparison with their white peers. Additionally, few participants mentioned how discursive outlets, such as brochures and pamphlets on civic engagement, contain the pictures of white students helping minoritized populations and what effect it had on their attitude towards civic engagement.

How can we get civically engaged if we do not belong here?

Most of the participants related similar stories in relation to the discourse on civic engagement and its effect on their civic activities.

Let us consider Roxanne's example. Serving as a student coordinator for Caribbean's Student Association, Roxanne was in charge of fund-raising and service-learning activities. She frankly admits that she did not particularly seek out this civic engagement position, but had to take it in order to fulfill the requirement of the contest she had participated in. One of the biggest challenges for her was to get other people motivated to participate. Eventually, Roxanne came to the conclusion that the reason it was so hard for her to inspire and motivate others was that she did not feel inspired and motivated herself to do the required civic activities *'On reflection, I think the reason why I had so much trouble getting people excited and motivated was, because I*

was not inspired and motivated myself to do the activities or the work'. As we delved deeper into the discussion, Roxanne revealed that she did not think that as a Black woman she had a place in the whole civic engagement idea.

When we talk about civic engagement or community service, it is always the dominant group helping the non-dominant group, because the non-dominant group is the one who always needs help. So if you belong to a non-dominant group, like I do, if you are a minority, like I am, do you even have a place in it [civic engagement]? How are you supposed to help others when they say that you are helpless yourself?

Roxanne further explained how seeing the pictures of minority students being helped by white middle class students that were popularized by the service-learning center at her university, made her question her own agency in relation to civic engagement:

Whenever you see pictures for community services or civic engagement at student centers for service-learning or civic engagement offices or even student affairs offices, the picture is always of white people helping minorities: Black, Latinos, Mexican, Asian Americans, etc. It is always them [dominant group] helping these groups of people and so sometimes I do not feel like I have a place within that. It is like I belong to people who are being helped, so it feels like I do not have a place for that [civic engagement], I mean the way it is portrayed it is always white people helping and it never says 'oh there is this Black woman helping out with this and that' and 'oh, there is this Mexican man or Latino men helping out with this and that'. You never see these images, and as a result you do not associate civic engagement with non-dominant groups.

In addition to multicultural students being portrayed as needy in civic engagement discourse, Deenah and Tim mentioned that little had been done to challenge these ideas as white students often appear ignorant about the confusing messages that present day civic engagement discourse sends to students of color. Deenah, for example, recollected the time she worked with white students on rebuilding houses in an African American and Latino community. The biggest challenge for her was to get her peers understand the bigger social justice issues and move beyond the idea of African Americans and Latinos needing help because they cannot take care of themselves:

Last year I worked with the white students and we went to a community in NYC where there were predominantly Latinos and African Americans, and so one of the challenges was to get them to see that is not just white students helping people of color because people of color need help, but it was hard for me to help them see beyond that 'these Latinos need help because they cannot take care of themselves and that is why they need our assistance'. ...Challenge was in getting the students understand service-learning. ...Some of the comments that I got were 'why cannot they help themselves?' It was hard to get students understand that there is more than just 'we go here to stuck up food on the shelves and help those needy people of color'. ...Challenge was in getting them to understand the bigger social issue.

Furthermore, the way civic engagement was constructed by the academic discourse made Roxanne, for example, think that it was solely exclusive to white middle-class students. Her own interpretation of civic engagement was that of a charity: *"it almost feels like civic engagement is a charity in relation to us, people of color, I mean, those white middle class people help those needy minorities"*. In discussing the effect the discourse had on her willingness to participate in civic-related activities, Roxanne acknowledged that she almost saw no point in pursuing civic engagement activities: *"It feels to me that only if you are white and middle-class you can take part in civic engagement, only then you can help. ...It almost turned me off, I do not have a place in it [civic engagement], so why I should even try to be concerned...?"*

Roxanne raised an interesting point about the effect of social class on shaping the discourse on civic engagement. This theme also came up in other participants' recollections of their civic engagement experiences. Thus, Gloria acknowledged that the way civic engagement is constructed in the present-day discourse makes it almost an exclusive middle-class category that marginalizes the interests and concerns of less economically advantaged groups of students.

Deenah took a slightly different stance on the issue. She believed that minoritized students, who often come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, conceptualize the idea of 'service', which forms the foundation of civic engagement, differently from the white students:

“Instead of rebuilding houses in poor neighborhoods or painting somebody’s fence, service for us [multicultural students] could be mentoring other people of color, getting together for a potluck and share our experience”. Furthermore not every ethnic culture condones the idea of service if its members are not economically advanced:

In my culture I was not taught to do civic engagement, because, you know, historically, we are mountain people, poor, socio-economic wise we are very poor in the US, we are the poorest southern Asian American group. When I started to do civic engagement and served as a leader in a student organization on campus, my mum was just like ‘why are doing this for free, this is stupid, you are wasting your time!’ Because that understanding of helping others, their understanding is we are here below here how can we help other people if we cannot help ourselves?

Additionally, Deenah mentioned that coming from a poor socio-economic background it is difficult for students of color to embrace the concept of helping others while they first need to help themselves and their communities: *“people who are disadvantaged cannot see the idea of helping someone else before they help themselves and their communities. As for multicultural students, our background is not as advantaged and so it does feel sometimes that you ‘Let’s help ourselves first’”.*

In further discussing the impact of social class on the discourse on civic engagement, Deenah acknowledged that she herself did not start thinking of getting civically engaged until her family became a middle class:

I had not started to think about civic-engagement until my family became a middle class. When a college student is working two or three jobs to pay for college, and trying to help themselves up, when is he going to have this shot ‘oh, I should do community service’, no ‘I need to work, I need to pay for college’.

The participants believed that the discourse on civic engagement presented people of color as needing help from more advantaged white folks and thus their own place in civic engagement was rather vague. As most people of color come from less successful socio-

economic backgrounds it was suggested that multicultural students may conceptualize the idea of service differently than their white peers.

The role of discourse in civic engagement

The effect of the stereotypical discursive representations of people of color (as described by the participants) on the participants' civic engagement experience was twofold. Some of the participants felt discouraged about civic engagement and either stopped their civic service activities or *'breezed through without giving it much thought'* as Gloria put it. While others felt passionate about breaking those stereotypes and prove that there is more to people of color than just being needy. Tim, for example, stated that doing civic engagement was his way of breaking common stereotypes that people have of Black men:

I do civic engagement not to be recognized as Tim the person, part of me wants to be recognized because I am a Black man. It is fair to say that in a way I am doing civic engagement to break stereotypes, I want to prove that there is more to us [Black men] then deficit numbers, there is more to Black men then trying to talk to girls, there is more to Black men than getting a woman pregnant, there is more to Black men than incarceration. So everything that I do in my mind has always been to break a stereotype, so being recognized for my civic engagement endeavors a Black men is a lot more important than being recognized as Tim the person.

Deenah echoed this sentiment when she said: *"... whenever I do or achieve something, either through the civic engagement or my academic activities, I want to be recognized that Deenah is a Hmong American and she is representing her community. Whatever I do, I represent my community and I am conscious of that"*.

Gloria, on the contrary, reported being somewhat disheartened by the way people of color were presented in the discourse and this, in return, influenced her attitude towards civic engagement. She started to interpret civic engagement as a required course activity that she had to fulfill in order to get her credits: *"Seeing those images of white people helping minorities, I*

remember thinking that I do not belong here. So, I did civic engagement that was required by the course and the scholarship, but my heart was not in it, I just breezed through and forgot about it”.

Roxanne had similar attitude. In our conversation on the subject, Roxanne revealed that the stereotypical representation of people of color in the discourse did little to encourage her participation in civic-related activities. In addition to that, she expressed regret that she was not as civically engaged as she would have wanted: *“I wish I had more of an investment in civic engagement, I wish I had been more involved. But it is hard to get involved into something if you do not belong there, is it not?”*

The above-cited examples reveal the dialectical affect that the discursive representation of minoritized populations had on the participants’ civic engagement experiences. It either encouraged them to take up civic engagement opportunities and break the discursive stereotypes or made them discouraged to seek civic engagement initiatives that were not required by the university curriculum.

University

The participants revealed that university played one of the pivotal roles in shaping their civic engagement experiences. Most of the participants were introduced into the field of civic engagement during their undergraduate study. Their early civic engagement experiences came in the form of service-learning programs that were required to get a certain number of credits, and outside community service programs conducted in cooperation with a university. The way the university structured civic engagement activities influenced not only the participants’ view on civic engagement but on their own position as students of color in relation to civic engagement.

In discussing the university aspect of their civic engagement experiences, the participants commented on the compulsory nature of civic-related activities and the lack of reflection. In another words, their earlier experiences of civic engagement made the participants associate civic ‘service’ with a required university course activity. Thus, Gloria mentioned that she served as a student leader in Fashion and Design club only because it was the requirement of her scholarship:

I served as a student leader in the Fashion and Design Club. As a recipient of the university scholarship I had to do this community service, because it was kind of required. ...Overall, during my time in college, both as undergraduate and graduate student, I would participate in various student organizations, but I have never given it much thought. You see, for me civic engagement is something that you had to do for a semester as everybody did. Once I finished, I do not remember a lot of what I did, let alone reflecting on it.

Alfonso had a similar experience. As a member of a Latino-based fraternity he took part in various community service activities because the concept of ‘service’ was: “one of the pillars of our fraternity and we always made sure that we adhere to it”. However, he admitted that he understood very little of it at the time as his service-learning experiences were mainly associated with sanction:

Sadly, for me, at that time community service seemed like sanction. I have to say that in terms of the fraternity volunteering, most of it took place during my undergrad and it was, you know, sanctioned and we were, like, ‘Ok, we have to do this’. I do not think I understood necessarily the value of that and I do not think we understood about what we were doing. I do not know even if I was at the point even, at the time as 18-20 year old to really reflect on my community services activities. So, civic engagement seemed like it was something that was put on our schedules.

Roxanne felt that she was forced to do civic engagement. On winning the university beauty contest, she was required to take a position of program coordinator at the Caribbean’s student association, a service-learning position she did not particularly liked or wanted:

Civic engagement was voluntary but not. Part of winning the pageant was to take up that position of program coordinator in a Multicultural organization, and for me, I only did

the pageant just to have fun, you know, with my friends. I had absolutely no intentions of winning, of taking up that position; I did not think that I had a shot. When I won and they placed a crown on my head I was like 'Oh my God, what did I get myself into, I do not think I am even ready for this service-learning position', so yes, it was voluntary but required.

Some participants felt that the university did little to dispel stereotypical representations of people of color in the discourse on civic engagement and sometimes even perpetuated them. Deenah and Gloria named the alternative spring break service-learning program as one of the ways in which the university 'enables' stereotypical portrayal of people of color as needy and helpless. During alternative spring break students get to help low-income parts of communities that predominantly consist of minoritized groups by rebuilding houses, cleaning parks, painting fences. When she went on her alternative spring break with her cohort students to rehabilitate homes in southern part of the United States, Deenah found herself thinking:

'Oh here we are and the students are white, staff members of the Christian-based organization we worked with are white. And we went out to go and worked on these homes, our clients were African Americans and I was, like, what does it tell us the assumptions we hold about people of color? What does this mean, us primarily white middle-class students from Midwest coming to work to this low-income part of [a southern] state? ... Challenge was to get people to understand that I am not just painting a home, I am not just helping others because it felt good. But think about the overall system, what do these people need help, what do they live in this district? We are painting someone's house, but why? What privilege, what right do we have to come here when we should be thinking about the whole system and ask why do they need us to have their houses painted in the first place?

Julius felt that the university promotes the idea of civic engagement as being exclusive to middle-class high achieving students by establishing the accepted forms of civic engagement. According to Julius most of the community service and leadership programs of a university are usually closely connected with Greek societies: "When I think of student organizations that go out there and volunteer at various community events, they are Greek organizations". However, Greek organizations are selective in terms who they accept and set out specific selection criteria

that usually excludes multicultural students, as Julius explains further: “*Multicultural students are not encouraged to participate, really. They may not be as high achieving and they are not encouraged to serve as a leader or become a president of a Greek society because they do not have 3.00 GPA*”. Julius learned this the hard way during his undergraduate years at the university. A first generation multicultural student, Julius at first found himself at sea with a university life and his academic performance left much to be desired. However, he passionately wanted to do better, to get engaged into the university life and community at large. Julius approached several Greek societies hoping to get civically engaged only to be told that his academic performance was not satisfactory enough. As a result, he felt further marginalized, discouraged and eventually dropped out of the university. The experience made Julius more aware of the various challenges that multicultural students have to overcome in order to get civically engaged.

I was not encouraged to participate, to get civically engaged. I am not blaming the lack of my academic performance on my race and ethnicity, but as it turned out, my mother was, in fact, an alcoholic; we were poor, as a lot of my friends were. It just so happens that a lot of us, multicultural students, come from broken families, we did not have a lot of money, and we did not perform the best academically. We lacked the cultural capital, I think it is big to emphasize the cultural capital. We lacked culture capital that a lot of other students have. ...I barely hanged on. We were first generation. Their parents went to college, they had money, and neither of my parents went to college, so yeah, I barely hanged on... I was surprised that I graduated. What really bothered me, what really worked me up was that when I tried to get civically engaged, when I tried to serve as a student leader in some of those university students organizations, they said: ‘No, we are sorry. You do not have the GPA that we need’. And then I felt further marginalized and excluded, that was not good for me to persist, I felt like dropping out and I did.

The participants’ early experiences of civic engagement were connected with a university. The way the university presented civic engagement activities to them, made the participants associate civic engagement with a required course activity. The lack of reflective

component and accepted forms of civic-related activities were also mentioned by the participants in connection with the university.

Making Sense of Civic Engagement

The participants for the study had been involved in various service-learning and community service projects. However, not all of the participants defined themselves as civically engaged. In an attempt to make sense of their civic service experiences, the participants spoke about how they define civic engagement and their participation in it. Additionally, the participants offered their thoughts on what their civic engagement experience meant for their personal and professional development, and what they learned as a result of it.

Definition

The participants' definitions of civic engagement were somewhat vague. The data analysis reveals that the participants associate the term 'civic engagement' with the concept of duty towards a community, social responsibility and with an abstract political construct. It should be mentioned that not all the participants were familiar with the term. "*Civic engagement? I am not sure I heard this term before*", Gloria said.

Some participants acknowledged that while they heard the term 'civic engagement' they were not quite sure what it meant. Thus, Alfonso, who has participated in his fraternity community services programs, admits that civic engagement: "*is a new kind of term for me. I am not sure I really understand what it means*". He went on to connect civic engagement with politics and laws that he as a citizen should abide. "*When I think about it, politics comes to mind. It almost seems like some politicians making some rules and me adhering to those rules can be*

seen as civic engagement". Alfonso believed that the reason he associates civic engagement with laws was because of the classes that he took:

I associate civic engagement with laws and me adhering to those laws, and I think it has a lot to do with the different courses that I have taken, and them labeling things like 'bring a current event' or let's talk about the law that has been passed' and labeling that as civic engagement in the class...So I attach laws and news stories and things like that to civic engagement because that what has been taught.

Roxanne was also of the view that civic engagement is closely connected with politics and political actions like protests and demonstrations. *"When I think of civic engagement what immediately pops into my mind is the image of people protesting with signs against injustice.*

Other participants appeared to have a broader understanding of the term. For Deenah, for example, civic engagement is a social responsibility and an individual's duty towards his or her community. Interestingly enough, in the context of civic engagement, Deenah equates community with location. A person may or may not identify with the community, but he or she is obligated to contribute to its upkeep and this, according to Deenah, can be classified as civic engagement:

I think civic engagement, you know, when you are a part of a community, and in this case, when I say community I mean location-bound, so when you are part of a location or community, in essence it is your duty as a citizen of that community to best support your community whatever way that looks, whether that is through social work, physical labor, just know that it is your duty as a citizens to contribute to the upkeep of your community and to bring out your best potential to support people whom live in your community. So essentially, civic engagement to me is the responsibility that you have and it is not the responsibility that you initially get paid for. Just like something that you should do for your community.

For Julius and Tim, the term civic engagement is associated with the idea of sacrificing time in order to help others. According to Tim, when someone is civically engaged, he or she does more than donating money. People take time to understand those they are helping and are able to reflect on it later:

Civic engagement is dissected into engagement and civic. Engagement itself is just more than raising money, it you actually engage with someone, something, a group of people, so have a physical interaction, you take the time to understand their story, why they need help, why they need assistance, and you are able to reflect on why you are interacting with them and then civic is community and this community can be local, national, regional. So, civic engagement requires more than just raising money, it is a lot more than just writing a check, it means getting your hands dirty. It means getting engaged into doing something worthwhile; it means learning, understanding, reflection, checking your purpose 'Why am I doing this?' 'Am I doing this for the resume, or am I doing this to impact?'

Given the fact that the participants had different interpretation of the term 'civic engagement', their answers to the question 'do you think you are and/or have been civically engaged?' were equally different with some participants believing that they were civically engaged and others thinking that they were not. Interestingly enough, among those who believed they were civically engaged, no one confidently said so. Instead the participants used discursive markers of hesitation 'I suppose so', 'I believe I may say so', 'maybe so'. Let us consider Julius answer, for example:

Am I civically engaged? Hmm....let me think about it for a moment. I suppose I am in a way. So every time I am interacting with men and support initiatives like MAC, Men Anti-Violence Council, where you are trying to make a difference in terms of how men think of themselves, so yeah, I suppose it is civic engagement. Also trying to change the way people interact with one another that is important. And also when you are a part or volunteer at a homeless shelter, I consider that can also be civic engagement.

Roxanne and Gloria were among those who believed they were not civically engaged. Gloria said that she perceived her 'service' activities at the church and the university to be a community work. Similarly, Roxanne drew a distinction between civic engagement and community service, with latter being defined as any unpaid voluntary work for community without much reflection on it. Civic engagement, on the contrary, requires a lot of planning and intentionality.

Researcher: Thinking of your activities, would you say that you were civically engaged?

Participant: Um, that begs a question. No, I would not say that I have been civically engaged. I feel with civic engagement there is more to it, and what I did was a community service. With community service it is just 'Oh we did this', but the 'Why' part is not necessarily there. With civic engagement I feel there is more intentionality and more thought behind it I mean more thought behind what's being done, so civic engagement is very purposeful and intentional and community service is not.

The participants defined civic engagement as an individual's duty towards community and as an abstract political concept. Given their different interpretations of the term, not all the participants defined themselves as civically engaged in spite of their involvement in various service-learning and community service projects.

Final thoughts

The participants' views on the effect their civic engagement experiences had on their personal and professional development were mixed. Some participants believed that civic-related activities enhanced their leadership and communicative skills as well as strengthened their desire to be role-models for other multicultural students, while other participants reported no profound effect.

Julius was among those who felt that the experience of civic engagement was mostly beneficial and polished his leadership skills. Having experienced the disconnect with the university community and knowing firsthand the challenges it brings to those who attempt to get civically engaged, Julius said that he wants to be an advocate for other multicultural students. He wanted to encourage others to get civically engaged regardless of the different obstacles they may face:

I think it is important to show to other students, especially marginalized students, students of color and international students who feel completely disconnected that it is important to work for the benefit of the entire community that it feels good and empowering and it looks good on your resume. It set you apart from others who do not perform service.

Julius was convinced that middle-class high achieving students would always be supported by the educational system and always be encouraged to participate in civic-related activities. According to him, the opposite should be the case: there should be more opportunities for students of color, for students who do not perform well academically to get civically engaged. That was why Julius envisaged himself working with underrepresented populations of students:

My view of it is that there are more opportunities for high achieving students to serve for example as leaders in their communities, to get civically engaged, because students of color have different obstacles, different issues that interfere with their ability to succeed, so multicultural students there are not encouraged to get engaged. And there will be students, high achieving students, who will be continuously be supported by the system, they will always have fans in their corner, they will always have support. I think that just the opposite should be the case; there should be more opportunities for students who are not performing well. Students of color need to be presented with more opportunities and students who are not high achieving might not have that support and they need it more and this is why I want to work and support marginalized students.

Deenah was also of the view that there are should be more opportunities for students of color to get civically engaged. Overall, she believed that civic engagement is crucial to the development of leadership and communicative skills, and therefore all students have to be encouraged to participate. *“I think that all students should be civically engaged. Once we leave the institution, a company or an organization you will work for, you will be working in a community, so you need to civically engage all students, no matter where you are, you will be working with people and you will have to build your community whenever you go”*. Reflecting on the lessons she learned out of her civic engagement, Deenah mentioned that being civically engaged helped apply social justice lens in addressing community problems and enhanced her leadership skills:

I would say I've learned so many leadership skills. Because I think when you give back to your community, when you take the time to help others, you understand that you come

from the place of privilege; you have the option to help someone. Not a lot of people have that option. And when I do service I understand who I am more and the things that I do to make a difference, and every time I do service I make a difference. Painting a window, working with students from low-incoming families, you make a difference, however small.

While Deenah acknowledged the benefits of civic engagement for all students, she also emphasized the challenges that students of color experience while participating in civic-related activities. Speaking from the experience, Deenah identified lack of multicultural competence as one of the major challenges. When she was involved in a community project as a part of her service-learning program, Deenah found that her colleagues displayed an astonishing lack of multicultural competence by referring to Deenah's actions as "It is so Asian of you!" Deenah said that comments like that made her feel like she did not fit in the community in which she was volunteering:

The comments like 'Oh it is so Asian, Deenah' were kind of synonymous with 'that is so foreign'. It feels like you are definitely not from here. It is very offensive because I was born here I grew up here. It is just like being othered. It was almost like 'you do not fit in here', 'you do not belong here'. They [colleagues] did not necessarily try to bring me down, but they appeared to be astonishingly ignorant. So I definitely think there should be more awareness and more emphasis on multiculturalism in civic engagement.

Tim and Alfonso stated that their civic engagement experiences inspired them to work with other students of color and become role-models for them. Both emphasized the effect of role-models in their own personal and professional development. Alfonso, in particular said:

I really attribute a lot of things that I do, like big picture things, like continue my education, volunteer, being involved, moving somewhere scary for the sake of something positive to wanting to be a positive role-model, I am the oldest of 3 siblings, I have 3 younger sisters and being a role-model has always been at the forefront of my mind when I was performing my civic-related activities and I've grown a little and was able to see how I am a role-model for other Latino men.

Gloria and Roxanne, on the contrary, appeared to be somewhat disillusioned with their civic engagement experiences. Gloria mentioned that the civic-activities that she did lacked reflection and learning component, and therefore she did them in order to fulfill her scholarship

requirements. By her own admission, she did not put much effort in her civic-related activities. Roxanne expressed a similar sentiment. Both of them mentioned that they would like to participate in more meaningful and intentional civic engagement activities than their previous ones. Roxanne, in particular, expressed regret at not being fully civically engaged:

I wish I had been more involved in civic engagement activities, I wish I had been more passionate about getting out there, getting involved and doing all those things. Sometimes, it just felt impersonal to me, I mean you go out there, you do perform a community service activity and that's it, the communication stops and you are required to perform another community service activity. So I did not see much purpose in what I was doing. And then of course there is a question of whether you actually belong in there. Overall, I would say that I've yet to participate in something that will have long term effect.

The participants' final thoughts on their civic engagement experiences were connected with the challenges that students of color have to overcome on their path to civic engagement. Calls for increasing service-learning opportunities for low achieving students of color as well as the need for multicultural awareness were made by the participants. In assessing the effect of the civic engagement on their personal and professional development, the participants mentioned increased social awareness, leadership and communicative skills. Some participants reported that they did not think their civic engagement experiences made much of an impact on their professional and personal lives.

Summary

The findings of the study were presented in this chapter. In order to provide context for the findings, participant profiles were given at the beginning of the chapter. This allows the reader to gain better understanding of the participants' backgrounds and civic engagement

experiences. In presenting the findings of the study, the information was organized around two major themes:

The first section – *Sense of Belonging* – described the participants’ civic engagement experiences through the lens of community, discourse and university. It was found that a feeling of connectedness to a community, positive representation of people of color in the civic engagement discourse and the adequate support and encouragement on the part of the university are essential preconditions for promoting civic engagement among multicultural students.

The second section – *Making Sense of Civic Engagement* – delved into the participants’ actual experiences of civic engagement. The sections explained how the participants define civic engagement and reflect on their participation in civic-related activities.

Chapter 5 will provide a discussion and implications for the study. To tie the findings to the conceptual framework, the research questions are discussed, the relevant literature is revisited, and recommendations for future research and practice are provided.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This is the final chapter of this thesis. Within this chapter, I revisit the research questions presented in Chapter 1 by exploring the participants' experiences of civic engagement within the framework of relevant theories and literature. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are given at the end of chapter.

Findings

The following research question guided the study: What are multicultural graduate college students' actual lived experiences of civic engagement? In the attempt to answer this overarching question, the following sub-questions were utilized:

Research Question 1: How do the participants conceptualize civic engagement?

This research question focused on the students' definitions of civic engagement and their reflections on their participation in civic-related activities. This question is important in the wake of current efforts to reform educational approaches to the definition of civic engagement (Foster-Bey, 2008; Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010; Torney-Purta, Almadeo, & Andolina, 2010) and the pressing need to include the voices of marginalized students into the contemporary discussions on the subject of civic involvement (Kyriacopoulos, 2011).

The participants' definitions of civic engagement were somewhat vague with some students admitting that the term 'civic engagement' was new to them. The students' interpretations of the phenomenon ranged from seeing civic engagement as charitable acts of kindness performed by middle-class White citizens to alleviate the plight of minoritized

populations, to viewing civic engagement as political involvement and social responsibility to contribute to the upkeep of one's community.

Common theme among these definitions was that of alienation and disconnect. The participants spoke about civic engagement as something abstract that had little relevance in their lives. Even though all the participants were involved in various service-learning and community service programs, few were willing to describe themselves as civically engaged. This fact can be explained by the associations the participants drew in relation to civic engagement.

Discursive representations of students of color as needy, "at risk" and incapable of helping themselves (Youniss & Levine, 2009) led some of the participant to connect the concept of civic engagement with that of charity. Several participants mentioned that most of the service-learning programs focus on helping low-income communities that are predominantly Black, Hispanic and Asian, and the students who take part in these programs are primarily White and middle-class. This reinforced the participants' view of civic engagement as an exclusionary 'charity' concept in which they have no place because they belong to the populations who are being helped. Adding to the complexity of the issue is the fact that in US academic culture students who are different from the mainstream middle-class White students have the status of outsider, which means that these categories of students are perceived to be having a deficit (Ladson-Billing, 2000). The participants were aware of these undercurrents and spoke at length about disconnect they felt in relation to some of their civic engagement activities.

Given the emphasis the previous research (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003; Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 1998) placed on the political expression and civic responsibility in relation to civic engagement, it is hardly surprising that some of the participants defined civic engagement as an abstract concept associated with political involvement. The students

acknowledged that such activities as voting, campaigning for a candidate, and taking part in political rallies were of little interest to them. Instead they were more passionate about taking part in the events that promote their ethnic and cultural heritage, and mentoring other members of the community. None of these activities were described as civic engagement by the participants. This is hardly surprising given the fact that spectral, all-encompassing view of civic engagement is only beginning to gain momentum (Kyriacopoulos, 2011).

Research Question 2: What aspects of their civic engagement activities did the participants find challenging?

The second research question sought information related to the participants' struggles and barriers throughout their civic engagement experience. The previous literature (Levine, 2009; Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1995) indicated there was a disturbing gap in civic participation between mainstream White students and marginalized students of color. Multicultural students were deemed to be less committed to public service and social justice (Foster-Bey, 2008) and, therefore, less likely to get civically engaged. In addition to that, the researchers pointed out to a number of factors that negatively affect multicultural students' willingness to participate in civic engagement activities. Among them - unequal distribution of opportunities for civic involvement (Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010; Torney-Purta, Almadeo, & Andolina, 2010), low socio-economic status of minoritized students (Foster-Bey, 2008) and societal assumptions that people of color are needy and helpless (Youniss & Levine, 2009). The studies highlighted in the paragraph strongly suggest that minoritized students experience a number of challenges and obstacles in relation to civic engagement. The researchers used these challenges to explain multicultural students' low civic participation rates.

Taking the previous literature into account, while also realizing that most of the research was based on quantitative data obtained from surveys and election polling figures, the study sought to explore the challenges the participants may have experienced during their civic engagement activities. Contrary to the previous research, the participants identified a lack of connection to a community as the main challenge for them in relation to civic engagement. The students revealed that it was hard for them seek out civic engagement opportunities or to stay motivated to perform their civic-related activities when they did not have a sense of belonging to their communities. Deenah pithily captured this point when she observed: “[if] *you do not feel like you belong, you will probably not want to get civically engaged. For me, if I did not identify with the community, if I did not feel like I fit it, I probably would not want to be an active citizen in that community*”. On the other hand, the participants described how a feeling of connectedness, acceptance, being valued and respected as well as the experience of mattering helped them to stay focused and motivated to perform their civic-related activities. These findings are in line with Strayhorn’s (2012) observation that a sense of belonging takes on heightened importance for marginalized students of color who are prone to feel excluded on a college campus. In an attempt to find their communities, these students often seek out people and environments that are congruent to their own values and expectations. Indeed, the students in this study revealed that they felt most connected to their communities when they were among other people of color who shared their beliefs and values. This observation coincides with Strayhorn’s (2012) notion of normative congruence in relation to sense of belonging.

University and discourse were found to be instrumental in shaping the participants’ sense of belonging in relation to their communities and civic engagement. Several participants remarked on the limited opportunities the university presents for multicultural students’ civic

involvement, with one participant stating that his low GPA precluded him from being accepted into one of the service-learning programs. The students identified stereotypical representation of people of color as needy and “at risk” as another challenge they experienced in relation to civic engagement. The students felt that the service-learning and community service programs promoted by the university contributed to the perpetuation of the negative stereotypes of people of color. Some participants admitted that it was challenging for them to see themselves as being capable of making a positive difference to a community when the university discourse on civic engagement constructed them as needy. As Roxanne aptly observed: *“Whenever you see pictures civic engagement at student centers for service-learning ...the picture is always of white people helping minorities: Black, Latinos, Mexican, Asian Americans, etc. It is always them helping these groups of people and so sometimes I do not feel like I have a place within that”*.

Research Question 3: What aspects of their civic engagement activities did the participants find fulfilling?

This research question focused on the aspects of civic engagement that have had a positive impact on the participants’ personal and professional development. This question was posed because there is a significant body of research that connects participation in civic engagement activities with positive developmental outcomes. Civic participation is believed to enhance students’ leadership, critical thinking and communication skills (Astin & Sax 1998; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003). In addition to that, civic engagement allows students to develop better understanding of themselves, their community and their role in society at large (Prentice & Robinson, 2007).

Despite this hopeful prognosis, the participants’ reflections on the positive outcomes of their civic engagement activities were somewhat mixed. Some participants mentioned that their

social awareness, leadership and communicative skills have increased as a result of civic participation, while others reported that they did not think their civic engagement experiences made much of an impact on their professional and personal lives. The participants' dichotomous view of their civic engagement outcomes can be explained with the help of Schlossberg's Theory of Mattering and Marginality (1989) and Strayhorn's Theory of Sense of Belonging (2008; 2012). Applied to the area of civic involvement, these theories describe a three-step process that students have to go through in order to have a meaningful and beneficial civic engagement experience: students have to be physically present on site of the activity; they have to form a sense of belonging to a community and feel accepted as they are into this community; there have to be intrinsic motivation and students have to feel that what they do matters. The students in the study who felt connected to their communities in spiritual, cultural or social ways had a more positive civic engagement experience, which they associated with their personal and professional growth. These students reported that their social awareness, understanding of their social identities, leadership and communication skills increased as a result of their civic involvement. The participants, who were unable to identify with their communities and form a sense of belonging to it, had a more challenging times performing their civic-service activities. Some of them reported withdrawing from civic engagement activities all together, while others admitted that they continued with their civic-related activities only to fulfill the requirements of the program or scholarship. These students acknowledged that civic engagement had little impact on their personal or professional development.

The findings of the study reveal that the participants' experiences of civic engagement were closely connected with a sense of belonging to a community, discursive representation of people of color and university role in promoting accepted forms of civic involvement. In the

section below, I will discuss how student affairs professionals, faculty and university administrators can utilize these findings to make civic engagement experiences more beneficial and inclusive for all groups of students.

Implications

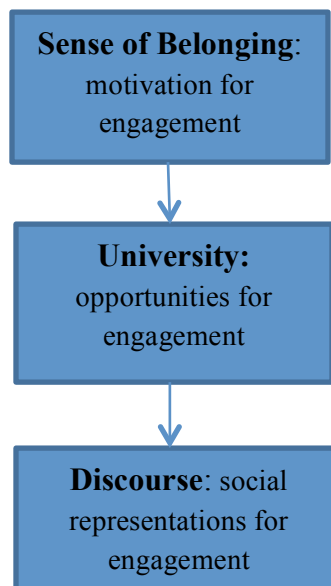
The findings of the study have implications for various constituencies, including student affairs professionals, aspiring students, faculty and institution administrators. By exploring civic engagement experiences of multicultural students, this study provides information for student affairs practitioners who administrate service-learning programs, mainstream and minoritized students who are currently involved in civic service programs, and aspiring researchers who are considering taking on future civic engagement research.

As a part of student development process, civic engagement is associated with a number of positive outcomes such as enhanced leadership, communication and critical thinking skills, commitment to social justice, diversity, and multiculturalism as well as ability to work successfully as a team member. These skills and values are crucial to the upbringing of ethical leaders and citizens that are ready to navigate life in an increasingly diverse global society. All students should be encouraged to participate in civic engagement activities. However, educators and researchers have to be aware that given their unique cultural and social history, multicultural students' understanding of civic engagement may be different from that of mainstream White students. The student participants in this study associated civic engagement with such activities as mentoring other members of their communities, taking part in the events that promote their ethnic culture and heritage, organizing house parties and providing financial assistance to those less fortunate than themselves. Participating in these activities gave the students a sense of pride

and achievement. It should be mentioned that most of the activities highlighted in the paragraph are excluded from mainstream conventional definitions of civic engagement.

The student participants, however, expressed mixed feelings about their civic engagement experiences in connection with the university. The student participants who took part in alternative spring break programs, fraternity community service initiatives and student organizations revealed that they felt these activities perpetuated negative view of people of color as needy and incapable of taking care of themselves. As a result, some of the participants mentioned that these civic engagement experiences made them feel further marginalized and excluded. Reflecting on the outcomes of their civic engagement experiences in connection with the university, some students admitted to being discouraged from pursuing further civic engagement opportunities, while others said that they became even more determined to break negative stereotypes of people of color.

Table 1.1. **Tertiary Model of Multicultural Students' Civic Engagement**



Student affairs professionals who administrate service-learning programs can utilize the study's findings in their work with multicultural students. In organizing multicultural students' civic-related activities, it is important to understand how the civic engagement process looks like for them. Based on the study findings, I came up with a tertiary model of multicultural students' civic engagement. It aims to explain what factors influence student participation and how they affect students' civic engagement experiences.

Findings of the study demonstrate that the participants' civic engagement experiences include three important elements: sense of belonging, university and discourse. Taken together, they provide a hierarchy of factors that influences multicultural students' willingness to get civically involved and the actual lived experiences of civic engagement.

Sense of belonging was found to be of paramount importance for the student participation. It forms the fundamental principle for multicultural students' civic engagement. Feeling connected to a community provides a strong motivation for seeking out civic engagement opportunities and getting involved. Conversely, inability to identify with a community results in students' unwillingness to get civically engaged. In the context of marginalized students sense of belonging is connected with the notion of normative congruence. It follows that people seek out environment of settings that are congruent with their own beliefs, attitudes and expectations. Therefore, in order to help minoritized students forge a sense of belonging to their environment, campus and local communities should adhere to the principles of diversity and multiculturalism. Campuses and communities that have broad and diverse values create more opportunities for marginalized students to find their place, their 'niche' in these communities and form a sense of belonging.

Once the students formed a sense of belonging to a community, they looked for opportunities to get civically engaged. At this stage the role of the university took on heightened importance. While sense of belonging provided a motivation for civic engagement, university provided opportunities for civic involvement in the form of student organizations, service-learning and community service programs. The way the university chose to structure its civic service programs influenced social representations of marginalized students in the discourse. By promoting the accepted forms of civic engagement (e.g. certain level of GPA is required to get civically engaged, alternative spring break programs in which mainstream middle-class students help out minoritized populations), universities may be in danger of perpetuating social representations of students of color as problems rather than asserts. This, in return, can limit multicultural students' perception of their agency in relation to civic engagement. Some of the student participants in this study revealed that they saw little point in their civic-related activities as they did not recognize themselves as being capable of affecting a positive change due to the way people of color are being portrayed in the discourse.

On the other hand, balanced civic engagement programs that encourage critical thinking, constructive reflection and aim at promoting human rights and social justice, can shift the view of minoritized students as problems towards viewing them as committed to civic engagement. Viewing students of color “as always having the potential for political engagement is fundamental to forging constructive policy for this and any youth cohort” (Youniss & Levine, 2009 p. 17). Educators should be aware of the social representations of people of color in the discourse and critically assess their service-learning programs to ensure that they do not inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of racial and ethnic stereotypes. Having students work on rebuilding houses in low-income communities during their spring break is an honorable

activity in itself. However, if the students who take part in these programs are primarily middle-class White and the communities in which they work consist of people of color, what message does it send about minoritized populations in relation to civic engagement? How does it affect social representations of people of color in discourse? Student affairs professionals should keep these issues in mind and engage students in constructive discussions on the subject before they begin their service-learning activities. Several student participants in the study pointed out how the lack of constructive discussion about the interplay of race and ethnicity in relation to civic engagement activities resulted in mainstream students viewing people of color as needy and incapable of helping themselves.

Social representations of people of color as needy and incapable of taking care of themselves find their way into discursive outlets such as pamphlets, promotional videos, brochures that are readily available on college campuses. These discursive outlets send strong message about who can participate in civic engagement activities and who cannot. If an Office for Service-Learning Programs distributes brochures and displays pictures of mainstream White students helping out minoritized populations, multicultural students are mostly likely to feel that civic engagement is not for them as they belong to the groups of people who are being helped. All student participants commented on the negative affect these warped social representations of minoritized populations, which are disseminated on campuses, had on their civic engagement experience, while one student described it as a major “turn-off” in terms of seeking out civic engagement opportunities.

Summing up, student affairs practitioners play an important role in students’ civic engagement experiences. To ensure that the civic service activities they offer are beneficial and inclusive for all groups of students, student affairs professionals should be advised to:

- (a) critically assess their current service-learning programs: do they contribute to the perpetuation of racial and ethnic stereotypes? Which paradigm they use to structure students' civic engagement experiences: charity or social justice? Are their programs inclusive and welcoming to all groups of students? If so, how do they communicate it to the diverse student body? What their discursive outlets say about multicultural students' agency in relation to civic engagement?
- (b) pay more attention to the “input” and “output” aspects of students' civic engagement: engage students in meaningful discussions about the interplay of race and ethnicity in relation to civic engagement before they begin their civic service activities. Encourage critical reflection and debates after students finish their service-learning programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

The study examined multicultural graduate college students' experiences of civic engagement. Although a wealth of information pertaining to the participants' personal and professional experiences in relation to civic engagement was gleaned from this work, there are opportunities for future research. The study focused on the civic engagement experiences of multicultural students who attended a large land-grant Midwestern university; therefore it would be valuable to conduct a similar research in other parts of the country. There are may be differences in multicultural students' experiences of civic engagement depending on the geographical location of the institution. In addition, future research can explore how such factors as public and private institutions, religious and non-religious affiliated colleges and enrollment affect multicultural students' experiences of civic engagement. A quantitative study of students'

socio-economic status in relation to civic engagement participation can provide valuable information about the categories of students who take part in civic-related activities promoted by universities.

Since little research exists on student affairs professionals who administer service-learning programs, little is known about their views on civics, social responsibility and multiculturalism. Future research can examine how student affairs personnel conceptualize minoritized students in relation to civic engagement and what affect it has on their work with “at risk” students. Continued qualitative studies of multicultural students’ civic engagement experiences would be valuable as they could bring the voices of those who were thought to be less committed to civic activities into the general discussion on civic engagement

Finally, research on students and civic engagement cannot be complete without including the experiences of international students. United States educates the largest number of international students in comparison with other countries. Most of them come to the country on academic and cultural exchange programs that emphasize leadership and encourage students to take part in community services. Future research can examine what opportunities for civic involvement exist for international students and consider such factors as ethnic culture, age, gender, and legal status of an “outsider” in international students’ experiences of civic engagement.

APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT E-MAIL

Dear [Name of a Student],

I am emailing to ask for your help in a study on multicultural students and civic education. The purpose of the study is to explore how multicultural graduate students experience civic engagement. Results of this study can potentially benefit society by providing student affairs professionals and faculty with more information on how best to utilize campus resources to make civic engagement more inclusive and beneficial for all groups of students.

We are looking for graduate students who identify as Black, African/American, Hispanic, Latino/a, Asian or Multiracial who participate or have participated in civic-related activities such as service-learning, volunteering, taking part in community events, and community service. If you are interested and you meet the criteria for inclusion in this study, please fill in the “Demographic Information Form” attached to this email. It will take you 1 or 2 minutes to complete. I will then invite you to participate in 1 interview that will last approximately 1 hour.

Your answers will be completely confidential and any information that will be obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

Please note that you have to be at least 18 to participate in the study.

If you have any questions, comments or suggestions please contact Ganna Kokoza at akokoza@iastate.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Ganna (Anna) Kokoza
Fulbright Fellow
Graduate Student in Higher Education Administration

APPENDIX B. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

Please choose a pseudonym (a name you would like to use during interviews, it should not be your actual name): _____

Gender: _____

Age: _____

How do you describe your racial identity?

Black

African American

Hispanic

Latino/a

Asian

Multiracial

Do you participate or have you participated in the past in civic-related activities (service-learning, volunteering, community service, taking part in community events, etc.)?

YES

NO

If **YES** please specify _____

APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in the study “Multicultural students and civic education: A qualitative analysis of multicultural graduate students’ experiences of civic engagement” conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Higher Education at Iowa State University. The purpose of the study is to explore how multicultural graduate students experience civic engagement. You have been selected as a prospective participant because you indicated that you that you: a) identify as multicultural student; b) enrolled in a graduate program; c) participate and/or have participated in civic-related activities.

If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed once about your civic engagement experience. An interview session will last approximately 1 hour and will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Once a transcript is done, audio-records will be destroyed. No one, except principal investigator, will have access to audio records. The information that you will provide during the interview will help me get better insight into your lived experiences of civic engagement and the effect it has on multicultural graduate students. Based on this information I will draw a list of suggestions for student affairs professionals and faculty on how best to utilize campus resources to make civic engagement experiences more inclusive and beneficial for all students. I cannot guarantee however that you will receive any benefits from the study.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Please note that participation in the study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.

You have to be 18 or over in order to participate in the study.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE, HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. Tell me a little about yourself and your background.
 - a. Tell me more about who you are and how you see yourself.
 - b. Tell me more about your future career aspirations.
2. What does community mean to you?
 - a. Tell me about a time when you felt most connected to your community.
 - i. Tell me about what inspired that.
3. How would you define 'civic engagement'?
4. Tell me about your experience of civic engagement.
 - a. What did you do?
 - b. Why did you choose to participate in civic-related activities?
 - c. What did you hope to learn and/or gain from it?
 - d. What was the most challenging part of your civic-engagement experience? Please give details.
5. What did/does your civic engagement experience mean to you?
 - a. What skills do you think you have learned?
 - b. Has your thinking about community and your role in it changed?
 - i. After your civic engagement experience do you feel more/less connected to your community?
 - ii. Do you feel empowered to contribute to your community?

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