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Many educators are intently implementing pedagogical techniques to connect students in the classroom. With great optimism, educators engage university students in activities and practices that build community and challenge individualistic beliefs, with the hope that society will be more compassionate, more communal, and overall "better." It is time to explore the perceptions of undergraduate students, as their voices are integral in not only providing them with a meaningful college experience, but also in encouraging educators to reflect on beliefs about and expectations for college education in the 21st century.

Through a qualitative study with a constructivist paradigm, current undergraduate students' perceptions of university education and classroom community were explored. Three hundred and twenty-three students were surveyed, representing two universities in the southeastern region of the United States. Additionally, 9 students and 5 faculty members from these universities were interviewed to provide a deeper understanding of possible student perceptions. The results were coded, analyzed, and presented as portraits of student perceptions. Two key themes were identified: 1) How educators might use pedagogy to help students gain knowledge that complements their end goal of success, without denying the opportunity for inquiry and critical thinking; and 2) How educators might encourage students to embrace the uncertainty and possibility of connection with others and why this is not considered integral for success. These themes will be analyzed through 3 distinct, yet related lenses: 1) Commitment and Togetherness; 2) Cognitive Development and Inquiry; and 3) Building Classroom Community.

The findings enable educators to gain a deeper understanding of student perceptions and the possible implications of these beliefs in the improvement of university teaching and learning.

Educators are reminded to remain “uncertain” about the pedagogical techniques they choose to implement, as they are only tools to help students reach higher levels of learning and growth.

Conversely, educators must respect the potential power of undergraduate classroom communities, as they remind students they are human and challenge all to face insecurities surrounding individualism and commitment.

EMBRACING THE UNCERTAINTY OF COMMUNITY:
A STUDY OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF
CONNECTION AND LEARNING
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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Approved by

Committee Chair

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To all of my students (past, present and future).

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The student feedback I reviewed in the final year of my Ph.D. program was not only the best evidence I could ever find of how students thought, but the most gut wrenching motivator I could have received. I am accustomed to student comments that both appreciate and discount my teaching; yet, I had never had a comment that hit me so deeply. As I glanced over the students' thoughts- some coherent, some disjointed- I came across one that summarized what so many of the students presented daily through their behaviors and bleak bodies they drug into the classroom. "We shouldn't have to apply the 'vocab' to real-life situations," it read. There it was- a comment that could not have more adequately expressed the pressure, the fear, the confusion, and the disconnect that so many of our students are experiencing. Understandably this comment and others are saturated with social and consumer expectations, and yet it stood out to me as one of the most honest and terrifying examples of how higher education is truly "promoting and reproducing what we take to be desirable forms of social life" (Walker & Nixon, 2004, p.4).

As many faculty do, I have a desire to really reach the students I teach, empower them to want more out of their college education than "the right to say I went", and engage them in an appreciation of connection, learning, and continuous growth. Yet, I experience great dissatisfaction after the submission of less than adequate student essays, or a classroom interaction with students who seem no more intrigued and excited by learning than many of us are to pay bills or visit the doctor. I perceive their submission of assignments and attendance to be another doctor's appointment they must attend in order to prevent physical or mental pain, receive permission to play sports, or be cleared for heavy lifting. If I am honest with myself, I

must recognize that as an undergraduate student I too experienced the monsoon of pressure to complete college courses and obtain a degree; I was rarely eager to embark on new learning journeys. It is my past and present experiences that ignite more questions than answers; and it is my passion for helping others to find efficacy and seek personal growth through education that led me to explore student perceptions of college, and the possibility of classroom community.

Let me be clear, that I am in no way discrediting student voices. In fact, it is the students' desires that keep me up at night, the students' beliefs that challenge and reframe my pedagogical techniques, and the students' perceptions that make my adrenaline rush and my energy disappear. I am actually partial to the student's voices, as they are what we have produced. They know what we have trained them to know and regurgitate what we have required and/or strongly suggested. If we believe our current educational system to be a factory, then students are our products. If we believe higher education to be a business, then students are our most important clients. If we believe higher education to be a place of critical thinking and intellectual growth, then students often hold the beliefs and perceptions that allow this to be possible or mythical.

With the desire to hear student voices, comes the reality of accepting student perceptions. Accepting student perceptions requires me to not simply take their ideas and work diligently to change and correct them, but instead to respect, and reflect on what they really desire and how they hope to reach this goal. It is common to see students entering the higher education system with a great deal of ambiguity about their expectations and individual desires. In my experience and from the research in which I have engaged, social success is highly valued in our society and many are enculturated to believe that higher education is the sole means to achieving this status. Many students have been told- through direct and indirect messages- that they will be attending college and even graduate school. Although this may be a positive message for many students, it also presents higher education as a universal requirement and allows little room for student

thought about expectations or individual desires. Furthermore, through online learning and numerous ways to earn college credit while in high school and after, universities are making it easy for students to earn a degree, but also easier to be alienated and disengaged from what some may consider university life and expectations. Additionally, college degrees are often presented as affordable and convenient to earn. Understandably, this causes many students to believe that their admission into the university and payment for courses is sufficient for strong grades and earned credit.

The desire to buy a college degree- driven by a society of consumerism- has molded the lens through which many students and their parents view college. The social messages that college is affordable and easy, most likely leave students very confused by high expectations in the classroom. While convenience and economical purchases are both critical factors for our consumers, these values do not always align with what so many university educators hope to convey and/or impart, nor do they align with pedagogical methods.

As an instructor of multiple college courses, I strongly believe that we need to be sending messages that help students understand the value of inclusion and community at the collegiate level, as well as messages that highlight the importance of learning and growth through connection with others. Yet, I am torn, as I do not truly understand the students' perceptions of college education, nor do I believe that they are committed and willing to connect with others in a classroom situation.

I am not alone. I like many faculty members have most likely seen two popular costumes created by our society. The first costume is the student citizen who seems to have completely rejected the importance and immanent value of others and therefore proclaims that his/her beliefs and rights are invincible. They appear unafraid to make statements that often intimidate, disqualify, and/or deny others.

The second is the student citizen who has witnessed or experienced so much hurt and inappropriate expression of ideas (often from the citizen wearing the first costume) that he/she has convinced him/herself to not think outside of the box or have any original thoughts or individual preferences. They believe it to be much safer and less confrontational to just regurgitate the accepted ideals. They choose to simply accept that “we can’t change it or do anything about it, so it’s not worth it.”

I present both of these viewpoints as costumes, and not personality traits because I believe that most of our students are just trying on identities as they move through the final years of high school and move into the years of post-secondary education. The costumes are only worn on certain occasions and chosen strategically based on contextual circumstances, and the presence or absence of others. However, I must realize that my perceptions of students and their costumes is only one side of the story. Equally as important to the learning process and college education are the students’ perceptions.

Because scholars such as Rebekah Nathan (2005), Richard Light (2001), and many more, have worked diligently to understand university student perceptions, we have some indication of common student thoughts and beliefs. From my own experiences with students through classes and individual discussions about life, goals, and purposes, I believe I have some grasp of how students are choosing to play the game and maybe even more important- why they are playing this way, but I desire a more concrete and expansive understanding of their beliefs.

Many educators realize that we must be willing to push for a clearer understanding of what students are really learning from collegiate education. As Bok (2006) acknowledges most surveys reveal that approximately 80 % of undergraduate students view their educational experience positively. University faculty are publishing and “advancing knowledge”, while students’ admissions requirements are often increasing. Although this all sounds positive on the surface

level, we must dig deeper to understand why this is occurring and even consider what could be done differently in the future. If students are not accustomed to experiencing learning in educational settings, it only makes sense that their expectations for learning would not be high. It is also possible that students believe they have had a positive college experience if it allows them to earn a degree, which in turn increases their chances of finding a job and/or increasing their salary. While it is only realistic to recognize that a college degree is often important in developing the material self, and consequently increasing one's potential for employment and social success, I do not believe college should exclude or deny the opportunity for and recognition of learning. However I also believe the opportunity for learning depends on how and why you play the game.

Playing the Game

In my experiences with facilitation, I have found that one of the most powerful questions you can ask is: "How did you choose to play the game?" It is critical that we reflect on how both educators and students play the educational game. Both students and educators have become painfully aware that the game of education abides by stringent rules, and provides limited resources and sparse attention to developing individual agency. However, the game of education is easily mastered by some and abused by others. The level of communal support and emphasis placed on gaining knowledge and personal growth is unfortunately minimal for many. This is most likely due to the perception that the only real rewards of the game are primarily extrinsic: obtaining the highest score or passing "Go" the highest number of times. I too, was once sure that if I invested enough time into practicing the game and focusing on memorizing all of the appropriate responses, then I would not only finish first, but this would consequently solidify my success in society. As an academic, I must admit that this belief still flickers. Grades were the primary objective of my game and sometimes the sole return on my investment in the educational

process. Just like my students, I often took very little “knowledge” from my primary, secondary, and even undergraduate courses.

The question of “why” offers more insight into the strategies for playing, but also an explanation of the surroundings and cultural beliefs. I believe it unrealistic to assume an individual’s perceptions and beliefs can be void of influence. As we know, these perceptions and beliefs are acquired through cultural and social surroundings. The contextual factors I faced growing up were largely influential on how I played the game of education and why I chose to play this way.

My mother, a traditional southern female focused on nurturing and schedule management, has been actively involved in teaching and directing preschool education since I was 9. It is difficult for me to remember a time when developing lesson plans, creating bulletin boards and finding ways to make children smile, behave, and achieve, were not common ideas in my house. My father, a traditional southern male focused on managing the homestead and finding ways to support the family monetarily, held sales positions while maintaining a passion for other hobbies. His interests did not usually correspond with his jobs, and instead he took pride in filling the home with pictures, stories, and artifacts from the past that he had both collected and restored.

My parents both attended the same secondary school in the Eastern part of Virginia and did not experience integration until their junior year. It was and still is a small town where many of the natives can track several generations of their own family and the families of others. My mother completed approximately two years of higher education before she married my father and began providing monetary support for him as he completed his bachelor’s degree at a small liberal arts college in Virginia. Over the years I began to realize that this was not an uncommon scenario for middle class rural families, particularly during the 60’s and 70’s.

All four of my grandparents finished high school, which was not as common for middle-class families in the 30's and 40's; however, none of them had the desire nor means to pursue a college education. Both of my grandfathers immediately entered the military which was followed by years of farming for one and the other found a life of sales and marketing in the meat-packing business. My grandmothers both lived lives focused on cooking, entertaining, and raising disciplined, respectful, and upstanding families of the community.

From all of this, I learned several preferred and even privileged strategies for playing the game. From my family, I saw that good grades were expected. Work was primarily done to earn money. Fun and spontaneity were reserved for later. Security was critical and lack thereof should be fixed. Decisions were never made without time passing. If it isn't going to kill you then push through. Success was equivalent to completion of priorities and priorities were determined by the need to avoid problems, pain and punishment.

The greater culture of a small town in rural eastern Virginia, taught me that school success was one way to be accepted, but was not required. Football and basketball were privileged and to be respected. Animals were not humans and meat was not optional. Straight was right. White was dominant. Success was monetarily based. Hip-hop, country and alternative style explained the concept of diversity. Religion kept you on the right track. Most religious people were Baptists; salvation determines everything. Facts are to be accepted and unquestioned. Community is defined by presence and pride.

Why did I choose to play the game the way I did? As most human beings, I had and still have a desire to be accepted by my cultural and contextual surroundings. I always felt there was value in asking more questions and continuing to push for greater learning and deeper understanding, but I could not justify the time and effort in a space that promoted facts and certainty. My passion

for inquiry would only be lit years later when I was introduced to the idea of uncertainty and the lines around my culture began to blur and were intentionally erased.

Re-conceptualizing the “Why”

It was during my freshman semester of college that I began to ponder the role of “learning” as a concept separate from grading, separate from scoring, and separate from winning the game. My college freshman writing seminar, introduced me to the writing of Paulo Freire (1998), which impacted my thoughts about learning and individual growth in unpredictable ways. I am not sure why it was this moment that prompted me to consider the role of learning and its connections to and separations from school. Regardless, it was then that I recognized that “learning” and more specifically “critical thinking” was a valued concept within itself and not only a means to an end. This idea contradicted some of my perceptions of life and success.

Despite the fact that I began considering the possibilities of learning during my freshman year of undergraduate education, I could not revert my engrained strategies that I had practiced for so long. Four years, tons of memorized information, and endless “scores” later, I began to reflect on this concept of learning again. Ironically, the words of Paulo Freire (2001) appeared again, only this time it was in one of my first graduate courses. The once dormant desire to explore this topic, pushed against and swirled within my head. The call for community and growth was echoed by Maxine Greene (1988) and bell hooks (1994), as well as others. I found myself reflecting back on my educational experiences and I found that unfortunately I too had been a receptacle for information, but that I had felt supported and protected by the educational communities that surrounded me. While research suggests that these communities can promote more critical thought, inquiry, and greater learning, I personally do not believe I reaped this benefit. My learning experiences were very individual and competitive. I memorized a lot, as all students do,

and I was rarely encouraged to really push my thinking until I encountered a few classes in college. These experiences lead me to wonder what is really required in a community for members to see educational benefits and not just support and camaraderie. Additionally, it has caused me to question the very possibility of what I am so passionately advocating- students should build communities and connections to enhance learning and growth.

Learning to Think Critically

After teaching in higher education for almost 7 years I believe my personal experiences with education -both as student and teacher- are complemented and contradicted by what I see in so many of my students today. I teach several courses at the collegiate level and I am continuously encouraging and requiring students to engage in and embrace small group experiences within the class. I am often bewildered by the resistance to working with others in both formal and informal assignments. Students are usually very open about their apprehension of the experience, due to past situations and the overall desire to “work individually.” I am often awestruck at the challenge of building a community of learners that can engage in open dialogue, commit to supporting the group as a whole, and ultimately work to enhance the knowledge and growth of all community individuals. I find myself wondering if this is possible in our society of individualism. Certainty has been valued for so long, and “knowing” is often prized as the way to success; are these societal values too prevalent and privileged to even consider building learning communities? Many of us are quick to name organizations, housing developments, and even schools as communities, but is it possible that community can exist in a college classroom? Do the objectives, needs, and desires align closely enough to even harbor the idea? Digging even deeper, I must ask myself and others: Is my desire for connection and community in the college classroom futile? ; Is it incongruous with the greater societal beliefs? ; and finally, Is community

merely an ancillary concern that should be rightfully overshadowed by conflicting student desires and needs?

If you are like me and many professors working for transformative education, community development is most likely a part of your teaching philosophy and your practice at points, but may not be fully developed, understood, or even accepted. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the possibilities of community from a different perspective. It is time to consider how we can take into account the individual lives and frameworks of our students. Might the classroom community truly allow for various cultural perspectives and experiences to be appreciated and valued? Could the classroom community serve as a catalyst for student learning and a model for students' future societal interactions? Will the corporate model of "communities of practices" be easily adapted to meet the needs of college students in the twenty-first century? And as I ask my students so often, "what is that is it that we don't know that we need to know in order to improve this situation?" It was then that I realized that we had overlooked a critical question: Even if we convince ourselves that we can find educational value in community and connection, this view must also be shared by those students that we serve. How do today's college students, who seem to have been enculturated to strive for individualism and impersonal relationships, really perceive college and the possibility of the classroom community? I wanted to know more. The uncertainty, challenge, and possibility intrigued me.

Conceptualizing the Dissertation

After reading numerous studies, essays, and calls for the development of community in the undergraduate classroom, I was not convinced that my students would embrace or even perceive this technique as beneficial and/or appropriate for their college experience. This obviously spurred the study and analysis that follows. Through a qualitative study with a constructivist

paradigm, I explored the current undergraduate student's perception of university education and classroom community. Three hundred and twenty-three students were surveyed, representing two universities (one larger public university and one smaller private university) in the southeastern region of the United States. Additionally nine students and five faculty members were interviewed from these universities to provide a deeper understanding of possible student perceptions. The results were coded, analyzed, and combined to create portraits of student perceptions (Lightfoot, 1983). Themes from these portraits were then analyzed through 3 lenses: 1) Commitment and Togetherness; 2) Cognitive Development and Inquiry; and 3) Building Classroom Community. Ultimately I gained great insight into how students in the southeastern region of the U.S. perceive the possibility of classroom community which enables me to not only analyze and adapt my pedagogical techniques, but also helps me to understand them and to finally hear the voices of so many students who have been lost in the educational system. I hope that you too are able to gain a deeper understanding of student perceptions and the possible implications of these beliefs in the improvement of university teaching and learning.

CHAPTER II

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH PROBLEM

As both researchers and constructivists have suggested, American institutions should take another look at the expectations and pedagogical techniques used in higher education (Bok, 2006; Lempert, 1996). Because we know that student memorization and regurgitation do not comprise learning we must explore techniques that encourage connection and engagement (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1998). Numerous researchers have explored the concept and potential impacts of community as a means of improving learning, connection, and engagement in the learning institution (e.g. Christiansen & Ramadevi, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1995, 2000; Lee & Robbins, 1995, 1998, 2000; Sizer, 1992; Summers & Svinicki, 2007; Wood, 1992). These studies showed numerous benefits of classroom communities including: increased motivation, connection, critical thinking, and performance. However, the students' perceptions of the classroom community at the undergraduate level have only been considered through primarily closed survey questions. Without a great deal of experience with communities, students may not be able to accurately understand and/or respond to these questions. If we do not truly understand what students perceive, we will not be able to implement communities or any pedagogical techniques successfully; we will not be able to meet the students' needs or enable them to grow in ways that they perceive as beneficial. Furthermore, we need to recognize what students perceive as beneficial and problematic with classroom community development as their initial beliefs will undoubtedly affect what they are able to take away. While providing a strong foundation for understanding student beliefs, I believe previous findings can be complemented and enhanced by hearing the student's voices in their own words and allowing them to provide perceptions void of

the educator's assumptions and/or survey instruments or scales. By applying student voices to current frameworks of knowledge concerning togetherness/connection, the process of inquiry, and the techniques of building classroom community, we will create a more authentic and relevant grounding for the development of future pedagogical techniques in the undergraduate classroom.

Many educators hope to meet their students' needs and engage them in an appreciation of learning; educators must create experiences in the classroom to encourage the practice of critical thinking and application to personal lives and future careers (Cantor, 1995; Lempert, 1996; Zajonc, 2006). One suggested strategy for improving learning and connection is the development of undergraduate classroom communities. As Dewey (1927) believed, the interaction between and among community members allows us "to learn to be human" (pp. 331-332). As noted by Christiansen et al. (2002), strong communities do help us learn to be human as they empower us with a sense of ownership, while concurrently requiring commitment and work. This allows us to "learn, grow, and develop in ways that isolated individuals find impossible" (Christiansen et al., 2002, p.117). Furthermore, commitment to a community and the support given as a result of that commitment should encourage hard work and dedication from the individual (Sizer, 1992). As Dewey (1927) and others have noted, learning how to be human and gaining an understanding of what it means to be committed to a larger community are not only valuable lessons, but may possibly enhance learning and applicable skills that can be carried into the future.

Research that confirms the possibility that school/educational climates and communities may affect student growth and/or learning can be found as early as 1932 in the works of Willard Waller (McDill & Rigsby, 1973) and it was further addressed by other scholars (e.g. Bloom, 1966; Sizer, 1984, 1992, 1996 ; Wood, 1992). As Wood (1992) noted, if an environment offers

“support and inclusiveness” then not only is community possible, but so is greater learning. Human beings need security and belonging, to eliminate the isolation and estrangement that often creates challenges in the learning process (Christiansen et al., 2002; Wood, 1992). Because the research shows that individuals often benefit from collaboration and community in schools, many high schools are taking on the challenge of trying to build beneficial school and classroom communities.

The research focusing on the development of community in secondary education (i.e. Osterman, 2000; Sizer, 1984, 1992, 1996; Wood, 1992) encourages us to consider what perceptions students will bring into the university experience. As Wood (1992) notes, schools were actually one of the first institutions to recognize the role and importance of community, based on the experiences the school constituents encountered. Today, many scholars encourage a greater emphasis on community at the high school level and they also explore the numerous intellectual and emotional benefits that often evolve from a strong community experience (e.g. Christiansen et al., 2002; Dewey, 1916; Sizer, 1992; Wood, 1992). In this space it is extremely difficult to create a sense of belongingness that is inclusive of all students and helps them to feel like a critical part of their own education (Wood, 1992). According to Sizer (1984), high school students need to respect themselves and need to be respected. A high school student whom believes in him/herself and has an incentive to learn is likely to try harder and decide to engage. As Sizer stated, “the decision to use his [her] mind is entirely up to him [her]” (Sizer, 1992, p.56). The decision to disengage and not try is an easy one and unfortunately one that many high school students choose (Sizer, 1984).

While we cannot assume that high school students share the aforementioned views, students may have been exposed to the concept of community development prior to entering higher education. There are also a number of studies focusing on classroom community in higher

education (i.e. Freeman & Anderman, 2007; Lee & Robbins, 1995, 1998, 2000; Rovai 2002; Summers & Svinicki, 2007). The studies that have looked at the development and role of undergraduate classroom community have primarily focused on the importance of developing community and the connection of community to learning and/or motivation. Johnson and Johnson (1995, 2000) developed the social interdependence theory which claims that student interaction and outcomes are dependent upon the interdependence and/or alignment of a group's goals. They concluded that when individuals work together and display positive interdependence they are not only utilizing cooperative learning, but also developing a cooperative community (2000). Summers & Svinicki (2007) facilitated a study involving a university located in the southwest by administering 32 closed-question survey to almost 500 students. This study confirmed what Johnson (1989, 2003) found in earlier research; students must perceive their group, or community, to be effectively meeting their group and personal goals in order for community to be developed (Summers & Svinicki, 2007). Summers & Svinicki's (2007) findings also suggest that if students perceive their group to be meeting their needs, they may perceive interactive learning as an individual motivator. Students believe this leads to positive outcomes such as classroom community (2007). These studies recognize the importance of student perception and illuminate the fact that cooperative learning as a pedagogical tool does not automatically evoke motivation of community. Instructional methodologies must be used effectively to create commitment to the community for learning to occur (Summers & Svinicki, 2007). Furthermore, Summers and Svinicki (2007) recognized the differences between an interactive/cooperative learning classroom and a larger lecture course. Students representing the non-cooperative learning classes (also large lecture classes) reported that they were less motivated to succeed, and less recognition of interactive learning and/or classroom community. Additionally, students reported higher performance-approach goals in the non-cooperative learning courses and higher mastery goals in

the cooperative learning classrooms (Summers & Svinicki, 2007). This may suggest that students are more focused on learning and growth (intrinsic motivators) when involved in a classroom community.

In several studies of higher education, models have been developed to measure connection. Lee and Robbins (1995, 1998) developed a tool for measuring social connectedness of college students. This scale was later adapted to measure connectedness to campus as well as detect differences in connectedness based on various student factors (Summers & Svinicki, 2007). Ravoï and Lucking (2003) also developed and utilized a scale to evaluate the role and degree of connectedness and perceptions of community in online courses. Ravoï & Lucking (2000, 2003) recognized classroom community as evoking belonging and responsibility to one another and the need for teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction in the development of this community.

All of these studies lay an important foundation for understanding how community may play a role in higher education; however, they either do not focus specifically on student perceptions of undergraduate classroom community, they rely primarily on quantitative or pre-determined survey questions, and/or they specifically focus on a control and experimental group. Several studies (i.e. Doyle, 1977,1980; Winne & Marx, 1980; Wittrock, 1978, 1986) found that student perceptions determined responsiveness to instruction, the possibility of motivation to learn, and the capacity to comprehend material and follow methodology (Wittrock,1986). Winne & Marx's (1980) study clearly supported that idea that a student's ability to learn a new strategy or idea was dependent on their beliefs and perceptions of previously learned strategies. A later study by Winne and Marx (1983) furthered our understanding of student perceptions by noting a positive correlation between student perceptions of instruction and student success. Because student perception is entirely based on the individual frames that are "constantly evolving senses of the world" we must take time to explore these beliefs and frameworks (Davis, Sumara, Luce-Kapler,

2000, p.38). Furthermore, perceptions dictate action and reaction, which in turn creates new experiences and perceptions, consequently altering the original frames of references. This continuous process makes the university student's current perceptions and beliefs invaluable. If university educators desire to enhance student connection, learning, and possibly build classroom communities, they must not only understand student perceptions, but also consider how these ideas as well as greater societal connotations have shaped and may continue to impact "educational philosophies and teaching practices" (Davis et al., 2000, p.3). Additionally unpacking students' perceptions will challenge educators to remain open to diverse voices and perspectives, enabling educators to think critically about their own beliefs and ideals as educators. There is undoubtedly a need for qualitative, interpretive/constructivist research that captures student perceptions of the possibility of community as well as the greater purpose of higher education. Furthermore, it is critical to analyze and consider these perceptions as respective to three frameworks used to consider the implementation and development of classroom community.

We must begin asking critical questions about the desires and perceptions of university students as they align with and/or contradict the current purpose of higher education; additionally student perceptions add to or subtract from learning, critical thinking and student growth in the higher education classroom. Ultimately, the recognition of student perceptions and expectations in the higher education classroom may benefit undergraduate students as they are introduced to the possibilities of higher education and they begin to reflect on what "learning, community, and college" requires and offers. Although understanding student perceptions alone will not fuse the disconnect between beliefs and strategy implementation, it will enable educators to examine and redefine the structure of the collegiate classroom to meet the needs of incoming students.

I will be inductively analyzing university student perceptions through an interpretivistic/

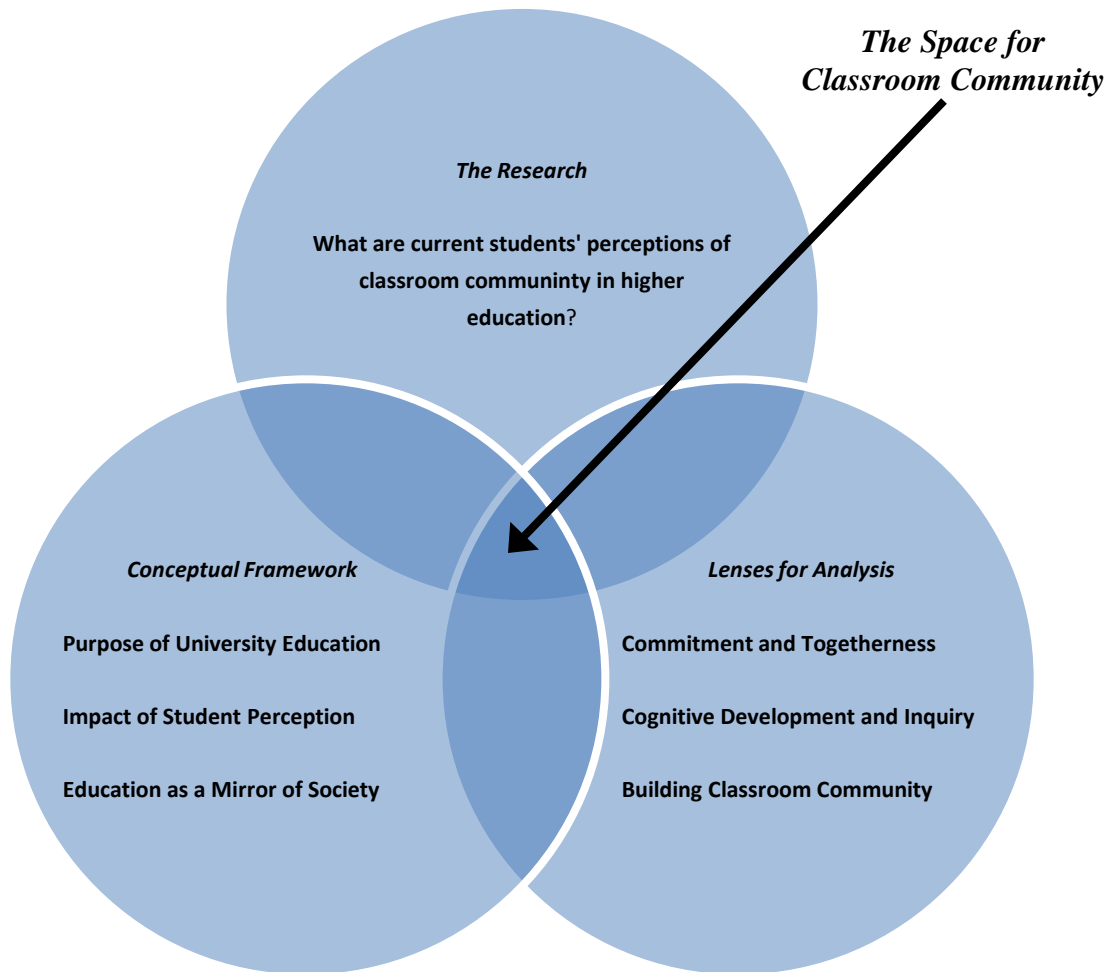
constructivist paradigm, and introducing three possible frames to further explore the possibilities and challenges of these perceptions. The themes discovered through this study will be framed by research on connection, togetherness, and assimilation; student learning and inquiry; and ultimately the potential development of classroom “communities of practices.” University advancement necessitates the consideration of student perceptions, for it is only by “struggl[ing] with them as subjects in search of their own projects, their own ways of making sense of the world” that we can begin to meet the undergraduate student’s needs and enable them to critically consider their current understandings and expectations (Greene, 1988, p.120). The discoveries and questions that arise from this study, incorporating “interdisciplinary triangulation”, should inform university educators, students, and citizens as we explore the preconceived notions that will inevitably affect the methodologies, understandings and purposes of higher education (Janesick, 1998, p. 47).

CHAPTER III

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Undergraduate students often tell me that they do not talk to classmates in most courses, let alone recognize or acknowledge them outside of the classroom. They are often discontented by the idea that they will be required to work closely with other members of the class. These students appear to be products of an “endless process of being judged, graded, sorted and ranked” (Shapiro, 2006, p.128). The educational system that has promised to “not leave any child behind” has not failed to teach these students; yet the meanings they are gaining may not be conducive to successful personal growth, community development, or democratic citizenship. Instead, these students have gained a clear understanding “that their own success depends on their ability to do better than others” (Lerner, 2005, p. 327). To better understand our current students’ perceptions, we must trace the development of the purpose of higher education, but we must also consider the importance of studying perception, and the impact of societal beliefs on our educational system and our students. This literature will provide foundational insight that can be used to later consider student perceptions and the lenses through which they are viewed. Ultimately, we should be able to better understand the space and/or opportunity for building classroom community in today’s universities (See Figure 1).

Fig. 1- Conceptual Framework



Tracing the Steps of Development: What is the purpose of a college education?

As a university educator, I am never surprised to hear an undergraduate's response to the question: What is the purpose of undergraduate education? In the twenty-first century, the response from students almost always focuses on finding a well-paying job or gaining a certificate or degree that permits them entrance into a particular field. Certainly the answer to

this question may differ depending upon who is asked and how they have been socially engrained to view a college education. The views and aims of higher education have always been varied (Rudolph, 1977), just as undergraduate education has always been influenced by “social, economic, and political pressures” (Hook, 1974, p. xvii). It is important to trace the history of American undergraduate college purposes to understand the patterns and perspectives that have been echoed and smothered throughout the development of education. To adequately understand the current state of undergraduate education, one must explore two questions: 1) What does the history of higher education tell us about the current and future purposes of undergraduate education? ; and 2) How have the purposes and aims of undergraduate education been affected by and reflective of greater social and political circumstances and expectations? As we seek a greater understanding of the role of undergraduate education, we must remember that the peak of education is debated by many scholars; however, most are in agreement that there has been a fairly steady decline in the quality and role of teaching and learning (Bok, 2006). For centuries, educators have sought a clearer understanding of what we hope students will obtain from the university experience. It is my hope that by reflecting on the history of education during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, university educators can begin to develop a more cohesive and communal understanding of how to enhance and improve college education.

Serving the Elite. Our modern day perceptions and beliefs about the university can easily be traced back to the Greeks with Plato and his Academy. It was also modeled by the Sophists and Pythagoreans (Kerr, 2001). Much of the administration and structure of the university came from the idea of the medieval institution; some of these structural ideas include: "a name and a central location, masters with a degree of autonomy, students, a system of lectures, a procedure for examinations and degrees, and even an administrative structure" (Kerr, 2001, p.8). By the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, colleges in America were developed,

overseen, and molded by “the locally established church, political order, and social conventions” (Jencks & Reisman., 1968, p.1). Many of these colleges were similar to secondary schools where everything was taught generally and nothing was specific or detailed. Before 1829, very few students attended high school, let alone college. The colleges offered very little professional training and students did not see college attendance as having any connections to their future plans (Jencks et al., 1968).

Andrew Jackson’s election to the presidency in 1829 was the beginning of great American change. During his presidency, the traditional ideas of colonial society were finally broken due to the fall of state churches, the ownership of new land, and the separation of government from England (Jencks et al., 1968). Colleges in the next several decades were plentiful and made attempts to specialize in various fields and religious beliefs, but student attendance was limited. University and college administrators continuously had to justify and promote their programs and the importance of higher education. Despite the efforts to specialize, the primary purpose of most colleges was still to indoctrinate students with “moral discipline” (Handlin & Handlin, 1973, p. 285). By the middle of the nineteenth century, most colleges had reverted back to a classic liberal arts curriculum (Handlin et al., 1973), but the 1860s brought a new focus for higher education. Due to secularization and scientific breakthroughs, the university began to turn away from student character development (Ben-David, 1973). By 1870, over 500 institutions of higher education were providing students with undergraduate degree programs. These programs were often comprised of free-elective systems and extremely specialized programs (Ben-David, 1973).

The period from 1870-1920 was often known as the “era of the president” as there were many dramatic changes and big names in the development of American society (Kerr, 2001). By the end of the Civil War, around 1865, America found itself in a “period of great industrial activity and national development” (Cubberley, 1909, p.38). The American Educational system

sought advancement and improvement as well after the Civil war; between 1875 and 1900, methodologies and visions changed greatly (Cubberley, 1909).

While the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868 had given “all persons born or naturalized in the United States” citizenship and guaranteed the equal protection of laws and privileges, schools remained segregated. The year 1896 brought the “separate but equal ruling” in the Plessy vs. Ferguson case (Spring, 2005, p. 191). Concurrently, the United States and the Native Americans were struggling for control of land, ideologies, and schooling (Cobb, 2000).

As demonstrated by the previously mentioned social happenings, the second half of the nineteenth century was dominated by struggles for control and grouping. Many of the smaller groups often built around “occupation, social class, religion, sex, locality, and ethnic background” began to develop their own colleges (Jencks et al., 1968, p. 3). The purpose of these colleges in the nineteenth century was to maintain and uphold a standard that various groups were achieving, and develop new paths and means of success for the individual group. Enrollment in these schools was fairly low and the church still held the majority if not all of the power.

The second half of the nineteenth century also brought about an increased emphasis on the importance of the university. Harvard developed the bachelor of science degree in 1851 (Spurr, 1970). It was followed by the first Ph.D., which was granted by Yale in 1861 and graduate universities such as Johns Hopkins and Clark were opened in the 1880's. Although American university reform began with Professor George Ticknor at Harvard in 1825, it did not take hold until Daniel Gilman became president of John Hopkins in 1876. Hopkins was joined in his efforts by Charles Eliot of Harvard. By the 1890s societies and journals were born, and knowledge was departmentalized. During this time university courses became plentiful and very specific, university presses were created and the academic ladder was built (Bok, 2006; Kerr, 2001). Emphasis began to be placed on research and graduate as well we professional schools (Kerr,

2001). According to Kerr (2001) this time brought about "high academic standards in what was still a rather new and raw civilization" (p. 11).

During these struggles for equality, knowledge, and development John Henry Cardinal Newman, proclaimed that the university should be a "place of teaching and universal knowledge" (1899, p. ix). He proposed the idea of the secular university that incorporated religious ideals, and more focus on - research- primarily an influence from the Germans (Hook, 1974). He believed that the university should focus on intellectual (not moral) growth and development. He felt that students should gain exposure and competence in the extension of knowledge in various areas. Newman (1899) defined knowledge as "the indispensable condition of the expansion of mind" (p.129). Newman (1899) believed that one way to increase what we know and grow as individuals is to explore different types of knowledge within the university setting. Ultimately, Newman (1899) believed that the purpose of a college education was to help students utilize a pattern of thinking that incorporates "freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom" (p.101). The knowledge and method of thought that one should gain from a college education would be considered a great reward and an end within itself (Newman, 1899).

It is important to remember that Newman's ideas were presented at a time when religion was seen as the ultimate knowledge and anything outside of the church was considered to be incorrect and unethical (Newman, 1899). Consequently, the aims were not widely accepted. Newman (1899) was making proclamations about the possibilities and directions of the university, at a time when most students were not even finishing high school. Until 1890, high school did not make much sense for middle or low income families. During this time there were more direct paths to becoming successful and high school would have simply prolonged the ability to get out into the work force and support the family (Nasaw, 1979). The great advantage of self-employment was that the business could be handed down to sons or daughters; therefore a high school education

was not seen as valuable. This began to change with the growth and development of the turn of the century, but even by 1900, only 11 % of students attended high school (Nasaw, 1979). This makes it impossible for more than 11 % of students to even consider attending college.

At the university level in the early 1900s, many universities had moved to the more elective system and students began to be consumers, which Kerr (2001) believes lead to the birth of the modern university. Small colleges developed in the nineteenth century to serve special populations, became the large, stable, institutions of the twentieth century (Jencks et al., 1968). These changes were partially due to decline of religious enthusiasm, an increase in the national market, the development of national magazines, the ability of radio broadcasts to reach and unify masses of people, the Civil War, and great changes in perceptions of the family and self-concept (Jencks et al., 1968).

After World War I, enrollment in higher education began to increase, but until World War II, the purpose of going to college was to “kill time, get away from home, make new friends, enjoy themselves, and acquire salable skills” (Jencks et al., 1968, p.23). Again, these were privileges only for those who could afford the tuition. Undergraduate education became a place for students to meet others of their class and background, and a space for engraining future generations with a common culture (Nasaw, 1979). Students were encouraged to pursue a liberal arts curriculum and leadership training, which are reflections of the greater Western culture. Students even pursued the study of agricultural science-seen as an acceptable and reasonable interest- to get an education which would allow them to leave the farm.

Shortly, as the demand for higher education increased, the entry and graduation requirements became harder (Jencks et al., 1968). Students and society alike began to see undergraduate education as a preparation for graduate education and a chance to prove your intelligence and abilities. By the 1920s, college was seen as a means of networking and gaining credentials that

would be needed to earn a job. Studies showed that executives of the 1950s were 9 times more likely to have earned an undergraduate college degree in the 1920s. It is not surprising that most of these 1950s executives were Protestant, white, Americans who now considered themselves to be upper class and to exhibit “sharpened intellectual skills” (Nasaw, 1979, p.167).

It wasn't until 1930, that Flexner published his visions of the ideal university. Some believe this type of university had already disappeared when he wrote about it, and that it was no longer possible. Flexner (1930), believed universities to be perplexing and diverse in structure, and he proclaimed that they should be “consciously devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, the solution of problems, the critical appreciation of achievement, and the training of men at really high level[s]” (p.42). He was not suggesting that universities eliminate any service they provide for society and/or career development, but he did recognize the need for a focus on the arts and sciences. He also privileged graduate education, which is one element of his vision that was easily accept and often still is.

It is important to note that both Flexner's (1930) and Newman's (1899) idealized versions of the university did not exist by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead, we were moving toward the modern (Kerr, 1963/2001). Perhaps some of Flexner's (1930) most important contributions were the ideas that higher education will always be “an expression of the age, as well as an influence operating upon both present and future” (Flexner, 1930, p.3). Additionally, he reminded us that “the modern world-no matter how new we think it to be-is rooted in a past, which is the soil out of which we grow” (Flexner, 1930, p.4). Flexner (1930) recognized that educational institutions will be both a reflection of our larger social societal needs, but that they will almost always be behind the current understanding of reality. These ideas help us to understand many of the developments and changes in undergraduate education in the past, present, and for the future.

By 1920, 32 % of teenagers were in high school. This percentage rose to fifty % by 1930 and reached 73 % by 1940 (Nasaw, 1979). With an increase in high school attendance, higher education became a possibility for many more students. Universities of the 1920s became focused on athletics as a form of public entertainment and a strong community connection. This focus on athletics obviously continues in universities today. By the 1930s higher education also began to value undergraduate student life. This focus on student life continued through the 1950s (Nasaw,1979).

Prior to World War II parents of upper class began to push children into higher education, but if the students of middle class homes hoped to go to college, their parents had to make major sacrifices (Nasaw, 1979). Soon, a college degree became the golden ticket to obtaining corporate jobs and it was commonly assumed that the college educated men would earn better jobs. The college degree eventually became “a badge of social standing” and virtually a requirement for corporate positions (Nasaw, 1979, p.165). As the prestige of the diploma increased, it is important to remember that the diploma did not prove intelligence, it was merely a sign that you had enough money to put off joining the work force (Nasaw,1979, p.165).

Despite the focus on athletics and student life, and the social status that was gained from a college degree, realistically only 15 % of students were enrolled in university by World War II. Although many of the universities were less restrictive, they were still primarily attended by the elite (Nasaw,1979). Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, higher education served a variety of purposes. It was a means of further school for the elite, the key to greater success, and it provided the inculcation of cultural and societal values.

War and Education. Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, unemployment became a large concern. Due to modernization, and overproduction, unemployment was up to 5 % by 1924 (Nasaw,1979). After the depression, the unemployment rate continued to drop until it hit over 20

% in 1932 and did not return to 5 % until 1942 (Nasaw,1979). World War II changed the focus and future plans for many families and individuals of college age. A considerable drop in enrollment was experienced during World War II as men went off to war and women went off to fill the jobs and make money to support their families. While many of the smaller colleges were hit very hard by the war and desperately needed more students and funds, some of the larger universities were receiving government funding in support of science and engineering training for soldiers. Many of the university scientists were asked to develop weapons and expand research (Nasaw,1979). This reiterated the importance of higher education, and placed a focus on the value of science within the university.

Following the war, the GI Bill of 1943 brought students back to the colleges. When the government passed this bill, it was not at all concerned about the individuals or about education, but instead about the economy (Nasaw, 1979). Many higher education institutions needed paying students. Because the GI Bill allowed war veterans to attend any school they wanted through complete government funding, universities and colleges began to gain students and money (Nasaw, 1979). Although more individuals were being granted admission to the university, and many were finally able to attend college because the government was paying, many educators believed that the GI Bill was a not the answer to economical or educational concerns (Nasaw,1979). As Nasaw stated, “education is not a device for coping with mass unemployment” (1979, p.178). Despite complaints, no university refused the incoming soldiers or the much needed money they brought with them (Nasaw, 1979).

To accommodate the veterans seeking education, many schools began to adjust or relax requirements; women’s schools opened their doors to men, and some school councils waived the high school degree requirement for incoming soldiers. The schools were interested in helping veterans to adapt to school and were willing to make compromises as long as it “didn’t cost too

much” (Nasaw,1979, p.179). As education class sizes increased due to the 2.3 million veterans seeking financial aid and a college education, more graduate students and lower level faculty were hired to handle the bulk of the undergraduate teaching (Nasaw,1979). These Veterans were the first nontraditional students as well as “from families who could not afford to pay their way” (Nasaw, 1979, p.181). Undergraduate classrooms were now filled with underprivileged veterans and the elite. During this time, universities were serving as national resources, as well as “all-purpose problems solvers” (Nasaw, 1979, p.182). Specifically, students were encouraged to attend the university to individually find a job, but also to help the economy as a whole (Nasaw, 1979). Finally, in 1947, the American Council on Educational Studies developed three basic principles concerning public education. First, the Council recognized the change in education and the role of the progressive education movement in making education more active than passive. Secondly, the council agreed that the focus of education should be on how to think, and not what should be thought. This movement has not always been upheld, but it was defined as crucial in the 1947 document. Finally, the council focused on how schools should play a role in forming student beliefs in democracy (American Council on Educational Studies, 1947).

The 1949 Frank Ellsworth Spaulding Lecture was given by Ordway Tead. The lecture focused on the purpose of education and the role of teachers. Tead (1949) was painfully aware of the need for student motivation and encouragement of learning. He also recognized that education “is for use; it is for action. It is to enable students to cope with problem situations of conduct” (Tead, 1949, p.18).

Both of the previously mentioned documents were attempts to reform and refocus the purpose of higher education. Unfortunately the social and cultural demands of the time took precedence over the suggestions by the American Council on Educational Studies (1947) and Tead (1949).

By the 1950s, one study found that a major effect of higher education was the development of common values and standards among college educated students (Bok, 2006). By 1957, the explicit and implicit focus of higher education had drastically changed. The purpose of higher education was no longer to fix economic problems or teach common values and/or standards; instead, the purpose of higher education became focused on research. The Russian development of and success with Sputnik, spurred the race to obtain research and develop technology (Nasaw, 1979). Funding for higher education became a national priority and public institutions had been granted approximately 760 million dollars by 1963, to fund research and development (Nasaw, 1979). When private universities and colleges began to suffer financially, corporations stepped in with donations (Nasaw, 1979). Additionally, the university began to take on more and more characteristics of a business. Business was alive and well, with an emphasis on producing American students who could achieve groundbreaking research that would confirm American supremacy in development and growth.

Despite the calls for greater emphasis on learning and growth, the military continued to engage in war, while Americans continued to wage war against the purpose of education. The Cold War and the Korean War caused military spending to increase greatly. Meanwhile, the 1950 Select Service Act allowed those enrolled in collegiate education to be deferred from the draft (Nasaw, 1979). The development of paperback books and copiers in the 1950s made academic material available and plentiful in higher education. Finally by 1959, almost 69 % of high-school students were encouraged by parents to attend college (Nasaw, 1979).

From the 1920s to the 1960s, the purposes of higher education included fixing the economy, advancing American culture and production, and escaping the war. As Kerr wrote in 1963, “American universities have not yet developed their full identity, their unique theory of purpose and function” (Kerr, 1963/2001, p.64). Kerr (1963) believed that American universities would

begin to embrace the need for knowledge. Because of individual loss of identity, longer life spans, and fears of foreign supremacy, Kerr wrote that "knowledge has certainly never in history been so central to the conduct of an entire society...the university is at the center of the knowledge process" (Kerr,1963/ 2001, p.66). As many scholars had already, Kerr recognized the need for focus on and improvement of the undergraduate university experience (1963/2001). He especially called for a focus on the role of instruction at the undergraduate level. As universities began to focus increasingly on graduate level education, the need for improvement of undergraduate education was echoed by numerous scholars for years to come (e.g. Ben-David, 1973; Bok, 2006).

Certification vs. Education. By 1968, Jencks et al. had proposed the idea that "education is not a college's primary function" (1968, p.61). As students sought college degrees for the purpose of certification and advancement, American educators began to realize that students were not necessarily seeking an education. Unlike many of the British institutions, American universities did not separate education and certification.

Seeking a life of leisure and wealth, Americans began to enroll in college programs to obtain a degree and/or certification: what they thought to be the key to white collar jobs (Nasaw, 1979). Because more students were graduating with college degrees, there was actually a shortage of white collar jobs for college graduates during the 1960s. McConnell (1962) suggested that colleges and universities develop strict entry requirements. This suggested that the primary function of college may be to "control access to the upper-middle social strata" (Jencks et al.,1968, p.100).

Parents of college students during this time perceived the college education as a "valuable sort of property and describe education as 'insurance' against unemployment" (Jencks et al., 1968, p.98). Ironically, studies performed during this time showed very little correlation between

higher education and greater worldly success (Jencks et al., 1968). Within the next 10 years however, higher education became a space to build a culture of leaders, but most importantly a place to train “low-level white-collar, paraprofessional, and technical positions” (Nasaw, 1979, p.204).

We also must be aware that by 1968 scholars recognized that most teachers still wanted to educate and not just train students. According to Jencks et al. (1968), many teachers felt that the “task of higher education [was] to give students the tools of literacy, the self-confidence, the skills, and the intellectual training to think for themselves” (as cited in Nasaw, 1979, p.236). It is not surprising that the purposes and ideals held by university faculty were opposed by greater social beliefs about the higher education system. University faculty and staff were consumed by the campus violence evoked by greater social issues during the 1960s (Hook, 1974). Then, during the 1970s, they were focused on the universality and equality of opportunity in higher education, as well as utilizing outside corporate support (Ashby, 1973, p. 278). Faculty were also expected to define themselves by their research (Hodgkinson, 1971).

By 1970, numerous highly qualified Americans, a lack of white-collar jobs, and an emphasis on research and graduate education had changed student perceptions of higher education. Students felt obligated to obtain an undergraduate degree, and conversely were experiencing a lack of motivation for learning (Special Task Force, 1973). Undergraduate education was seen as a means of obtaining a job or admission to a graduate program; gaining the undergraduate degree was simply a means to an end (Jencks et al., 1968). The undergraduate degree failed to get many students a job, and for some, the education was merely a waste (Nasaw, 1979). By the late 1970s, it was very difficult for university or college students to “develop their intellectual skills and learn to think for themselves” (Nasaw, 1979, p. 236). Higher education institutions serving students of the working class were usually lacking staff and funding, and struggling to transition students into

the college expectations (Nasaw, 1979). This, as well as cultural expectations, made it extremely difficult to encourage students to gain a greater appreciation for the college education.

Despite the problems and lack of promise occurring in many schools during the 1960s and 1970s, some scholars were still holding hope that a college education could help students develop open-mindedness, independent judgment, and other critical skills (Keniston & Gerzon, 1972). Unfortunately, few colleges were able to provide students with these skills. By the last few decades of the twentieth century, the aim of undergraduate education was just as ambiguous and contested as it was a hundred years prior (Rudolph, 1977).

By 1990 undergraduate educators were commonly seeing a lack of commitment to learning, lack of preparation for college work. Meanwhile, educators were experiencing a lack of willingness to spend time focusing on teaching. According to The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990), a needed characteristic that was definitely lacking was an overall commitment to the intellectual. Many scholars would agree that almost 20 years later, higher education - especially undergraduate programs- are still lacking a focus on intellectual pursuits.

Higher education in the twentieth century became a “funnel through which workers were channeled into the different levels of the white-collar pyramid” (Nasaw, 1979, p.210). This social division process was implicit but still somewhat hidden (Jencks et al., 1968). The belief that college attendance was mandatory and completion was a measure of personal success, placed great pressure on many Americans (McConnell, 1962). The lack of commitment to learning and lack of improvement of undergraduate education were disappointing for administrators and educators. The lack of job security and false ideals of success were disappointing to the college students. The last few years have brought an even more critical idea to the table.

Problems and/or Promise. According to Bok (2006) the years from 1990 to 2015 comprise the fourth stage of American university development. This stage of development commonly exhibits a shortage of money and either denial of ever-present concerns or the use of temporary quick-fixes for the problems (Bok, 2006). There is a focus on maintaining diverse and outstanding faculty. One of the primary questions of the university during this stage revolves around the subjectivity and contingency of truth (Bok, 2006). In 2000, only 10 years into the fourth stage of development, there was already a great deal of apprehension about the future of higher education and society as a whole (Bok, 2006).

As Kerr (2001) stated, the university means different things to various people and therefore, "it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself" (p.7). The twenty-first century view of higher education holds true to this belief. A decade ago, the university privileged tolerance and consistency, however, even those values have dissipated (Kerr, 2001). Conversely, higher education is still very much influenced by the classic British University of the mid nineteenth century; universities still bring knowledge to society, as well as evoke both political and cultural changes (Kerr, 2001).

Currently, although both parents and students view college as necessity for gaining a successful job and opportunity to evolve into a mature adult, Murray (2008) argues that four-year universities are doing neither for students. Murray (2008) recognizes how easy it has become for students to earn a college degree. He believes the adaptations and accommodations professors are required to make in their classes suggest the decreasing value and/or appropriateness of higher education for all. Instead, Murray (2008) suggests that many students do not attend higher education, but become skilled laborers as there is demand and high pay in these positions.

Even with the previously noted recognitions of university structure and values, society is still debating the purpose of higher education. While some critics continue to support the idea that

there should be one shared and cohesive purpose for higher education, higher education is fulfilling various purposes in the twenty-first century (i.e. Anderson, 1993; Bok, 2006; Readings,1996; Wilshire,1990). Unfortunately, higher education is also facing several problems. The focus for many universities and teachers is still on research, and not students, which causes students to gain only small bits of knowledge that may have little connection to the outside world and realistic application. Additionally, many still see the university as a training camp for the future, that maintains low standards, and offers little opportunity to gain anything but a degree (Bok, 2006). According to Bok, (2006) undergraduate higher education should be enabling students to develop the ability to communicate, to thinking critically, and utilize moral reasoning. In addition, undergraduate education should focus on citizen preparation, and evoking interests in a variety of areas. Finally, undergraduate education should prepare students for work, to live with diversity, and to live within a global society (Bok, 2006). Harrington (2003) adds the idea that undergraduate education should prepare students to be “productive citizen-leaders” in order to ensure a strong future society (p.46).

A critical perspective that has been left of the current discussion around twenty-first century university education is the student’s perspective. Students now see a college education as “a means toward accomplishing other goals” (Bok, 2006, p.35). While this perspective can be aligned with some of the previously mentioned ideas, it may also conflict. No matter how hard educators try to define or alter the purpose of undergraduate education, the students, now seen as “consumers” will always bring a critical perspective. The students’ expectations for undergraduate education will certainly be reflective of society’s views but also very much influenced by class and cultural expectations.

The purposes of higher education and specifically undergraduate education have been varied and often contradicting. Usually, the expectations and responsibilities of higher education have

been determined by greater social circumstances, and this will undoubtedly continue in the future. We must consider how the events of the twenty-first century affect beliefs about and perceptions of undergraduate education? War, community aid, the millennial generation, and a struggling economy are a few examples of what may determine higher education's role today. While society and administrators attempt to define the purpose of higher education, it is important to remember that ultimately student perceptions will determine action and performance. Student perceptions of the purpose of higher education are important as we focus on improving undergraduate education in the twenty-first century. It is my hope that any reform efforts will account for student perceptions and encourage all to rethink and re-evaluate the undergraduate experience and degree (Kerr, 2001).

Student Perception: Why does it matter?

Too often, students are expected to walk into a classroom, digest material, and interpret the information as the teacher, and the greater society, have determined. While this most definitely ignores the students' subjectivity, this approach also asks the student to interpret information based on someone else's frame of reference (Freire, 1998, 2001). All individuals develop perceptions, and these ideas are never stagnant, but instead dependent upon biological and cultural experiences of the past, present, and future (Davis et al., 2000). John Locke's seventeenth century work with the idea of "tabula rasa", is commonly recognize in western philosophy. Locke recognized that the individual begins as merely a blank slate and it is only through reflection and sensation of experiences that the human being creates perceptions (Locke, 1690/1975). While many Americans today recognize this concept as valid, we do not always account for these ideals in our practices.

The process of perception begins with our senses (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). Through experience, we believe what we sense to be true. However, this truth is not proven or omniscient, instead it is unique to the individual having the experience (Bateson, 1979). As perceptions are created, they conversely begin to affect individual actions and/or decisions. Both the individual him/herself as well as others react to these actions and the individual creates a new perception of the current interaction. This ongoing cyclical process demonstrates both the inevitability of perception in the world, as well as the complexity of perception development (Davis et al., 2000).

As the twentieth century philosopher Merleau-Ponty reminds us, human reactions to objects and situations are not usually neutral. Instead, we associate a connotation- positive or negative- to the interaction. The individual then assigns a definition to the experience and classifies the information according to previously developed schemas of the mind (Bateson, 1979; Merleau-Ponty, 2004). Because a perception is only relevant to the present moment and past understandings, it is impossible to completely separate the object from the appearance and current sensation (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). However, if we recognize that all definitions are humanly constructed, temporal, and unique, we can begin to reach a clearer understanding of the individual's beliefs and frames of reference (Merleau-Ponty, 2004).

As Erving Goffman reminds us, the individual in the situation does not create his/her own definition. Instead they assess the situation based on a "framework" or "primary schemata of interpretation" (Goffman, 1974, p.21). The individual will then "locate, perceive, identify, and label" experiences that meet these criteria (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Thus a framework is developed that creates a perception for future occurrences.

Framework determines meaningfulness; however, "it also organizes involvement" (Goffman, 1974, p.345). As an individual implements a framework, he/she also brings a sense of how one will be involved and engaged in the moment. If we observe participants, we can begin to

understand the numerous “assumptions about ordinary activity that would otherwise remain implicit”(Goffman, 1974, p.566).

As noted by Goffman (1974) we must consider the “primary frameworks” of a group of individuals as they “constitute a central element of its culture” (p.27). By considering the connections and relations between and among the frameworks, we can develop “an image of a group’s framework of frameworks- its belief system, its ‘cosmology’” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). By understanding the frameworks of a social group, we can begin to not only understand, but predict and anticipate perceptions. While it is important to remain open-minded and nonjudgmental when researching perceptions, it can provide great insight into the reasons for actions and responses.

There is a great danger in not considering perception. Although it is only true, as Merleau-Ponty writes, for “every subject who is standing where I am”, it is a reality (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p.17). If not explored, perceptions will remain hidden and unrecognized, thus denying individual frames and spaces for learning. We should encourage individuals to explore their own perceptions, belief and reactions. Additionally, by communicating and dialoguing with others, human beings can begin to see and understand diverse views and appreciate difference. By interacting with others, Merleau-Ponty believes we can develop a plurality of consciousness (2004, p.17). Through exploration and analysis, the individual can not only authenticate their beliefs, but also learn about the relationship between conflicting and/or diverging views (Bateson, 1979). It is only when two individuals’ perceptions are recognized and merged that human beings can create the connection necessary for a relationship (Bateson, 1979).

When considering the impact of perception, it follows logically that not only will perception build a foundation for future interactions and decisions, but also it will certainly influence classroom interaction, pedagogical practices, and education as a whole. Not only should we

consider student perceptions, but we must recognize that educators' societal connotations and mores have produced our current beliefs and philosophies (Davis et al., 2000).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, John Dewey had already begun to consider the role perception plays in education and specifically in student-centered learning environments. As we know students' minds are developed through "stimulus from social agencies, and finding...nutrition in social supplies" (Dewey, 1900/1990, p.99). These perceptions become elements of the students' personality and behavior, eventually determining their desires and goals (Dewey, 1900/1990). If learning is presented as mere memorization of information and void of interaction with other students, the student may perceive this process as individualistic (Dewey, 1900/1990). Furthermore, the student will fashion his/her unique understanding of pedagogical practices based on language, social images, and other factors (Wittrock, 1986).

Many curriculums today privilege content and focus on teaching to the test. This leaves little time for exploring student needs and perceptions. Without connection to student desires, there is little motivation to learn and certainly no recognition of the possibility of growth. As Dewey wrote in his 1902 work, *Child and Curriculum*, "The only significant method is the method of the mind as it reaches out and assimilates" (Dewey, 1902/1990, p.187). The importance of recognition and validation of the individual's agency and belonging is critical. For many progressive educators, self-realization is more than a circumstantial affect of learning; it is in fact the primary goal.

As more mainstream educational research and practices began to focus on the student during the second half of the twentieth century, studies began to focus on student beliefs and perceptions. Several studies (i.e. Doyle, 1977, 1980; Winne & Marx, 1980; Wittrock, 1978) found that student perceptions determined responsiveness to instruction, the possibility of motivation to learn, and the capacity to comprehend material and follow methodology (Wittrock, 1986). Winne

& Marx's (1980) study clearly supported that idea that a student's ability to learn a new strategy or idea was dependent on their beliefs and perceptions of previously learned strategies. A later study by Winne and Marx (1983) furthered our understanding of student perceptions by noting a positive correlation between student perceptions of instruction and student success. As anticipated greater cultural beliefs, and specifically needs for completion, success, and other consumerist beliefs are affecting student perceptions and consequently performance.

While these studies of perception help us to understand its importance, we must also consider the types of perceptions studied in educational settings and how these perceptions may be affected by outside factors and how they may in turn affect future decisions and educational practices. A study of first graders by Anderson (1981) found that they believe that the "most important part of their class work is to get it done, and to get to the bottom of the page, or to get to the end book" (p.299). If Dewey's (1900, 1902/1990) belief that young students are naturally curious is true, then these perceptions indicate the role that culture and societal beliefs have on student perceptions.

University student perceptions can be found in Richard Light's (2001) work. After in-depth interviews with over 1600 students, Light (2001) was able to highlight many university student perceptions. He found that students believe that much of their learning happens outside of the classroom, that they preferred more structure in college courses, that exposure to diversity and interaction with various cultures really is beneficial, and that despite resistance, they really do value foreign language and good writing (Light, 2001). Astin (1993) captured over 24,000 students' perceptions of their overall education and experience from 1985 through 1991. Astin's (1993) study found that at least 75 % of college graduates are satisfied with their undergraduate education and 80 % of students were pleased with the quality of teaching at their respective institutions. While all of these perceptions are valuable and give us indications of how students

may react, and ultimately how they will perceive similar situations and respond to comparable questions and concerns, they do not provide substantial information to make well-informed decisions about educational successes or failures. It is probable that all of these perceptions were influenced by individual background, religious beliefs, socio-economic status, parental instruction, and many more social and cultural factors.

If we understand a student's perspective, why can we not assume that this perspective will be all that is necessary to create stronger pedagogical practices and better learning environments? The answer is both simple and complex. It is reasonable to assume that because a student has a perception of an object or situation, this perception will affect the outcome or eventual belief; however, if the student has not ever truly experienced the object or interaction, then his/her beliefs, expectations, and ideas may in fact change. Dewey's (1929,1938) philosophies remind us that beliefs are never fixed, but fluid and unpredictable as inquiry and experience lead to transformation. While many researchers and philosophers suggest that today's students may benefit both personally and academically from connection with others, deeper levels of inquiry and critical thought, and the development of community both in and out of the university classroom, we do not have studies that can accurately pull together the numerous factors influencing a student's perception of these possibilities. Conversely, we cannot assume that from a study of student perception alone that we can accurately construct a meaningful learning environment. We also cannot ignore the hidden messages that our students have learned through both educational and cultural structures/institutions. We can however attempt to hear the students' voices as so many critical pedagogues (i.e. Freire, 1998, 2001; Greene, 1988, etc.) have suggested and begin to consider how these perceptions may affect pedagogical theories and practices.

Society and Education: Are we producing individualistic students?

When we hear the phrase “the American Dream” we commonly see images of white picket fences, rewarding and successful careers, and enough income to provide our healthy families with a meaningful and comfortable life. Diverse expectations must also be taken into account. While some of us want merely to be more successful than our parents and provide our children with more than we once had, others seek control, power, and the ability to buy anything they may ever desire. Regardless of the specific connotation that “the American Dream” evokes, it is clear that autonomy and independence were necessary for achievement of this dream. Additionally the freedom that to pursue the American dream was achieved through “self-dependence and self-determination” (Greene, 1988, p.1). Individualism remains a critical factor in twenty-first century decisions, actions, and thought.

Individualism as a concept can be traced back to Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, published during the mid eighteenth century (Bellah et al., 2008) and is commonly referenced in Tocqueville’s (1835) *Democracy in America* (Bellah et al., 2008; Tocqueville, 1969). While diverse interpretations of individualism exist today, American culture and identity are still molded around the idea of individual pride and the inviolability of the individual him/herself. These views are not only desired by each, but instilled in others and desired for others (Bellah et al, 2008).

Tocqueville (1835) made several important contributions to our current understanding of individualism. First, he recognized the individualistic paths upon which many Americans were embarking. Secondly, he recognized individualism as a serene and careful emotion that encouraged human beings to segregate themselves from the greater mass of people, to surround themselves with friends and loved ones. However, perhaps most importantly to our discussion here, he recognized that while democracy did enable individuals to claim equal status and reduce

hierarchical systems that once ruled societies, the individualism they exhibited in pursuit of happiness was cause for only fleeting and careless interactions with others. In essence, meaningful relationships between individuals may be under attack in the race for democracy (Bellah et al., 2008; Tocqueville, 1965).

William H. Whyte (1956) explored the organizational self, which lies at the heart of the concept of organizational identity. Through his work it is evident that identity and self in the mid twentieth century were defined by not only the American Dream, but also conformity to group (corporate) goals and values (Whyte, 1956, p.44). Whyte called for man to put group goals and values above his own, and therefore, give up individuality. He had already realized “the conflict between individual and society has always involved dilemma” (Whyte, 1956, p.400).

By the time Bellah et al.’s (1986) publication of *Habits of the Heart* entered society, individualism had been defined by many and was being practiced- consciously and subconsciously- by most.. Bellah et al. (2008) recognized the American struggle between the desires for both self-reliance and social commitments. As Bellah et al., (2008) wrote, the American culture is responsible for the perceptions and understandings of achievement/success, as well as for the personalities demonstrated by Americans. The cultural views ultimately leave the “individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying isolation” (Bellah et al., 2008, p.6). The American ways of thinking and living have been incased by the understanding that in order to succeed one must leave the church or the home and set out to pursue success with very little meaningful connection to others. Yet, we are all held together by the value placed on autonomy.

Finally, we must recognize that it is the middle-class that provides society with the predominant values to be followed. Students of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century are seeking what is best and they almost all desire to increase their status in some way.

While they are motivated to become self-sufficient and successful, yet they are confused about how to reach this ambiguous goal. There is “no standard against which achievement is to be measured except the income and consumption levels of their neighbors” (Bellah et al., 2008, p.149).

Bellah et al. (2008) reminded us that we do need to belong and connect with others. Even our desire for self-reliance and individual pride is not possible without the surrounding contextual factors of society, culture, and institution. Furthermore, we are not “ends in ourselves, either as individuals or as a society” (Bellah et al., 2008, p.84). Instead, we must see ourselves as able to interact with and connect to others to truly discover who we are and what we desire in life. It is only through the other that we “discover who we are face to face and side by side with others in work, love and learning” (Bellah et al., 2008, p.84).

In 2008 many Americans still believe democracy to be a strong and beneficial form of management; as we know, this brings with it some appreciation for individualism (Bellah, 2008). While economically Americans are struggling once again and commodities are growing scarcer, we must reconsider the role of individualism in our society. While individualism seems to satisfy the economic concerns during prosperity, it creates even more competition and inequality during more strenuous times (Bellah et al., 2008). The American people have experienced several events during the last decade that have triggered the recognition of interdependence and may have put individualistic notions aside momentarily. Both the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the election of Barack Obama, the first African American President of the United States, have brought people around the country and the world together for brief periods to both hold one another in grief and connect with one another in celebration. Surely these are not the first, nor will they be the last, circumstances that bring individuals together, but the question remains- will we always need an event of tragedy or a joyous occasion to recognize our interdependence?

Individualism is not new to the American Society, nor is alienation- a frequent effect of extreme individualism. Alienation has been present since ancient times and can be seen in various societies and developments such as: Roman laws, English politics and Hegelian philosophy (Langman & Kalekin-Fishman, 2006). While the twentieth century brought war, it also brought periods of despair, growth, and affluence. While the 1950s brought some rebirth to the American economy, it also brought death to the importance of human connection. While teenagers began to question their identity and seek more independence, feelings of alienation often turned to violence. In addition to riots and protests, educational institutions became a common target for the alienation that so many individuals were feeling. While tragic school shootings such as Columbine High school, in 1999 and Virginia Tech in 2007, are commonly recognize examples of alienation leading to violence in schools, destruction of educational institutions and the killing of students and teachers has been seen throughout the twentieth century and shows no sign of slowing in the twenty-first century.

Although alienation occurs, it is not the only challenge that individualism presents. Today, I see my students struggling with the dialectics of self-dependence and social connection. They try diligently to present themselves as confident, independent, and removed from engagement with others. Our conversations often leave me baffled by their desire to succeed in college and in life with little to no meaningful interaction with classmates, teachers, and even friends. I, like my students, see messages of individualism throughout society. High school students find it fashionable to wear t-shirts with statements that blatantly reject other people or indicate that the student is better than other individuals. Perhaps the enculturation of the American Dream has lead us to recognize American as merely a label denoting citizenship, and to work toward what may be more appropriately titled- the Individual Dream. Perhaps in our society that so clearly

understands self-sufficiency, it is easier to assert independence than to recognize, strive for, and practice interdependence (Bellah et al., 2008).

If individualism is still prevalent in American society, it is only natural that we consider its role in educational institutions and classrooms around the country. The American push for individualism and democracy has understandably become part of our social institutions; many believe this to be extremely evident in the process of schooling. As many critical pedagogues and progressive educators have noted, school is a mirror of our societal structure. If at the undergraduate level, we are content with a mere reflection of consumerism and mere preparation for a corporate position, then perhaps no more effort should be put into enhancing our higher education system or preparing our collegiate students to excel. Focusing on the possibilities of education in the undergraduate classroom community may empower us all to stop being satisfied with the ideology that schooling is a reflection of society, and recognize that we must push avidly to transcend the mirror reflection. It is education- “a mode of intellectual development and growth” - that enables us to mold and alter our once mirror image, to create a more communal, democratic representation of what we would like society to look like (Giroux, 2001, p.239) .

The Mirror Reflection. After several years of teaching undergraduate students in mid-sized public university, I am no longer taken back by the increasing number of apathetic students I encounter daily. It has become apparent to me that many students do not feel as if they own their education, nor do they find reason to seek meaning in many of the courses they take to fulfill their degree. The notions of inquiry and critical thinking seem to be considered unnecessary and lavish in their pursuit of “tangible connections to a better grade and job opportunity” (Shapiro, 2006, p.14).

These students have learned the importance of covering their work, experienced the effects of isolation, and discovered ways to memorize the overload of information they are required to

“know”. Many have mastered standardized tests such as the SAT, but these tests are often only measuring regurgitated knowledge and do not take cultural and socioeconomic status in to account. According to Lerner (2005), the standardized tests “measures meaningless thought, thought that has been purposely separated from the actual emotional, situations and ethical and spiritual concerns that fill our real lives” (p.328). Overall, the educational system has become a mass producer of uninterested and unmotivated students who have mastered the system of the “crude, cramming factories” (Shapiro, 2006, p.6).

It comes as no surprise to me and many others that an undergraduate student’s expectations of collegiate education align all too well with what they have experienced in their primary and secondary schools; these experiences are undoubtedly an effect of the greater individualistic and competitive ideals. For many, the little education they have experienced has not been in a private or public educational institution, but instead through sports, religious organizations, and other experiences of privilege unrelated to school. Perhaps what continues to bewilder me is not the cause of the current university student’s expectations of, approach to, or struggle with a deeper, more meaningful learning process; but the lack of inquiry, application, and rigor of learning that is present in the undergraduate classroom. Students have entered the university system, with little understanding of what it means to be an educated student, or citizen, and rarely educated to seek justice, or respect other human beings or themselves. Consequently, faculty are facing new challenges and are forced to rethink pedagogical methodologies.

According to Giroux (2001) schooling is inevitable if educational institutions choose to serve the state instead of the students; yet we must first help students to serve themselves and others, instead of serving the expectations of a consumer society. Our students have been taught to be the best consumers possible. They expect to produce a large quantity, and in exchange for the production (regardless of quality) they hope to instantly be granted with high grades and other

means of external motivation. Conversely, what is often sacrificed as one becomes a master consumer is the ability to excel as a citizen. Obtaining a degree and entry-level corporate position helps to define the materialistic self, and not the social and/or democratic selves that we may see as being even more valuable in the pursuit of becoming a meaningful human being. However, as a citizen, is it not our responsibility to commit to others and seek equality and justice? How is this sense of connection understood and valued by our undergraduate students? Perhaps it is the undergraduate education that provides the opportunity for students to explore critical consciousness and embark on “the question and struggle for lives of meaning” (Shapiro, 2006, p.21).

As Giroux (2001) notes, we have come to develop an ideology that identifies the underlying causes and factors founding the culture of schooling. Knowledge based, pre-packed and standardized curriculums are frequently used in the primary and secondary systems, but they also appear in many general education courses in higher education. The curriculums are often void of application and evaluation, privileging the banking method and retracting “conception and critique from the pedagogical act” (Giroux, 2001, p.158). Apple (1982) reminds us that many pedagogical materials control both students and teachers by dehumanizing the learning process and eradicating any call for critical thinking skills. Recognizing that these and other structural and pedagogical considerations often resemble schooling more than education enables us to focus on building a space and justification for meaningful education. Greene (1984) reminds us that it is only when we enable students to “reach beyond themselves, to wonder, to imagine, to pose their own question” will students be inspired to really seek individual freedom (p.14). This individual freedom that only human beings possess must not only be recognized but acted upon. Just because ancestors from around the world have fought so hard for independence and freedom, does not mean that individuals automatically embrace the full potential of freedom. As Dewey

(1916) noted, the human being must recognize his/her own ability to pursue freedom in inquiry, mind, and intellect. This is a continuous struggle in Western culture.

The Undergraduate Reflection. As students enter the university system, schooling often follows them into the higher education classrooms. They are often asked to sit rigidly and attentively in rows of desks separated strategically- a system most have practiced for over a decade (Gray, 1998, p.161). Both students and teachers emulate Paulo Freire's (2001) banking concept of education as lecturing still serves as a dominant form of instruction delivery from the professor, and passive reception of material is still the most accepted role for students. Students expect and (if they are not given) they request, that all lecture notes be posted online or made easily accessible for them to download and memorize whenever is convenient for them. Student questions of inquiry are usually limited to simple clarification and/or reminders of what is due or what may show up on a test. They sit behind laptop screens, clicking keys and searching the internet anxiously waiting for a nonverbal signal from the professor that they may exit the classroom. The lack of interest is appears evident and critical thinking is minimal if present, and perhaps even more disturbing is the lack of connection made with others. Many enter and exit the classroom door (if they choose to attend) without speaking to or acknowledging other students.

Although higher education, both public and private institutions, seems to have far more freedom than other levels of schooling and should enable students to explore more critical thinking, higher education has not been exempt from criticism, nor has it been exempt from the ideals of consumerism and schooling. Bok (2006) challenges all American colleges to consider their weakness and raise their expectations for undergraduate performance. In his critique and call for reform, he recognizes the lack of true critical thinking and inquiry occurring in undergraduate classrooms. It is important to note however, that the majority of students graduating from higher education institutions in the United States are pleased with their education (Bok, 2006).

Considering the previously discussed role that consumerism and schooling play in the “education” of students, it is not surprising that most students are not seeking higher order thinking or analysis of material in collegiate courses. Instead, they are seeking jobs and a degree- two materialistic signifiers that they believe label them as successful human beings (Bok, 2006). Conversely, faculty are being pushed harder and harder to publish, recruit more students, and acquire grant money, leaving little time for pedagogical concerns or even the energy to seek more than minimal standards from students. Because many higher education institutions are privileging values of production over reproduction, and because schooling has become so culturally engrained in all of us, undergraduate classrooms are lacking students that desire education, commitment to improvement and enhancement, and dedication to reproductive characteristics that allow isolated individuals to become connected human beings (Martin, 2005). If we are committed to educating our students and increasing critical inquiry, we must seek methods community and connection to provide not only a safe place for development and growth, but also a source of experiences and connections from which to draw.

Although most higher education faculty would agree that critical thinking is a primary skill that all undergraduate students should be utilizing and enhancing, it is not uncommon for many faculty to do little to motivate students to think critically or to provide an environment for critical thinking (Bok, 2006). Certainly, “passive lecturing and drill can help students memorize rules and concepts”, but faculty will need to promote experiential learning, challenge students to apply material, and evoke a curiosity for learning and growth, before critical thinking can become a foundation of the classroom experience (Bok, 2006, p.116). Unfortunately, administrators and teachers often assume that students “are capable of only passive attention. They are therefore either unwilling to pose or are incapable of posing questions that reach beyond the self-evident”

(Greene, 1981, p.389). These expectations further encourage students to perceive learning as a passive “banking” process (Freire, 2001).

While some undergraduate professors are beginning to encourage active learning and asking students to answer questions about material, students are rarely expected to employ “higher-order reasoning” (Book, 2006, p.120). It is possible that students themselves are even fearful that “no one really cares whether they learn or develop intellectually” (hooks, 1994, p.203). Many students feel as if their voice does not count. They are in the practice of “assuming that professors see them as having nothing of value to say, no valuable contribution to make to a dialectical exchange of ideas” (hooks, 1994, p.149). We must therefore find ways to engage students in the process of higher education. While students should be encouraged to play an integral role in raising expectations and reaching higher levels thinking, educators must express belief in student aptitude and promise.

Focusing on education, and not schooling, will challenge educators and students alike to continuously search for meaning in life and society, and consequently encourage “caring, cooperation, and love” (Lerner, 2005, p.339). Education is often thought to require connections, communication, and collaboration with others. As Giroux (2001) explains “it deals with needs and issues that arise from the groups involved, while simultaneously drawing upon theoretical constructs that allow the participants to situate such issues within a wider historical, social, and economic context” (p.239). Information is merely invented and useless unless it is applied to human experience, enabling deeper understanding and greater meanings and/or purposes (Shapiro, S., personal communication, 6-29-05). This need for connection and application in learning points to the idea that relationships, communication, and reproductive process should be emphasized in the higher education classrooms. As Rorty (1999) stated, “the point of non-vocational higher education is...to help students realize that they can reshape themselves-that

they can rework the self-image that makes them competent citizens, into a new self-image, one that they themselves have helped to create” (p.118). If reinvention is the objective of higher education, reproductive characteristics are a must and community is a necessary vehicle for introducing and emphasizing reproductive ideals and helping students discover themselves. A classroom community brings opportunity for relational and contextual ways of learning and knowing (Gray, 1998). Yet, as discussed earlier, competing views of higher education have surely influenced and defined perceptions and expectations. The bigger question here may be: By which views have students been most influenced?

The concept of connection in higher education brings numerous possibilities, but we cannot forget the needs of our students. Due to unjust inequalities, inappropriate care, lack of recognition, and the absence of agency and/or belonging, many students reject or are apprehensive of connecting with others (Greene, 1991; hook, 1994). Joining together and creating a community requires joining together for a common purpose or good (Greene, 1991). Separation is so engrained in our culture. Segregation, isolation, and division are eminent elements of students’ perspectives. Ironically, our world is “whole, but varied, integrated, and interconnected and interdependent” (Gray, 1998, p.164). Students in higher education will need proper training and positive connecting experiences to overcome the uncertainties they hold and recognize the inevitable connections within their worlds. Should we be teaching students to defy the culture of separation and competition and to practice “communal healing and improvement” (Shapiro, 2006, p.43)? Understandably, they would need encouragement and trust from professors, to venture into and discover this “new” method of learning and growth. It would require students, faculty, and administrators alike to step out of their comfort zones in the “culture of separated desks” that is so prevalent in many other levels of education (Gray, 1998, p.161). It would necessitate a move away from individualism and towards “connections of a loving

community, mutual support, and equal regard for one another” (Shapiro, 2006, p.128). Finally, effective implementation of these concepts would require that educators work diligently to understand student perceptions, desires, and expectations as they are both influenced by past and present experiences and beliefs, as well determining the success and impact of current pedagogical techniques.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

My goals and research questions have evolved from: my personal experiences as a teacher and a student; my observation of other students and the struggles of many teachers; and research in various areas of transformative education. In this study, I plan to explore and address questions such as: What is the college student's perception of the purpose of undergraduate education? What is the college student's perception of community and its possibility in the classroom? ; Why is the students' concept of community critical for understanding and enhancing undergraduate pedagogical practices?; How can historical, philosophical and critical perspectives enhance our understanding of student perceptions and conversely, how can current student perceptions add to our beliefs and ideals about classroom community and the undergraduate experience? ; Is the assumption that learning and belongingness are interdependent a perception that is also held by undergraduate students in the twenty-first century? ; Is it possible for diverse students with differing expectations and perceptions to find a sense of community in socially "masculine" undergraduate classroom? ; How might student perceptions of classroom community impact (positively and negatively) the potential for critical thinking, connection, and growth? ; Is the desire for community really a greater social need that is being mirrored by our educational system? ; and finally, How might these findings help educators to bridge any existing educational gaps between the millennial students and our current university educational system?

Sites of Research

I chose to focus on only two university settings making this a collective case study. Because these students represent two different types of universities in the same region, the case is also instrumental as the results help us to better understand the phenomenon of student perceptions (Stake, 1998).

The first (University A) is a public, research intensive, student-centered university located in the southeastern region of the United States. The faculty to student ratio is 17:1 and about 26 % of the students are classified as minority. Approximately 13,000 undergraduate students (31 % male and 69 % female) attend the school. Students at this site represent 49 states and 70 countries.

The second (University B) research site I chose is also located in the southeastern part of the United States; however, it is a private university often recognized as a school of engagement and community. Approximately 5,000 undergraduates attend this site (41 % males and 59 % female) and the ratio of faculty to students is 14:1. About 10 % of the students are classified as minority. Students at this site represent 46 states and 45 nations.

I chose to research these two sites because of the dedication to quality student centered education that both universities promote, the close proximity of the two schools, and my ability to gain access to faculty and students of these universities. Both of these universities were established in the late nineteenth century and today the majority of their students come from the state in which the schools are located.

My decision to focus on only two research sites allowed me to provide a more in-depth description and analysis of the students/faculty interviewed and surveyed. It also allowed me to compare and contrast diverse perspectives between and within the universities. Erickson (1986) recognizes that qualitative research provides the opportunity to inform the general understanding

by studying particular situations. By studying two research sites, I was able to focus on “situation-specific conditions” and then use this knowledge to gain skills, images, and models that can be applied to other university settings (Merriam, 2002, p.28).

Furthermore, thorough descriptions of the setting, data, methods of collection, and means of data analysis, it will allow others to determine how their personal contexts may be similar to or different from the universities studied (Merriam, 2002). Because the sites I chose represent a mid-sized public university and a smaller private university, the study will most likely be transferable for many, but not all. To ensure greater transferability, I will need to develop follow-up studies that maximize variation of the types and number of universities sampled.

Sample and Sample Selection

The participants in my study were undergraduate students at public and private universities. All university students were considered potential interviewees or participants regardless of race, ethnicity, age, experience, achievements, extra-curricular activities, or major/interests. The participants were at least 18 years of age, and currently attending one of the selected schools. I surveyed 323 students between the two universities which is approximately 1.8 % of the total number of undergraduate students attending these universities. By classification, I was able to survey 12 seniors, 31 juniors, 137 sophomores, and 143 freshmen. I surveyed 220 students from University A (1.7 %) and 103 students from University B (2 %). I also interviewed a total of 5 faculty/staff representatives between University A and B.

Interviewees and classroom sites were identified through mixed purposive sampling. Participants and classrooms were chosen through snowballing and accessibility (Creswell, 2005; Patton, 1990). This study required that I focus on perceptions of students with various levels of exposure to community in the classroom and to the college experience, therefore, students were

surveyed regardless of student classification (level) and several general education classes were targeted to include various majors and levels of experience. I was able to survey students whom have used and appreciate classroom community as well as those who do not favor community or have not been exposed to this form of learning. This allowed me to yield more transferable conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 1990).

Due to student schedules and willingness to participate, I was fairly limited by sampling possibilities. Each volunteer student was interviewed either via email or face-to-face interaction. Fortunately, I was able to obtain students from both universities and I feel that they most likely represent the typical case (Patton, 1990). However, it is important to consider that students were not receiving any monetary or academic credit compensation for this experience. Therefore, it may be important to consider that the volunteer students most likely felt comfortable and connected to me or the experience, and/or found some value in this experience. This could potentially eliminate students whom did not value community or opportunities for personal/professional growth.

The faculty interviewees were fairly homogeneous (Patton, 1990). Faculty/staff interviewees were identified because of their commitment to student development and growth and/or their overt or more hidden appreciation for community and human connection. These individuals would be likely to focus on student engagement and the development of human capital in their classrooms as a means of enhancing student learning.

Methods of Data Collection

As Valerie Janesick (1998) discusses in “The Dance of Qualitative Research Design”, my focus for this was to capture the students’ story of the undergraduate experience and classroom community through perception; I was sure not to become entangled by methodolatry. I was

however focused on clearly articulating Patton's (1990) criteria for credible qualitative study: techniques and methods used to ensure integrity and accurate findings, experience of the researcher, and assumptions that may impact the study.

Because I am primarily interested in exploring the meaning and perceptions of classroom community at the undergraduate level, I chose to utilize phenomenology as my research tradition. This methodology allows me to utilize in-depth interviews and open ended surveys (Schram, 2006, p.99). Phenomenology complements the constructivist paradigm that I used throughout the study. Because I wanted to focus primarily on the particular phenomena of student perceptions as they apply to college and the development of classroom community, a fairly unstructured approach was utilized. Gaining access to student perceptions required that I use "individually tailored methods" (Maxwell, 2005, p.80). Overall, the sample chosen and analysis used, allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the typical college student's perception; while offering faculty perspectives to provide for comparison and contextual foundation.

During the study, I focused on language, associations, and underlying assumptions surrounding the student's and/or educator's experience, which allowed me to explore the participant's individual reality (Schram, 2006). Through dialogue and description I was able to gain a better understanding of the participant's experience with and perceptions of community and their beliefs about its effects on individuals (Creswell, 1996). I was able to uncover "stock of knowledge" and "typifications" that may be present when a student is exposed to an undergraduate classroom community (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998, p.139; Schutz, 1970). Overall, I focused on the perception of undergraduate education to gain a greater understanding of how these beliefs have been affected by and may potentially affect social and educational beliefs and practices. All of this data was collected through personal experience, individual interviews, surveys, and an in-depth analysis of literature and philosophy.

Classroom surveys encouraged students to reflect and record thoughts about community and its role in their current university. Only open-ended questions were used to capture more authentic feelings and perspectives. The surveys were considered anonymous as the students were only asked to note their academic classification (i.e. senior, junior, sophomore, or freshman).

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) and classroom survey (see Appendix B) followed the formatting suggestions of Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte (1999) to include: an explanation of the interview/survey to the participant; written or oral consent; and more general questions that merge into more specific prompts. During the interview, I used introducing questions, direct questions, follow-up questions, probing questions and silence as a means of encouraging the interviewee to open up and explore whatever is was most important (Kvale, 1996). I probed for further clarification and assumed a critical eye when needed (Kvale, 1996). I made an effort to create a natural, yet focused conversation through the structure of the questions (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). All interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the researcher.

In approaching data collection methods, I adopted a structured approach, yet I remained aware of potential opportunities for revision (Maxwell, 2005). Originally I had hoped to focus more on student interviews; however, due to limited accessibility to students for an extended amount of time, I obtained more classroom surveys and fewer face-to-face interviews than planned. To supplement the five face-to-face student interviews, I obtained four extensive email surveys from different students. For clarity and distinction, we will refer to these as email interviews as the questions were similar to those used with the face-to-face interviews (see Appendix A). As Maxwell (2005) suggests, I analyzed and evaluated my protocol designs. Throughout the data collection process, I was able to use theoretical understandings to illuminate key foci within my research; however, I was also able to consider possible perceptions, meanings, and/or directions that I did not originally anticipate.

Methods of Data Analysis

To analyze the surveys, I used Spradley's (1980) emergent categories and included domain analysis, taxonomic analysis and componential analysis. This analysis method provided a more authentic understanding of the student's /educator's meanings and perceptions. The emerging classifications encouraged me to challenge my previous understandings of community in general, but also the perceived benefits and challenges to classroom communities. I used Spradley's (1980) general cultural domains as a model for understanding and exploring the semantic relationships within my data. The surveys provided natural domains as I considered responses under each question separately. As I analyzed the data, I taxonomically classify words, comments, and situations under each of the domains. I looked for similarities within the data and divide these similar findings into subcategories (Spradley, 1980). Finally, I classified the various meanings within contexts to complete the componential analysis (Spradley, 1980). I then rechecked all residual data to be sure I performed a rigorous analysis.

The surveys in this study were used to determined frequency counts, and a broader understanding of student perceptions at both universities studied. To maintain the integrity of student perceptions, I coded each question separately. Although some common concepts were discussed through the survey, it was important to see how the student interpreted the question and how he/she then addressed each individual idea. The results from University A and University B were also compared to consider possible perception differences between students at larger public and smaller private universities. In addition, I compared the results from each student level (classification) to consider any differences in perception that may occur as students move through the higher education system. Major distinctions between Universities and classifications were noted in the results. The most frequently mentioned responses as well as those that provided a unique or important insight, were reported and discussed.

Both the student and faculty interviews in this study were used to further explore and consider the ideas and perceptions discovered through the student surveys. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed through bracketing (Denzin, 1989) This allowed me to focus on the stories and experiences relating to the themes and findings of the surveys and interpret these ideas. Other relevant findings were recognized and interpreted as well. Finally these ideas were analyzed to create structure and potential explanations for the phenomenon of student perceptions. While the student interview results are not directly connected to the surveys, nor are the 9 student interviewees expected to serve as definitive representatives of the student surveys, the interviews do provide further possible explanations of student perceptions. The faculty interviews were only used in the analysis as a means of providing ideas and beliefs that students may encounter if classroom communities are implemented in the higher education curriculum. Only the student surveys were used to obtain frequency counts, while the interviews were used primarily as additional support and to analyze the findings. To establish dependability, I provided examples of my analysis techniques (see Appendix C) and I explained how I used the findings to develop conclusive ideas and themes.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

During this research study, I was particularly aware of the potential threats to the validity of my conclusions as I am a passionate educator working in the university setting. I chose to explicitly recognize my subjectivity in this study and illuminate my goodwill and ethical intentions during this process. It is important to recognize that my personal experiences with students in the university have caused me to believe that most students are not engaged in their education, nor are many truly learning as much as they can as they move through the educational system. My familiarity with experiential learning, community, and critical thinking, both in and

out of the classroom, give me confidence that classroom community can be an effective and necessary means of helping students to engage in learning to bridge the ever-growing disconnect between the concepts of school, learning, and human connection. I also believe that many university educators care about their students' learning and would like to continuously improve the ways they teach and the ways students learn. I believe that students and faculty deserve high standards and more meaningful educational experiences (Merriam, 2002).

As a researcher, I feel it is only ethical to address my perceptions of students and their experiences at both of the universities. I watch students both wander aimlessly and seek intently on a daily basis at University A. I often use the word "real" to describe the students. I believe they struggle with academic concepts and the concept of being academic. They courageously battle and crumble under the pressure of outside work and family. Many are first generation college students and both proud of and pressured by this circumstance. I find them to sometimes be energetic activists; however, usually they are busy, goal-oriented students, sons and daughters, parents, and employees. They are clever; they understand the need for monetary support; and they are compassionate. School is usually a second or third priority for many, but success is crucial.

After spending time at University B and consulting with Faculty Interviewee E, I believe students at University B generally come from higher income backgrounds and are in many ways privileged and advantaged. The majority of the students are accustomed to performing well and accustomed to being at the top of their class during secondary education. These students recognize that they live in a "bubble" and they are primarily concerned with what occurs in their community; they do not work outside of school; and academics are priority. Time to study is fairly plentiful. In the words of Faculty Interviewee E, the students "have more luxury to be able to push harder on complicated problems...work longer." They are caring, friendly, easy-going students seeking success now and for the future.

Because of my bias towards the research topic and the students themselves, I actively sought discrepant evidence that challenges my beliefs (Merriam, 2002). It was necessary that I continue to step back and consider the findings and analyses from various perspectives. I recognized that although I have been a part of and studied diversity in numerous contexts, it was still difficult for me to analyze the data from a less privileged paradigm. Much of the research on and perceptions of community and its importance is coming from a privileged, white perspective; therefore, I remained aware of the preconceptions and feelings towards community based on the derivation. Because of my biases and privilege I chose to use the students' words as frequently as possible to maintain integrity and authenticity of meaning. I also chose to recognize my personal thoughts whenever possible. Overall, I continuously evaluated my personal subjectivity and sought trustworthy and valid conclusions.

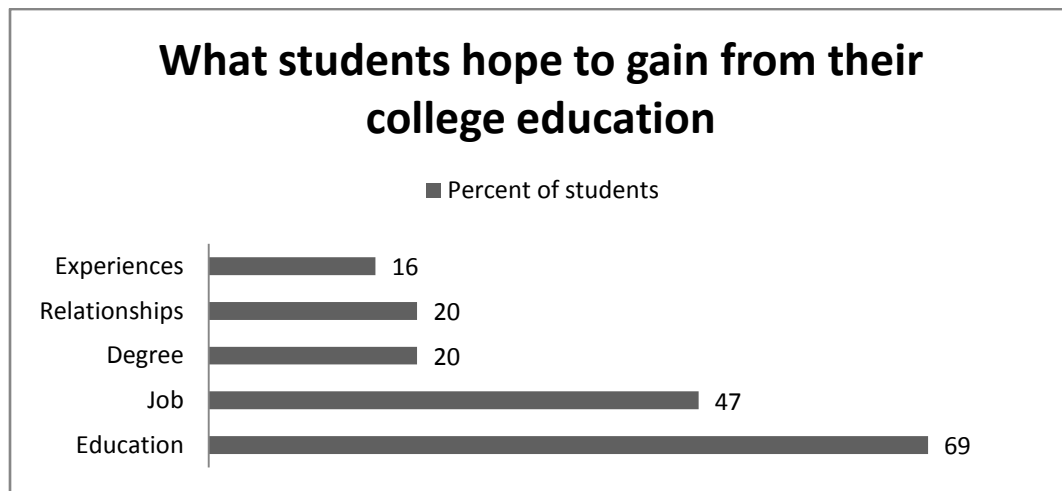
CHAPTER V

RESULTS

As noted in Chapter IV, 323 students were surveyed and 9 students were interviewed. The surveys and interviews yielded both predictable and intriguing findings. To maintain the integrity of the students' perceptions, each of the original survey questions are used to introduce the findings. The frequencies, insights, and themes that evolved from the surveys are addressed in detail, while the student interviews are used to support and explain various concepts.

College Education Hopes

Fig. 2- Question #1: Hopes for College Education



Historically, the purpose of a college education has been debated and reconfigured. Furthermore, it is usually dependent upon and parallel with the larger social expectations of the era. Our current times offer very similar circumstances. If you were to ask a student in the

university today, what he/she hopes to gain from his/her college education, the results would vary greatly. While some students may respond with a well-developed sentence that speaks to multiple purposes, another may simply see his/her attendance as more than enough. A less commonly recognized theme that evolved from this question was the idea that students may gain “a valuable life experience including academic growth so that all my intellectual curiosities can be satisfied and challenged [and] social networking (making lots of friends) and hopefully something (undefined right now) that will make me feel like this was an invaluable experience/opportunity.” Similarly, a few students hope to become “a more developed, polished person”, while others merely want “the right to say I went.” Regardless of the answer, educators need to understand the current college student’s perception of why he/she is attending college (See Figure 2).

After completing and coding the surveys, I was pleasantly surprised that 69% of students do desire to gain education, knowledge, skills, or ideas while pursuing their college education. Also, as students progress in their studies, they seem to be more likely to desire education, until they reach their senior year. While only 60% of Freshmen recognized education/learning as a goal/hope for their college experience, 76% of Sophomores and 83% of Juniors noted this desire. Surprisingly only 66% of the seniors referenced education or learning in their responses. It is also important to recognize that students at University B were more likely to desire education than students at University A.

Of the students hoping to gain education, approximately 31 % (21% of students total) desired knowledge specific to their career; they seemed to want both a “deeper more complex knowledge in [the] career field”, and/or a tool such as “practical application of required skills in my field.” The most frequently listed reason for this career related knowledge was to be successful in the field, major, or profession. Students also mentioned other types of education they hoped to gain. Some of the most frequently mentioned were: well-rounded/broad based, life lessons/skills,

people skills, and communication skills. Students also demonstrated a hope to gain “skills -not just from textbooks, but from real life”. Thirty-eight percent of students desiring education (8% of total), specifically want “an understanding of the world and the workings in it” or more understanding of the “real world.” While most students desire education/skills to gain a job, others see these ideas as helping them to become successful, productive, or to excel in the future. Others mentioned surviving in the real world, helping others, and gaining entrance into graduate school. While some students “expect to be given” this knowledge, others seek the ability “to teach myself”. Although rare, a few students noted that they would like to remain a “student of life” and “be curious even when college is over.” Some even hope to gain “a sophisticated academic perspective on life and the humanities/ natural sciences.”

At least 47% of the students surveyed specifically mentioned obtaining or working toward a job or career as a result of their college education. While approximately 22% of students seemed to see the job, or preparation for the job, as the primary goal of college education, other students indicated the desire for education, experience, or a degree that would eventually lead to a job. Some students specified the type of job, as this freshman did, by stating that he/she desired, “a good job, like CIA or FBI.” Students classified their desired jobs as fulfilling, enjoyable, well-paying, and within their chosen career. The most frequently mentioned type of job was labeled as “good” “successful” or “better.”

As one freshman noted, he/she desired “something that will help me get a good job and understand global ideas.” As mentioned earlier, knowledge toward a career was desired. Another freshman wrote that he/she hopes to “gain knowledge not necessarily to make a difference but to be successful in my career.” One junior desires, “The skills and anything else necessary to obtain a job after college,” while similarly another junior hopes to “Learn enough to get a job and be prepared to go into the real world.” These types of responses provide an indication that while the

student does primarily want a job/career, there may be other objectives as well. Although there was not a great differentiation between student classifications, it is important to note that while only 24% of University A students cited jobs and/or careers as a reason for his/her college education, 64% of University B students cited jobs and/or careers. As a faculty member at University A found this to be a very surprising recognition. On a daily basis, I encounter students whom speak only of finding jobs and whom often believe the material they are learning in the classroom is unnecessary if it is not moving toward a future career.

While many students did believe that “education is the main reason” for attending college, several also recognized that the “journey towards reaching that goal (completing your degree) is the most rewarding.” Approximately 20% of students indicated that the primary goal of college was to graduate or earn a degree; the beliefs about how this degree will affect them are diverse. While one student hopes “to join the elite of college graduates,” others plan to further their career, gain a better paying or good paying job, or just a “life of relaxation and enjoyment.” It is important to recognize that again, the most frequently noted reason for receiving a degree is to get a job.

The percentage of students from University B expressing that the degree was the primary goal, was approximately twice that of students from University A. Again, I found this to be surprising. However, many of the students I work with at University A are first generation college students; from my experience, it is clear that just receiving a college degree is perceived as a challenging, yet an unwavering goal. Furthermore, the majority of students at University A are already working and therefore, finding a job may not be an immediate concern. I imagine that some students at both universities would agree with the freshman student that stated, “I honestly don’t feel as though college is for me, but I know It’s impossible to have a successful career or life without having been to college these days.” Perhaps the college experience, and/or the goals

for this experience, are not perceived as a choice, but another requirement. If viewed through this framework, the hopes and goals for college would likely also be affected.

Another 20% of students expressed a desire to gain relationships and connections from their college education. This includes meeting new and diverse people, developing “meaningful relationships” and friends that they “can keep for a lifetime.” As described by Student Interviewee 1, some students feel that their role is to “really get to know people and ...just find those connections.” Student Interviewee 8 reminds us of the potential that professors and/or advisors possess to facilitate a connection between students and potential professional mentors. Interviewee 8 stated, “he [professor/advisor] can just call somebody up” and arrange an interview for a student and this “is so pivotal in our success.”

As indicated in the quote, some students seemed to allude to an experience of some sort, yet only 16% of the students surveyed specifically referenced the term “experience.” The most commonly mentioned experiences were those pertaining to the overall college experience and the opportunity to engage in a “meaningful and memorable four years.” Students also expressed hope for experiences related to their desired career/job, life, and/or preparation for the outside world.

While not mentioned as frequently as previous ideas, students did demonstrate a hope to use their college education for other means such as: obtaining entrance into graduate school, engaging in all opportunities possible, earning good grades, achieving dreams/goals, improving themselves in some way, gaining a greater understanding of self, becoming independent, and determining, “what I want to do with my life.” Some students specifically hope to gain a competitive edge over other students as they emphasized wanting a “readiness to compete in the financial world,” a desire to “work my way to the top, at the University and in my future career” and a way to “separate myself from others.” Although the percentage of students specifically mentioning money as something they would like to gain from their college education was small, a

few did denote the importance of money and/or financial success. One freshman student at University A stated that he/she merely wanted “a ticket to the money- making world” while a sophomore student from the same university believes that his/her her college education is “a way to not be homeless later on in life.” However, the idea that a future career must be “good” or “well-paying” was common.

The surveys produced numerous perceptions and ideas, and it seemed that a key concept for many students was the idea of “success.” While approximately 20% of students specifically used the term “success”, many others seemed to suggest this desire as well. As Student Interviewee 1 stated, it “just really seems like the standard of life now is you have to make it to college or else you’re not going to get anywhere...I felt that if I didn’t go to college I wouldn’t be successful.”

Furthermore, as one freshman stated, “I view college as my stepping stone and foundation to my adult life.” This type of transitional statement was also evident in several of the student interviews. As noted by Student Interviewee 6, college is “the bridge between childhood schooling and the real world; a combined experience of education and living independently -but still with some training wheels on.”

One student summarized his/her desires by saying he/she wanted, “The story book outcome” and explained this as making sure “what I want to do is really what I want to do and be prepared to be successful.” Finally, I found one senior’s response to be extremely intuitive as he/she stated, “I think that nowadays a lot of us feel expected to attend college and don’t necessarily... understand how lucky we are to be able to attend it.” This may indicate a recognition that many students take this experience for granted, but it also alludes to the expectation without appreciation.

After reflecting upon these responses, it is evident that while some students do desire knowledge and education, many desire these ideas as a means to another end: life transition, job

preparation, degree completion, and/or future success. It is possible that students at University B perceive degree completion and job preparation as more of an integral element of their college education than students at University A. Perhaps most interesting is the fairly large number of students who did specifically mention the desire for connections and relationships, as well as the possible trend with the desire for education. As mentioned previously, the interest in learning and education seems to increase for students between their freshman and junior year; however their interest may decrease again during their senior year. This may be due to the perception of impending completion and/or less interest in pursuing knowledge or growth in their current place in life. As we will explore later, relationships and connection may refer more to the desire for comfort and support.

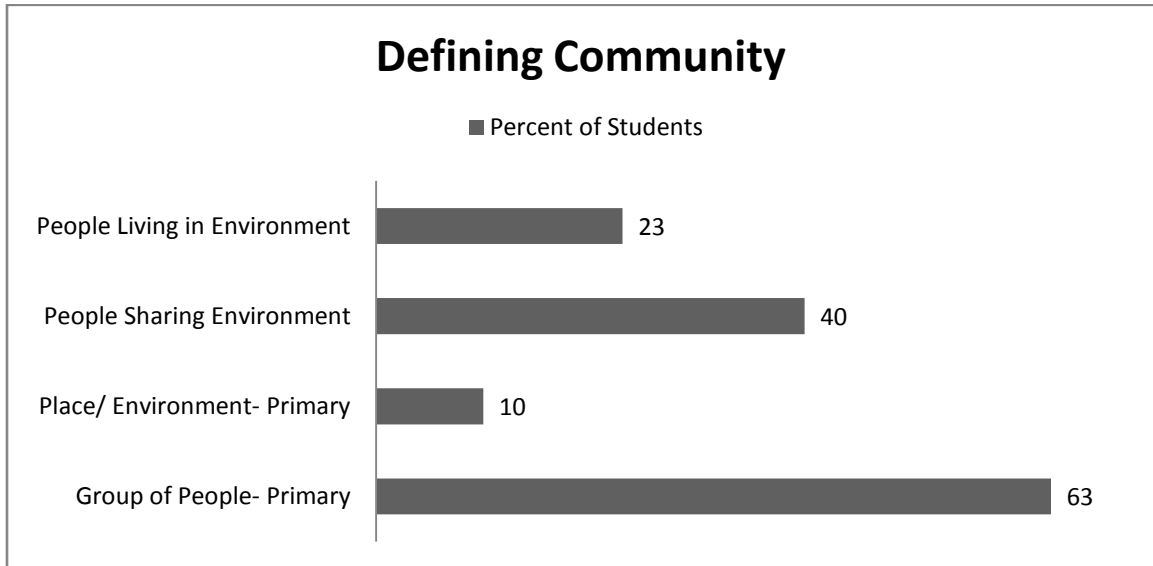
Overall, students seem to see college as an avenue to success. Most students want to gain a job from college, and secondly many students want to gain knowledge/education that is either specific to their career, will help them be successful, or will give them an understanding of the world. Finally, some students want to simply earn the degree, while others specifically want relationships and connections, and still others desire “experiences.” Most of the students surveyed and interviewed were very future oriented and seemed to see college as a transitional place/stage. Only a few seemed to really be focused on gaining ideas, experiences, etc. that were relevant in the present. Students commonly referenced the college experience as a means to an end; the end is some form of success.

Defining Community

Most students have heard and commonly use the word “community.” For this reason, I found it particularly important to consider the students’ current connotative/denotative definitions of

community. The results were not surprising, but provided a strong foundation for understanding what students have experienced and what they may expect in the future (See Figure 3).

Fig. 3-Question #2- Definitions of Community



Perhaps the most common definition of community is that of a “group of people” as approximately 63% of students used this or a very similar phrase in their responses. An additional 4% of students recognized that it consisted primarily of people, but they made no statement regarding group or connection. All nine of the student interviewees believe community is primarily comprised of people. Conversely, approximately 10% of students seem to believe that the primary definition of community is a place or environment. However approximately 40% of students believe that the body of people may share a geographic location or environment. Of those recognizing that a community is people possibly sharing a location or area, 62% (23% of total) believe these people may live in this environment together. These people may or may not share any other commonalities or connections. As one freshman stated, community is “People

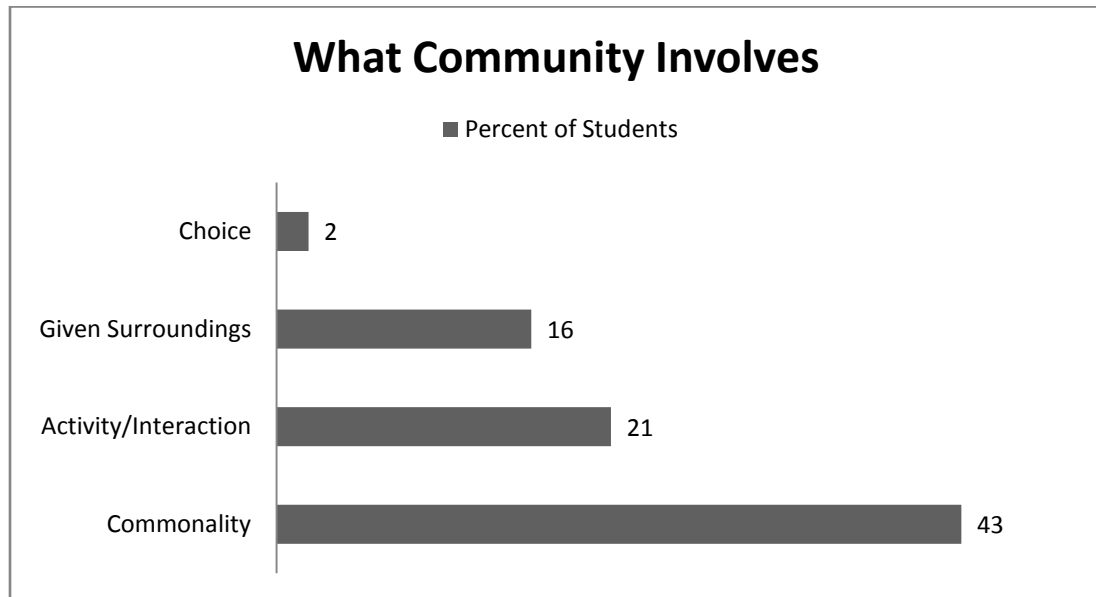
who live and work together- not exactly living and working in the area for the same reason.” An additional 4% of students specifically noted that the community “includes people, as well as locations, organizations, programs, etc.” All classifications of students showed fairly consistent frequencies with these categories and University A and University B showed fairly consistent frequencies as well.

In describing what the community contained, the most frequently mentioned concept was a shared or common idea of some sort. As explained by Student Interviewee 8, “In high school you’re friends with the people that are cool, or that you think fit your personality and your look...but when you get to college its like-mindedness...there’s a connection, there’s something deeper there.” Approximately 24% of students believe the people in the community may share a common goal and/or interest, while 7% recognize the people as having shared beliefs, emotions, or values. Finally, at least 12% of students perceive communities as having some other connection such as shared characteristics, bonds, connections. A few students suggested that people might share social needs, concerns, and resources (See Figure 4).

This need for commonality was further confirmed by eight of the nine student interviewees. Student Interviewee 9 believes there are two different types of communities;

You have communities of necessity where you all work together because you’re gaining something and then there are sort of communities where you feel connection on a more emotional or maybe less concrete level- you’re all there because you’re interested in the same thing or like something.

Fig. 4-Question #2: Elements of Community



Student Interviewee 8 also recognized a difference in the communities he/she had participated in. He/she stated,

I've been a part of the learning community and then there was the dance team and I guess the whole guild of athletes...that community is completely different because...with the learning communities ...everybody's similar in their personalities...we all want to do communications and we know what we want; with athletes...you still have that common bond where...you're stuck at the gym twice a week, your forced to get up early, you're forced to go to practices and you get that common bond.

However, it is important to consider that even if there are different types of community, within both of these examples, there is always a commonality of some sort.

Approximately 21% of students believe community members are involved in activities together or suggested that they interact together in some general way. Additionally, I found the lack of reference to choice to be intriguing. While 16% of students responded that community involved people around them, where they were, or that they interact with daily, it was still unclear

as to whether they had chosen the community or not. Less than 2% of students made any indication that you should or do have the opportunity to choose your community or the people that surround you. This may indicate that choice is not important in a community or it may be that choice is not perceived as part of community development or the denotation/connotation of the word.

Some of the most frequently (yet still rarely) mentioned elements of communities include but are not limited to: support; togetherness and/or belongingness; mutual concern with well-being and success, care, or protection of all; and working together to benefit either the group or the surrounding environment/others; feelings of comfort, safety, and/or home and family; and close-knit relationships. Although important to note, each of the above mentioned elements were only recognized by approximately 3%- 4% of students. As stated by Student Interviewee 3,

Going through some hard events during my high school years from our coach's son dying, to having my family fall completely apart, community is what you have to lean on during hard times. A community doesn't have to be one hundred people it could just be 5, but you're there for each other, and support each other in the face of adversity and good times.

Some students even spoke to the bigger picture of community development. As Student Interviewee 5 stated,

The world would be impossible without some form of unity amongst people and organizations. This unity develops personal virtue ethics and encourages a moral compass of right from wrong. Without community, there would be no such thing as 'social norms/acceptance' or even morality.

Perhaps most surprising are the few references to community requirements and/or elements that many educators have come to hope may result from community which will be further discussed in Chapter VI. Only 2% of the students surveyed referenced the sharing of new ideas, learning, or growth. As an educator hoping to promote classroom community I must admit that I

had hoped that more students would recognize this sharing of knowledge as a part of community. In defining community, one sophomore at University B responded with the statement: “Besides the school community, the town community should also further enhance your education.” Although a few students recognized that community could be a school or part of a school, this type of response was rare. Additionally, only 2% of students believe people in communities influence one another. Without influence, learning and growth may be difficult for both teachers and students. As Student Interviewee 6 believes, “Community is defined by a group’s ability to grow as a whole: spiritually, physically, mentally, whatever.”

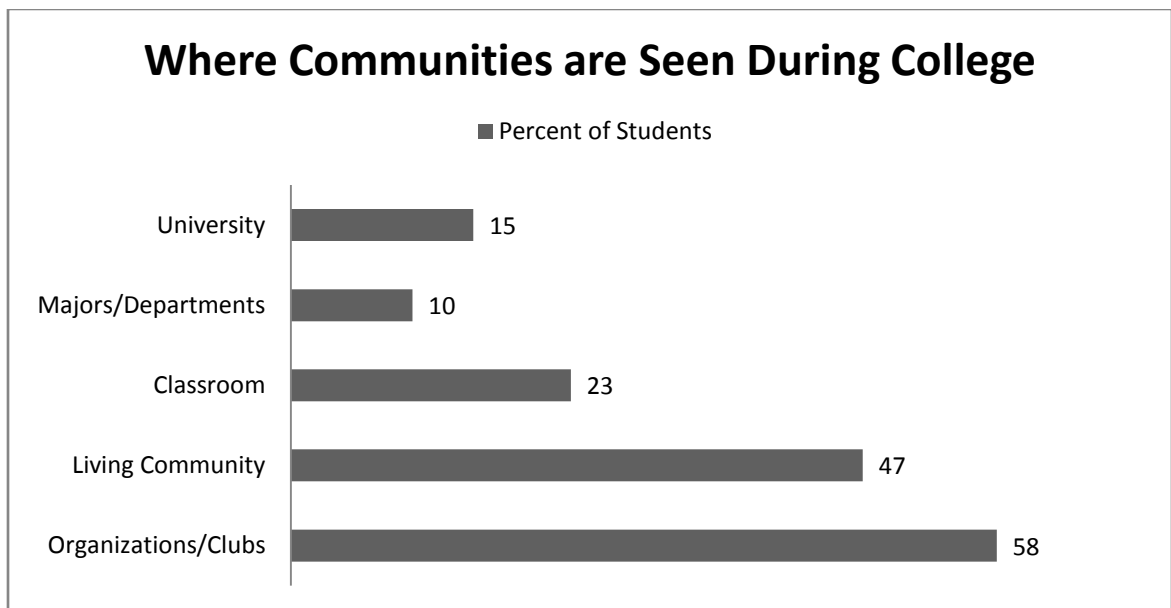
Approximately 4% of students perceive diversity as a possible part of the definition of community. As one freshman noticed “I would define my community as diversified, however, I still find it rather bland and not exciting.” Conversely, some students even noted that community members should have common backgrounds and/or cultures. Most students did not reference diversity in their responses at all. This may indicate that students and individuals in general are more likely to focus on commonality than difference when describing community.

Overall, students seem to at least connotatively connect the word “community” with people, places, and commonalities. Community is most likely to be seen as a group of people, but these individuals may or may not interact or live in a common environment or place. Some form of commonality is key for students. Many students would agree with Student Interview 7, that when you are in a community “you’d feel like you’re going toward the same goals as that community”; however it is less likely that students would agree that the members of the community would or should be “working together to better the community or the people around you.” The lack of further description may be an indication that students are not aware of or accustomed to specific requirements for the communities to which they have been exposed.

Community Experience

If you asked a student at University A or B where they have seen communities on their campus, he/she may respond with: “The better question is when have I not seen it” (See Figure 5). Only 3% of students at University A specifically noted that they had not seen any communities at the University. All students from University B reported seeing or experiencing communities at their university.

Fig. 5-Question #3: Community Locations/Examples



It may come as no surprise that the most commonly recognized communities at both of the campuses were the university groups/organizations/and clubs. Fifty-eight percent of the total students surveyed reported these types of communities either specifically by name or generally. Perhaps most notable here is that 46% of students at University A recognized organizations/clubs/groups, while an astounding 83% of students at University B reported this type of community.

The most widely recognized examples of organizational community were fraternities and sororities (also labeled as Greek communities and the Greek Community as a whole). One sophomore students noted that, “a few classrooms have achieved community, yet the most community I’ve noticed has been through social groups such as Greek life.” One sophomore helped us to understand this community by explaining, “I’m in a sorority which brings a large sense of community to my college experience; it just makes you feel like you belong to something.” Students mentioned numerous other organizations including but not limited to: Campus Ministries, Intervarsity, ensembles, Chinese Association, Student Government, College Democrats, Model UN, BCM, SIP, and SALSA. One student recognized student government as a community because “students can voice their opinions.”

Although some individuals with common interests, beliefs, experiences may not form sanctioned organizations or groups at the university, they still come together in ways that some students consider to be a community. A junior at University A feels that “being a minority at this university I feel like I am in a community with my race.” Additional groups of people that were specifically noted for their commonalities were: the gay community; people with common interests in music; people participating in service-learning, students as a whole, faculty as a whole, and people working together. It seems that minority status and/or interest created a bond for several students.

One group/organization that may be integral in developing and encouraging the concept of community at University B is the student orientation group. A sophomore noted that “besides being a community itself, [it] also spreads the concept of community to incoming students.” Certainly how organizations view, exhibit, and discuss community will likely influence the understanding and expectations of community throughout the school.

Overall, 15% of students mentioned the university as a whole as an example of community. While a few students at University A (8%) mentioned the school community, the students at University B are more likely to recognize the entire campus as a community. Approximately 32% of students at University B perceive the campus/school as a community. Students at University B feel that “you can’t walk across campus without knowing at least one student or professor and everyone is friendly.” From my experiences with University B students and alumni, it is likely that students at University B commonly recognize the term “bubble” as a means of describing the University and everyone in it. As one student noted, “the people here are in their own ‘bubble’, very similar but also very driven.” Another student from University B believes that “the relationship you have with your professors...the traditions of the university... [and] the common love you have for the school” all work to create a larger school community. Finally, a junior student at University B recognized that while smaller communities form within the larger school community, these smaller communities “help make the larger community stronger.”

One of the most recognized communities on campus at both universities was the area/domain in which students live. Approximately 47% of students described some sort of living situation as community. Forty-one percent of students specifically recognized the dorms as a community they had experienced during their college experience. Based on the previously noted connection to a specific place that emerged in the definition of community, the recognition of a living space is not surprising. As a sophomore student noted, “I am an RA; Community is my responsibility.” A freshman student explained, “My dorm is a very close community. We share and do everything together. Better yet, we all enjoy having one another around, which is the best community you can have.” Students referencing dorms/residence halls/suite mates, as communities recognized both the space within the building as well as activities outside of the building. A freshman noted

that below her/his dorm there was “a common area and people all over campus going there...we have our own community of people- about 45.” Others mentioned attending cookouts and participating in various activities. As one freshman explained, “There is always a mix of people from other halls coming together and going to stuff outside of campus grounds.” For some students, this seems to be a community because “you see these people every day and associate with them” and/or because “we’ve all become friends and communicate constantly whether it’s through email, IM, face book, or in person.”

Students at both universities also noted the importance and prevalence of living-learning communities. Learning communities are often defined as programs that strategically “cluster two or more courses,” and possibly combine students with similar disciplinary foci. The majority of the students that listed learning communities on the surveys, seemed to be referring to living-learning communities, which incorporate a common living environment for these students (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gaelnick, 2004). As noted by one freshman at University A, the living-learning community is a “great example of community here...because it’s kids matched according to their field of study.” Similarly, students mentioned international dorms that house students with a common concern/struggle, but also diversity. As one student mentioned, they “all sought each other’s friendship, company, and help in adjusting to a new culture.” Student Interviewee 1 further explained, “since I’m in a learning living community... my roommate has the same classes that I do and we can compare our grades sometimes and see what we did wrong and talk about things in class that we like or dislike.”

Approximately 23% of students recognized the classroom as a community they had seen or experienced during their college experience. The frequency counts at University A (21%) and B (28%) were fairly consistent; however approximately 21% of freshmen and sophomores, while 34% of juniors and seniors, recognized the classroom as a community. Student perceptions of the

prevalence of these classroom communities differed here. While one junior student mentioned that “some of my classes but not all” are communities, a freshman student believed that “each classroom is a community”. Perhaps most perplexing and yet critical about these statements is the connection to these students’ community definitions. The junior student believing that not all of the classrooms are communities, actually defined community as “a group of people living in one surrounding.” The freshman student who believed that each classroom is a community, defined community as “the people one chooses to be surrounded by.” This may speak to the confusion with and/or lack of understanding of classroom communities. Students specifically identified classes that required them to interact and work with one another, as well as classes that were major or interest specific. A sophomore student recognized that, “vocal classes have more community because they have more in common than just a classroom.” Statements like these may help us to begin to identify some of the perceived requirements and/or elements of classroom communities.

Majors and departments are also considered to be communities by 10% of students. One student recognized that she/she believed communities to be “mostly within departments rather than within classrooms.” A sophomore student at University B specifically mentioned a departmental fellows program and believes, “Although we do not necessarily live together, we consistently have class together and work with one another to conquer coursework and improve our communication and professional abilities.” Four percent of students recognized the fellows or academic programs as communities.

It is important to remember that classroom and/or departmental community may be the only communities a university student experiences. A freshman student stated, “I am a commuter student so I have only experienced a classroom community.” This may be true for other students

as well. We should not assume that students have the opportunity and/or resources to participate in the groups, organizations, living situations, etc. across campus.

Finally, we should consider that the concept of classroom community will most likely remain unclear for many students as it is still not considered to be an experience commonly encountered by more than one fourth of the students surveyed. Although only 23 % of students mentioned classroom community specifically I am encouraged by the student surveys saying, “Some of my teachers have expressed a sense of community towards myself and class” and “I’ve experienced a lot of professors and students willing to learn and help each other.” As noted previously, as students progress through their college education, they may see more classroom communities than they originally perceived. Of course the quality and impact of these communities is yet to be determined.

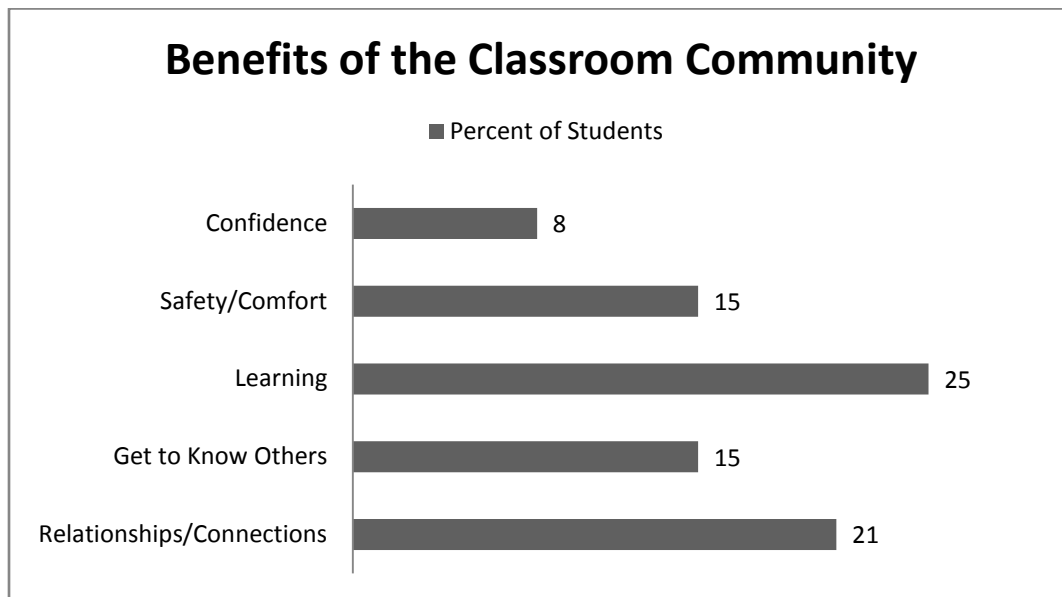
As previous noted, there seems to be a disconnect between definitions of community and those communities identified. Due to the inconsistencies seen, it is unclear as to what type of community and/or elements of community these students experienced with these examples. While certainly some students’ definitions and examples were far more consistent, these examples alert educators to the varied perceptions and expectations that students may have of community based on previous experiences and labels. It is clear however that almost all students recognize communities as a possible part of the college experience. They recognize both spaces and people labeled as communities, in addition to groups they feel demonstrate characteristics of a community. Groups and/or organizations are the most commonly recognized communities on campus, followed by student living situations. The third most commonly recognized place for communities is the classroom, which is encouraging. Finally some students do recognize the entire school as a community. Due to the differences in percentages at the two schools, I

anticipate the recognition of the entire campus as a community is dependent on the school environment, pride, student connection and possibly size.

Benefits

To explore students' perceptions about benefits, it is important to consider various emerging themes as well as unique ideas and beliefs (See Figure 6). As some students noted, they believe they have experienced classroom communities, while others have not experienced this type of community, but they do have ideas about possible effects. As one sophomore stated, "I believe the community is already there, created by the common interest of the class- to pass." Whether the community is already present or it must be strategically developed, students seem to see a variety of benefits including the anticipated learning and connection to others, to enhancing communication and personal skills, and create feelings of comfort, belonging, and support. Some students would agree that, "Communities in classrooms are crucial to success/enjoyability...one can learn new perspectives and make new discoveries about him/herself and others." Other students recognized that "goals can be achieved in communities that can't be [achieved] alone." As a junior student mentioned, classroom community can "help students interact and learn together because usually classroom work is done individually." The connection to other people in the classroom can make you "less likely to skip that class and more likely to study in groups" and ultimately "receive help, advice, and support in all aspects of life." While it would be presumptuous to assume that all students had experienced identical or even positive group development processes, some students do already believe that growing together is "the fastest/best way to grow."

Fig. 6-Question #4: Benefits of Classroom Community



The most prevalent theme discovered in this domain was that students believe that connection with others and/or relationships developed will benefit them or others in some way. Over half of the students surveyed overtly or subtly cited connection. While only, 21% of students believe friendships and/or relationships are benefits of the classroom community, students also mentioned the opportunity to get to know others, to gain comfort and belongingness through connection. Actually building relationships and connecting was the most frequently cited benefit of community. Several students believe relationships could develop with others students and/or professors. Another 15% of students referenced interaction with others and getting to know them better. Students believe benefits may be as simple as being able to “recognize each other’s faces and names,” feeling more appreciated by teachers and therefore feeling “like they are a person not just an ID number,” and/or “they can help if you’re having a tough day; they let you know that someone’s there for you.” Students also seemed to refer to, what I believe to be deeper, more

personal, benefits. Not only may networking provide “future opportunities, [but also] less tension and feelings of loneliness.” As mentioned in the surveys and explored during the interviews, “most people need recommendations for jobs and building relationships with professors allows the recommendations to be more effective because the professor truly knows the student.” A few students also suggested that classroom community may help students transition into college, and “help the new college students feel at home rather than just dumping them in there.” It may also help students to find a place to fit in and provide a “much needed sense of belonging for undergrads.” Responses in this category also referenced hopes for networking, interdependence, unity, togetherness, and belongingness.

Approximately the same percentage of students from University A and University B specifically referenced ideas related to connection and by classification, the percentage of student references was fairly consistent as well. Students recognize that in a classroom community, you “really are on a journey together” and that the relationships developed may make “associations with information learned easier to retain, [and make students] more active...because their thoughts are valued.”

As noted by the preceding quote, the second most referenced theme in this domain was learning. More than 25% of students used the word learning or learn in defining the benefits of classroom community; however, many students believe that community would likely result in: gaining access to information, having help with homework, and making better grades. The percentage of students referencing learning in some way (i.e. growth, easier to complete assignments, asking for help, engaged in learning environment and motivated to learn, etc.) was only slightly lower than the number of students referencing connection; over half of the students surveyed also believe learning is direct or indirect benefit . It is important to note that the survey was structured to not specifically mention learning until question 6; my intent was to gain more

authentic answers from students that were less likely to have been prompted by the wording of the survey questions. Students may, however, have used this word as a result of oral discussion about the survey or the consent form. Although all of the students may not recognize their statements as related to learning, referenced ideas such as: gaining insight from others, working with others to study, group growth, more practice with group work, more engagement, more motivation, better grades and/or academic performance, and an overall better working environment. I personally see a connection to learning with all of these ideas.

As mentioned earlier, students do seem to think connections with others are beneficial, so it is not surprising that the two most frequently mentioned causes of learning involve interaction with others. Approximately 14% of students believe learning from others to be a possible benefit of classroom community. Many students hope to be exposed to a “wider range of ideas” as you will have “people other than your professor to learn from and share with” “to encourage exploration of the world.” As one student noted, classroom community enables you to “learn from people in different areas of the world, and form friendships that will help open your eyes to completely different lifestyles, world views, and personal goals.” Ultimately classroom communities could begin to impact society as, “people will better understand other cultures and combine their beliefs to broaden and improve society” and the experience can “prepare students to become global citizens.”

The second most frequently mentioned reason that learning may occur, is the ability to ask for help or to help others. Students also see learning as a possible result of student and group growth, group work, more engagement, more motivation, and an overall better working environment. Because they learn more, they will earn better grades and/or enhance academic performance. Students at University B were more likely than students at University A to recognize learning as a benefit. This difference between universities is consistent with the

findings from question one (i.e. Students at University B were more likely to desire education as part of their college education than students at University A). This may suggest that students and other individuals use personal hopes and goals to frame and analyze experiences they may encounter. In other words: If students want to gain skills and learn, they automatically impose those beliefs onto any pedagogical technique. Ideally, we would like to think that classroom community may actually be meeting student goals, yet as we will discover, this will take great effort.

Finally, students also seem to value the comfort, confidence, and/or sense of safety that can be evoked from a classroom community. While 15% of students specifically noted the feeling of safety or comfort, another 8% of students consider the classroom community to build confidence and/or the ability to be open with others. As one sophomore explains, “If students feel connected to the people (teachers and students) there is more positive learning environment. From experience, I want (and will) do better if I’m comfortable in any “learning environment.” Two freshman students furthered the explanation by recognizing that the community’s opportunity for growth and support provides “the ability to learn without the fear of being judged” and this may “allow you to feel confident that everyone is in this community for the same goals.” As noted earlier commonality was one recognized aspect of community. Perhaps the challenge will be to build comfort and safety through commonality, yet still remain open to and courageous enough to welcome diversity.

The most frequently mentioned benefit of classroom community is connection and/or relationships. Many students also recognized learning as a possible benefit that seems to be closely connected to learning. The third most frequently mentioned theme was comfort and safety. There is a strong possibility that these benefits are interconnected as we will explore later.

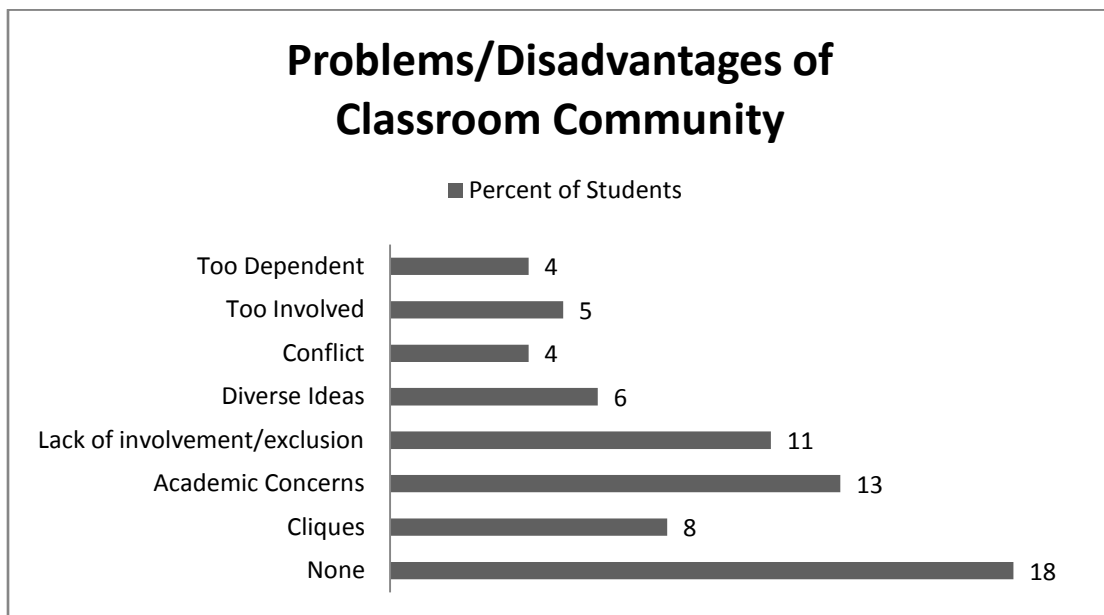
Concerns

My experiences with students led me to anticipate perceptions of numerous problems with or concerns about classroom communities. With this question I hoped to understand the downfalls that students perceive, not just the obstacles that may prevent development. I anticipated that they would be fairly unfamiliar with the logistical development of community and believe their perceptions of the problems of the community itself to be more important for this study (See Figure 7). While approximately 18% of students reported that they did not see any or very few problems or disadvantages with classroom community, it seems that once again the students' primary concerns are related to connections with other individuals. Almost all of the students surveyed students recognized some type of relational concern. Specific relational concerns included but were not limited to: becoming too dependent on the community and finding it difficult to branch out or transition, becoming too talkative or too involved with the people in the community, the formation of cliques and divisions, the clashing of ideas and beliefs, as well as arguments and conflicts. Perhaps most interesting here is the percentage of seniors expressing relational concerns. Eight of the 12 seniors (66%) spoke to relational concerns. This was much higher than the average percentage and that of other classifications. This finding may suggest that their experiences with connection in previous classrooms have led to problems and/or challenges.

The most frequently mentioned relational concern was exclusion of individuals. Approximately 11% of students believe individuals would either remove themselves from the community (i.e. not participate) or be excluded by others. I chose to combine the idea that an individual may be pushed/left out of the community, with self-exclusion, as individual perceptions are often based off of how others treat the individual. This is most likely closely related to the development of cliques or divisions within the group (8%). As many students

provided little description of these terms, one student suggested that segregation may occur based on “race and sex groups”. Another student reminds us that “Communities can be exclusive or judgmental excluding people who they feel are not the same or good enough.”

Fig. 7-Question #5: Problems/Disadvantages of Classroom Community



Of the relational concerns, the next most prevalent theme regarding connection alluded to the clashing of ideas or beliefs (6%). Although we do not want to assume that students automatically connect diverse ideas and beliefs with conflict, it is a possibility. Approximately 4% of students specifically referenced conflict. If these two categories were combined, the number of students referencing these ideas would outweigh those concerned about cliques. As one sophomore student noted, “Communities have to agree and everyone has different ideas/view that may clash at times.” Classrooms include “different people with different opinions, goals, and interest” and some students believe that because of the diverse beliefs and values, “not many people want a community.” Although rare, one student did recognize that although some people may not agree

with others, “this problem will become a good thing in the end.” In my experience with students the possibility of arguments/a conflict is to be avoided and accommodated. Even universities work avidly to avoid conflict and encourage everyone to “get along” (Oppenheimer, 2008). The desire to avoid conflict is most likely a greater cultural belief; students often discourage different ideas as they believe it may prevent conflict, which is almost always perceived negatively. Many of the students in my classes even speak positively about conflict and recognize the theory behind this, but they are still hesitant to engage in conflict and work hard to avoid it.

It seems that some students (5%) are concerned about becoming too involved with the community and possibly too talkative. According to student surveys, this involvement could lead to lose of direction or purpose, lack of production, lack of attention and/or focus and general distractions from class work, studying, etc. As one sophomore wrote, the classroom may become more of a “hangout/gossip spot than a place of education.”

Several students (4%) believe that in classroom communities students may become too dependent on others and find it difficult to transition out of this community. Some students believe this could cause individuals to become lazy and not complete the required work. As stated by one freshman, the interdependence may also “detract from independence.” Furthermore, it may “not allow students to meet new people” outside of the community.

Some students had concerns about being connected and losing anonymity. A few students believe that “sometimes it is good to be anonymous”, “so if I want to skip, I don’t feel as bad.” Other students expressed concerns about becoming emotionally attached and having to involve their personal lives. Connection in the classroom may create the “inability to separate from class and detach yourself.” If the “community of people wants to enter into a social setting it can be intrusive.” Ultimately, some students seem to be concerned that “people may abuse the trust and bonds that are created in a community.” These ideas may allude to the conflicting student desires

(and greater societal desires) for connection and belongingness without responsibility, commitment, and trust.

Academic concerns were present in the surveys although they comprised only approximately 13% of the answers. The most common academic concern cited, was the fear that communities would take away from school work and/or learning in some way. As suggested earlier, some students believed this may be due to the casual environment of the classroom and this may ultimately result in slacking off, creating an awkward learning environment, or the likelihood of group think. As noted previously some students see juxtaposition between connection and poor academic performance, causing “too much socializing and not enough studying.” Classes may also move away from learning because there are “not enough ‘classroom’ activities.” Additionally some students referenced the idea that communities do not encourage diversity, and consequently, “there are not challenging ideas.” It is also important to consider that “group work” or community engagement is “not the best way for all students to learn...it can detract from the material.” I find myself continuously questioning the material we [university educators] are teaching our students. Are our hidden and/or null curriculums and “deep-seated assumptions” teaching students to creating knowledge is an individual act (Davis et al., 2000, p.41)?

Another possible reflection of either societal beliefs or our assumptions as educators may be seen in the students’ concerns about grades and equality. One student presented the question: “How are you graded if everyone participates together?” This is a common concern that I hear from many of the students that I work with at University A; however it was not frequently cited in the surveys. Another student expressed concern that learning may be equalized and this “may bring advanced students down...and in turn they could get really bored with the material.”

A surprising yet important finding is the student concern about being negatively influenced by the classroom community. This concern was more prevalent in students from University A

than from University B. Students mentioned the group influence and therefore loss of individuality and/or forced conformity. They were also concerned with negative attitudes and/or negative environments, as well as peer pressure to party. Not only do students anticipate pressure to join the community, a few anticipate pressure to drink as recognized by the student who stated, "I'm in recovery and most people here are not; it would be hard to socialize and relate without drinking."

Finally, students seemed to express concerns about overall involvement in the community and the structure of the course. As expressed by one sophomore, "People may lose sight of what is really important" and furthermore, the community may not function properly and "attempting it may be futile- loss of time, money, and effort". The most frequently mentioned concern about involvement is lack of student participation either because they do not want to or are feeling left out. Approximately 11% of students believe there is a risk that only the people feeling involved in the community will be involved in the community. In many ways this lack of involvement could be linked to issues of connection and relation with others. While some students do not desire to participate in the community, others find themselves, "disappointed or discouraged when they cannot, or are not welcomed, into a certain community." Some students believe it is "the professor's responsibility to get everyone involved." While it is important that students recognize that lack of involvement is possible and even probable, lack of responsibility to take initiative to prevent this from happening may present a challenge.

Some students have concerns that the classroom community may create a "false bubble" and "too carefree interaction with others, which is unrealistic in the business world. This may cause "shock" because "community does not always exist in the real world." Additionally, communities may "create fragmentation within a class, or within the larger university community." As one sophomore stated,

When communities are formed, they tend to divide the student body, and make it hard for one person to get along with other communities. I've had to struggle with this problem of community involvement, where every community wants you to remain strongly affiliated with them.

Finally, one sophomore from University A recognized a concern that I myself have had as I attempt to build classroom communities. There is a strong possibility that "once the semester is over that community is broken up." In describing a class community Student Interviewee 8 said, "when we left the class...we all just looked around and we were like, this is kind of sad. I had never been sad to leave a class especially one that I had struggled with the entire semester. And you just realized that you were losing a piece of the magic you had for the last semester" However, it is fair to say that this temporal issue does not seem to be a concern for most students. Either students do not see this as problematic, or they are accustomed to temporary and transitory community involvement.

After reflecting on these results, it is clear that students believe connection and/or relationships with others is not only a benefit of classroom communities, but also can be a problem. Communities may be problematic because of cliques, emerging conflict, the risk of dependency, and the involvement in personal life. Secondly, students are concerned about academics. The concerns about academics include the idea that academics will become secondary to relationships and socializing, and this may not be the best way for all to learn. Finally, negative peer influence and the lack of involvement are also perceived problems of classroom community. These concerns, although not indicated by all, provide possible indications of challenges to developing community. Because of what we already know about the prevalence of individualism and the role perception and framework, it is likely that these problems will certainly be conceived for many students and therefore may affect the entire community.

Learning

Finally, it is important to recognize that students have various beliefs about how their learning is impacted. Students surveyed were presented with the following question: Do you believe your learning is impacted in any way by classroom communities? How so? (See Figure 8). The responses to this question ranged greatly, however, it was clear that the majority (82%) of students surveyed believe that classroom communities do impact learning in some way. Only 7.4% of students overall noted specially that they did not believe their learning was impacted, and another 4.0% thought it might be possible, but they seemed unsure. Perhaps what is most interesting about this is the distinction between student classifications. While 74% of Freshmen and 84% of Sophomores believe that the classroom community could impact their learning, only 58% of Seniors agree. Again this may indicate that while incoming students have hopes for communities that impact learning, seniors may be more likely to have experienced what they see as a classroom community that did not impact their learning. We must also consider that seniors may not have had the opportunity to experience classroom communities during their college years and are fairly content with what they have learned. They may perceive classroom communities to be unnecessary for enhanced learning.

Students indicating that their learning was impacted in some way explored both positive and negative effects (See Figure 9). Approximately 18% of students generally noted the enhancement of learning in a positive, productive classroom community. However, the largest percentage of students (27%) recognized that learning would be enhanced specifically by the connection and interaction with others. As noted by one sophomore “Closer classrooms are more likely to share their thoughts and ideas, resulting in increased, focused discussion that can lead to a higher level of learning.” Again, this focus on connection and interaction echoes earlier recognized benefits of

classroom community, and this helps to affirm that students believe learning and connection may be related.

Fig. 8-Question #6: Learning as Impacted by Classroom Community

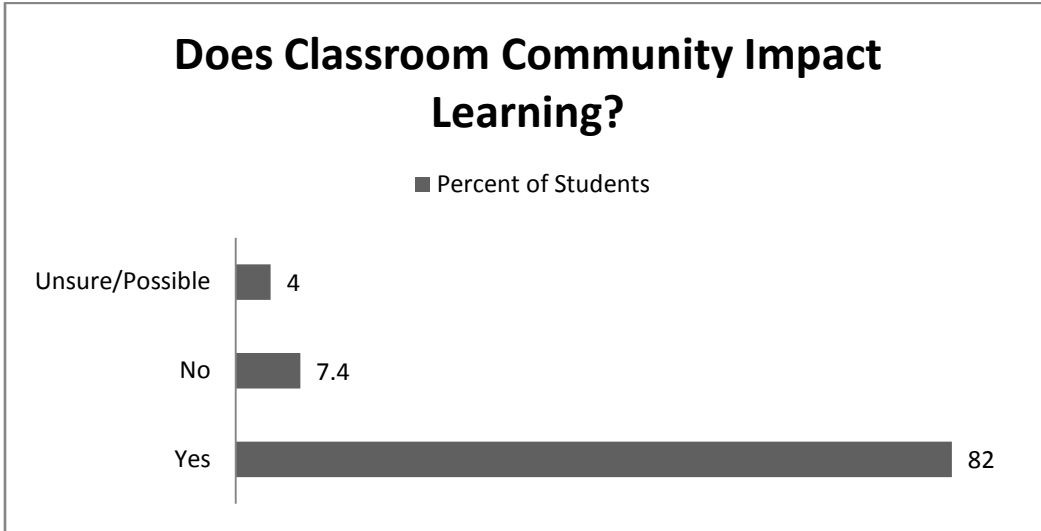
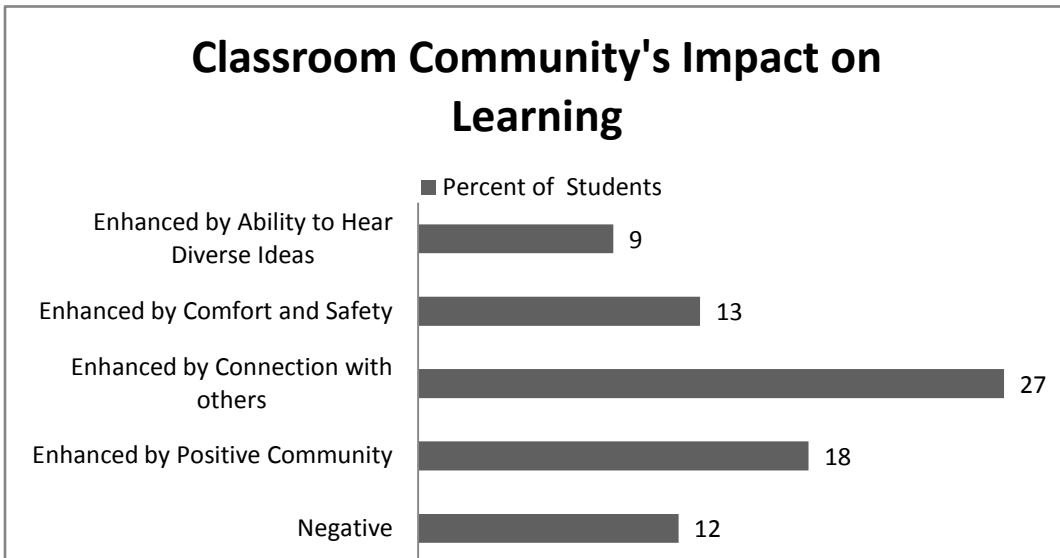
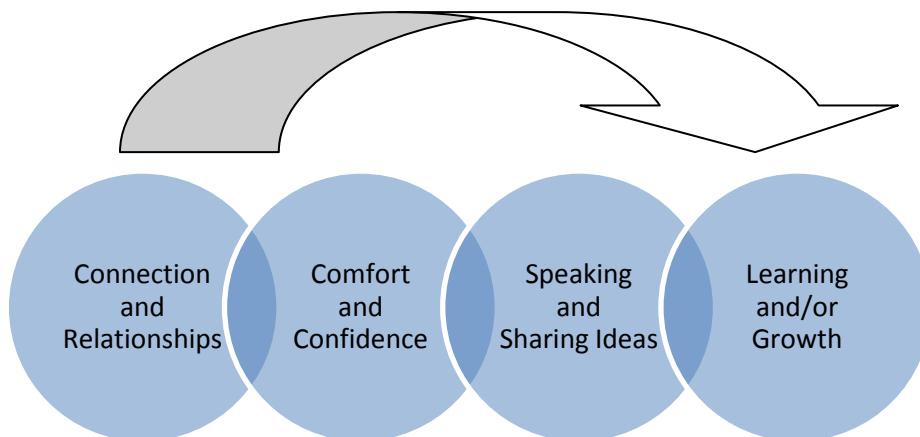


Fig. 9-Question #6: How Classroom Community Impacts Learning



The relationship between connection, comfort, and willingness to share ideas seems to be interconnected for many students. If the community is connected and interacting, 7% of students believe this will increase support, help, and the ability to gain/give advice. Additionally students may feel more confident and comfortable. Thirteen percent of students believe learning enhancement is due to the comfort, safety, and openness developed in the classroom. If confident and comfortable, 3% of students specifically noted more willingness to talk and share ideas. Student Interviewee 4 believes, “Having a classroom community can be helpful in that students are more relaxed during discussions and question and answer sessions.” When students are more comfortable, more information can be shared (See Figure 10).

Fig. 10- Relationship of Connection and Learning



Nine percent of students believe learning would be enhanced because of the ability to hear and express diverse opinions. Understandably, the “exchange of ideas helps the flow of knowledge” and “different people from different backgrounds impacts my learning and helps

shape me as a student.” As recognized by Interviewees 3 and 8 “I learned how to defend my ideas quickly when put on the spot” and “it teaches you self-control, it teaches you not to be a jerk, or you learn something deeper and you find out maybe you agree with them...it forces you to get more out of your comfort zone.” These types of comments were rare, but they demonstrate a deeper understand of learning and growth that were not present in the original definitions of community. This may suggest that some students do recognize deeper learning as a possibility in classroom communities.

Other reasons for and/or effects of enhanced learning included but were not limited to: better performance, trying harder, more enjoyment/fun, more willing to go to class, more motivation/interest, more engagement, and less loneliness. One student reminds us that, “the student wants to make the class fun because if it’s boring most likely, from what I’ve seen, the student won’t do any work.” It may also be true that “responsibility of an individual is higher in a smaller classroom community.” As an educator, perhaps one of the greatest potential benefits for learning was recognized by a freshman at University A, who stated, “I feel like I pay more attention and actually learn, not memorize the material.”

Although I intentionally chose the word “impact” to allow students to consider either positive or negative effects on learning, some students seemed to have a negative connotation of this word. While many students did seem to understand impact to be positive or negative, the negative connotation that some students experienced may have affected how the students answered this question. With this in mind, only 12% of students indicated the possible negative impacts on learning that may occur. Many of these students indicated that the negative or ineffective community would inhibit their learning. Specifically some students felt that the community may cause them to not pay attention, or become distracted because of disruptions. Other students also mentioned reasons for the inhibited learning such as: the community members may become too

close, their ideas would not be challenged, they may rely on others too much, they may not feel comfortable, they will just learn things to pass, and they are not able to work at their own pace.

As stated by Student Interviewee 9,

I've had group work experiences where there is sort of a community...where it hasn't been such a good community and it actually negatively affected learning because you're trying to get this person to show up and you're not really focused on anything.

Student Interviewee 9 recognizes one of the struggles that students may experience with connection. The group may be entirely focused on the lack of presence of one or more members and unable to move forward with productive group work. Student Interviewee also explained the possible negative defect known as the,

bandwagon phenomenon...everyone else is going with it so my idea is going to sound stupid so I'm not going to say it, or you just say something and...what I actually meant is not quite example what I said and so they might not take it that way and that can obviously...divide the community- you know friction between people.

These concerns mirrored the earlier described problems students recognized.

One particularly important find is increasing frequency of students reporting possible negative consequences for learning across the classifications. Only 8% of Freshmen indicated possible negative impacts on learning, however, 13% of Sophomores, 16% of Juniors, and 25% of Seniors indicated possible negative impacts. Various explanations are possible, however, we will want to consider why more students see possible negative impacts on learning as they move through college.

Students alluded to various other ideas that may be beneficial for understanding classroom community and learning. A sophomore student at University A noted,

I think that I learn different but not less or more in different classroom communities. In these smaller, tight-knit communities I learned more hands on and intimately, but through the larger classrooms I learn more visually and auditory.

While not all students would agree that the learning is different, several students noted that the learning may be easier if a community is developed. This could or could not affect the quality or quantity of learning. Approximately 2% of students did perceive easier learning as an effect of a positive classroom environment. As stated by Student Interviewee 7,

I think that you can get out of a class what you put into it, therefore maybe for me personally it might be easier for me to learn...when we are having fun in a class, joking around, having a good time, I tend to remember that stuff a little more than if I'm studying, but I think it's not a necessity in order to excel or get what you want out of class.

Several students seemed to differentiate between classroom material and personal growth material. A freshman at University A believes that in a classroom community, "you aren't just learning the material for a particular class, but lessons and knowledge which will help a person grow and develop into the mature adult they will become." Another student also differentiated between class content and personal growth; however, this student believed his/her "knowledge specific to the class" was not affected, but that the classroom community was likely to enhance relationship building skills. This differentiation may give us an indication of how students perceive the term learning; the connotation of classroom learning may be connected only to content specific material and/or information provided by the teacher and not classmates. Students may believe that only or primarily relational skills will be impacted by community, but this does not necessarily connect to content specific learning.

As noted earlier, some students do not believe that their learning is or would be impacted by the presence of a classroom community. One student wrote that he/she, "can work alone just fine," while another student indicated that he/she "will receive my education and learn. At the end

of the day it's still on the student." Finally, an important idea to remember is that some students will not recognize/foresee any impacts of the community, but may also avoid the community. A freshman student believes, "As a student who would have no need for those sorts of community, I would avoid them altogether." These comments suggest that some students privilege a more individualistic approach to education and university learning. Although rare, a few students seem to exhibit a feeling of pride in and responsibility to learn without the help or involvement of others.

The results of question 6 help us to understand that most students do believe their learning is impacted in some way by classroom communities. However, seniors are less likely to agree. Most students see the impacts as positive and they specifically believe it is the connection and relationships that develop, that may lead to more comfortable environments that will ultimately promote more talking and sharing. A few students recognize that the sharing does in fact enhance learning. Several students suggested that the learning is not necessarily enhanced but different. Finally some students do see the impact on learning as negative and the number of students with this perception seemed to increase as they moved through school.

Additional Considerations

Certainly there are many more ideas, suggestions, and concerns that students have about communities and classroom communities specifically. As I spoke with students and analyzed the surveys, a few additional themes emerged that may be critical to implement effective classroom communities in our current college and/or university classrooms.

Several students surveyed and interviewed seemed to consider small groups and/or group assignments to constitute communities in the classroom. As Student Interviewee 9 explained, "You could even find smaller [communities] because there were particular people that I personally preferred for whatever reason and those were sort of my community within a

community.” When discussing communities, Student Interviewee 2 frequently referenced her small group in a particular course. When asked if he/she had experienced classroom communities, Student Interviewee 3 responded,

Yes; my first semester English class I developed a connection with two female students and a male student. I think we developed such a connection because we weren’t afraid to speak up and be outgoing during class discussion and other times in class.

As an instructor of Small Group Communication, I agree that there can be numerous commonalities between small groups and communities, however, we need to explore the differences between the two and possible effects of this perceived link between the two. Most research certainly suggests the use of cooperative learning activities in classroom communities, but it does not define these individual groups as classroom communities (e.g. Ciani, Summers, Easier, & Sheldon, 2008; Frank, 2004; Hendrix, 1996).

Finally, one senior surveyed not only identified communities as small groups in class, but she/he also expressed great concern for the time commitment required in these groups. This student wrote, “Last spring semester all six classes had semester long groups. I literally was working my schedule around 36 other students. I am a commuter and work full-time.” This concern for time is similar to the concern expressed by students that they are/may be pulled between communities. Two of the interviewees I spoke with discussed having to leave one of the communities they very much enjoyed being a part of due to time requirements and other commitments. One Student Interviewee described the struggle with time by saying,

You’ve got to have time for friends. You’ve got to have time to sleep. You’ve got to have time to eat. You’ve got to have time to call your mom and dad and see how they are...so it was like this weird struggle.

I can visibly see this struggle for time in my students' faces as they are extremely torn between many commitments and time management is of the utmost concern. We may need to consider the time commitment involved in developing and maintaining classroom communities.

Another concern recognized by a few interview and survey students in either question four, five, or six, was the lack of voluntary commitment to the community. While a few students recognized that classroom communities can be beneficial as long as they are not forced, other suggested that negative results could occur if it was forced. Some students believe the classroom itself to be a "forced environment." Others believe community success is often dependent on voluntary community membership, and that if forced, there may be problems and disadvantages. As one sophomore noted, the problems may only be temporary because, "something that is forced to be created is never liked or enjoyed by individuals involved at first." As explained by Student Interviewee 9, she/he prefers to choose the community;

Just working through things together on a more voluntary basis then okay you three do it together which I've also done and that was less effective, so I think give them the freedom to choose who you work with because for me that's important, you know the choice helps.

Conversely, Student Interviewee 8 seems to find value in being forced to be together. He/she noted,

You never get to pick your classmates...it just happens to be that you're stuck with each other for an hour and a half three times a week. So I think it forces you to get outside of your comfort zone...and it forces you to talk with people that you completely disagree with...but you don't have a choice.

The students' perception of their choice to become a part of the community may also play a role.

Perhaps as one student suggested, the learning in a classroom community may represent a Bell Curve. As the community builds and develops, so does learning; however, at a certain point

of community development, the learning begins to decrease. While no other students directly recognized this idea, many students seemed to think that connecting and learning from the community members was positive, while becoming too close or too connected, could be detrimental. This provides another perception to explore.

To better understand how important classroom community was to the students, I asked seven of the nine interviewees how much they would choose to emphasize classroom community if they were a professor and the results were surprising. Six of the seven interviewees indicated that they would place a high emphasis on community development by using phrases such as: “a lot”; “emphasize it greatly”; “it should be top priority”; and “it is vital.” As Student Interviewee 6 stated, “I believe that it is the number one thing teachers or professors should focus on in creating a course.” One student interviewee suggested that some emphasis should be placed on community; however, he/she believes it depends on the subject matter. “When you are talking about something that is based on ideas like history or literature” the student believes community is important because “those things I think benefit from discussion and so in order to have a good discussion you have to all feel comfortable with each other which is ... part of a community.” However, with some subjects, the student interviewee believes, “I have to go at my own pace and I don’t see that anyone else could necessarily change that.” Student Interviewee 4 agrees that, “some courses are better done individually.” Student Interviewee 2 also believes that subjects such as the humanities and communications are more likely to promote community because in some other classes “we don’t really communicate unless we have a question about what we are doing.”

All seven of the Interviewees that discussed placing an emphasis on classroom community as an instructor, suggested one or more of the reasons previously mentioned by surveyed students including: more likelihood of discussion and sharing of ideas, more comfort in the classroom,

and more connection with others. Reasons referenced very primary interaction concerns as explained by Student Interviewee 6; “Everyone in the class should be required to know one another’s names. I cannot tell you how many classes I’ve walked out of my final exam for and thought, ‘were those girls and that guy here all year?’ It’s horrid.” Student Interviewee 7 said,

I think one of the best things about college that we didn’t have as much in high school is the discussion that we have-where people start contributing collaborative[ly and] building a new paradigm [or] outlook on whatever your topic is and when there is not so much of a community- at least myself- I think [I] would feel a little bit less likely to speak up...and really show your viewpoint or be more passionate about what you’re talking about or working on.

Students also alluded to deeper concerns of learning. As explained by Student Interviewee 3, “if you have [those] brave few that will speak up but no one else will step in to give the debate/discussion a different take then what are you learning? Nothing!” Furthermore, as Student Interviewee 5 stated, “Classroom community is very important, especially in college because we are paying to learn and a community experience can teach you something applicable in life which is how to work well together with others.”

In an effort to understand more of the possible long term effects of classroom community and possibly what students would like to get out of this experience, I asked all nine of the student interviewees what they would hope to take away from the classroom community experience and/or how they felt the classroom community experience would impact them in the future. I was not surprised to find that all nine of the students referenced better ability to work with and interact with different people in the future. In the future, Interviewees believe they will be able “communicate to different kinds of people” because “more exposure to the way other people think and how they operate will just make me better able to work well with them and make the

process enjoyable.” In some ways, it may help students “to trust in other people- just renew faith in that people can work together and get things done.” As noted by Student Interviewee 5, this connection can impact the world as a whole. Student Interviewee 5 reminds us that,

During these hard times, people living in all countries need to stop looking at the individual gain out of greed and selfishness and learn to work together as a civilized society...we need to fight off community crime, terrorism, global warming, greed, and hatred together.

Additionally, three of the student interviewees referenced developing and being part of a community in the future either at work or in the greater social system. Student Interviewee 4 believes, “As I plan to be a nurse, community development will be very important in my future... community will make the working environment easier on everyone.” Student Interviewee 3 believes community development will help him/her in the international business field, “to bridge gaps and help associates to feel comfortable with each other and clientele.” Finally, as expressed by Student Interviewee 6, “We need to know how to live in and contribute to a community, or else we will be lost in the hubbub of our crazy crazy world.”

Student Interviewee 7 spoke to a key element that I found missing from many of the student perceptions. As Student Interviewee 7 suggested, learning in the community may help in the future. As he/she explained, the classes

that have more community- it’s almost just like an instant memory bank... and I definitely know how to do this without really having to think about it- its more second nature. So I think that having this community... whether... we’re talking about the job community or whether we’re talking about classes later on...I’ve really learned it as opposed to memorized it.

These findings suggest that students may be more focused on or hopeful that the classroom community will enhance relational skills and provide experiences that will help them in future communities.

Primary Foci

Based on the previously results, I intend to explore and analyze the following foci: 1) Students see college as a means to an end; 2) They hope to gain knowledge and/or skills and/or qualifications that will lead to success. This success is most likely defined by a particular job and lifestyle; 3) Students believe that people coming together and sharing commonalities are important for communities to exist. These people may or may not interact in the same environment; 4) Communities are recognized as part of the college experience and are most often seen in organizations and groups or living environments. Approximately one-fourth of students immediately recognize the classroom as a place where communities are built; 5) Connection and relationships are both fearful and problematic elements of classroom community; 6) Connection and relationships are the most promising and welcomed elements of classroom community; 7) Learning and academic growth are often connected to socializing and connection, however there is not always a positive relationship. Too much connection and not enough connection can both lead to less/poor learning; and 8) Connection and relationships create comfort. Comfort creates sharing of ideas. The sharing of ideas may lead to learning; however the students seem to see the process as ending with sharing. Most students do not fully understand the process and/or possibilities of learning. The cognitive and reflective pieces of learning do not seem to be part of the equation. Comfort and ability to engage in or be more interested in the class are most important.

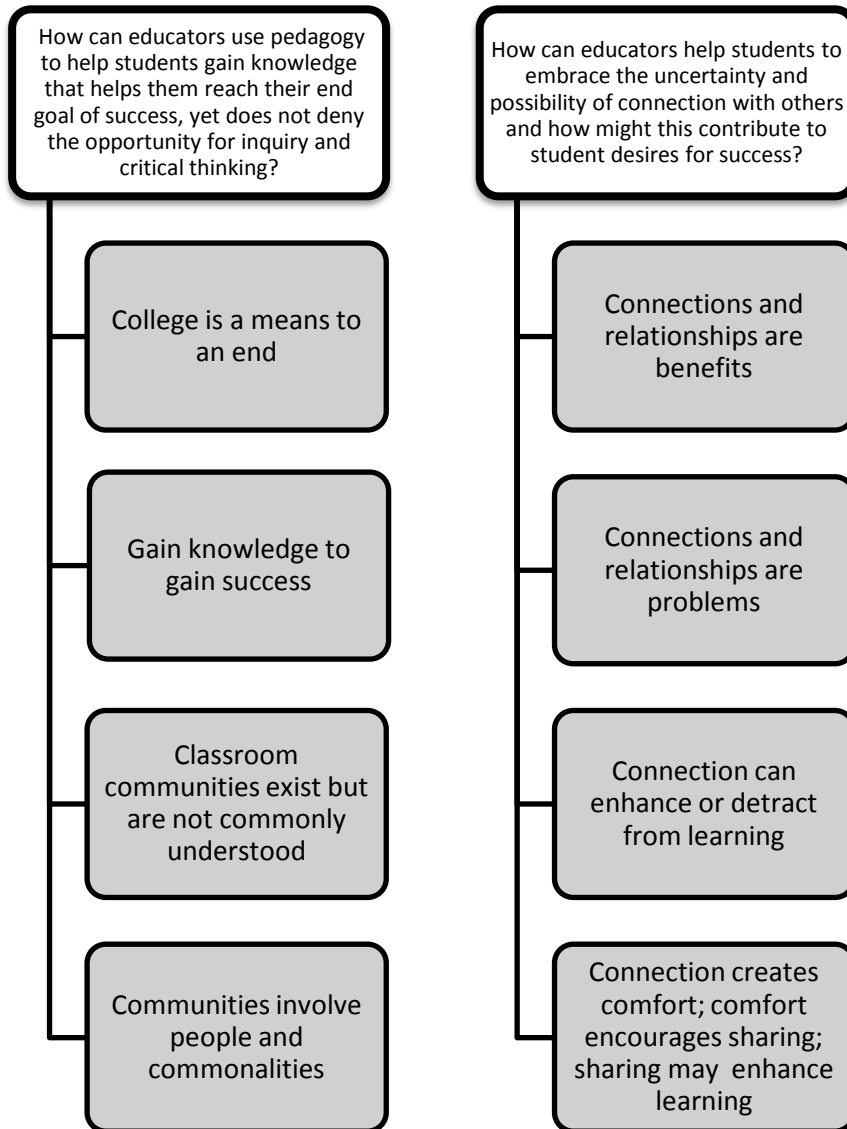
Emergent Themes

All of the previously identified foci can be merged into two primary themes for analysis. Therefore I have chosen to present the two emerging themes as questions to encourage both possibility and embrace uncertainty (See Figure 11).

First, because students have some understanding of community, they also have some expectations for classroom communities including: the involvement of people, the role of commonality and comfort. However, the classroom is not the most commonly recognized place for community development and/or existence. If students' desires for college education are considered, we find that students see college as a means to an end. The means include gaining knowledge and/or education; however this is acquired for the purpose of achieving social success- often presented in the form of a good job. Together these ideas help us to see that whatever pedagogical methods are chosen for the university classroom may need to include a consideration of how students can gain knowledge that will help them reach their end goal of success. The question that emerges is: How can educators use pedagogy to help students gain knowledge that helps them reach their end goal of success, yet does not deny the opportunity for inquiry and critical thinking?

Second, it is clear that students believe connection and relationships are both the best and worst aspects of community. They are seen as both benefits and problems. Connection with others can enhance or detract from learning in the classroom. Finally, the potential connection may be linked to increased comfort. Comfort then encourages sharing. The second question that emerges is: How can educators help students to embrace the uncertainty and possibility of connection with others and how might this contribute to student desires for success?

Fig. 11- Emergent Themes



CHAPTER VI

ANALYSIS

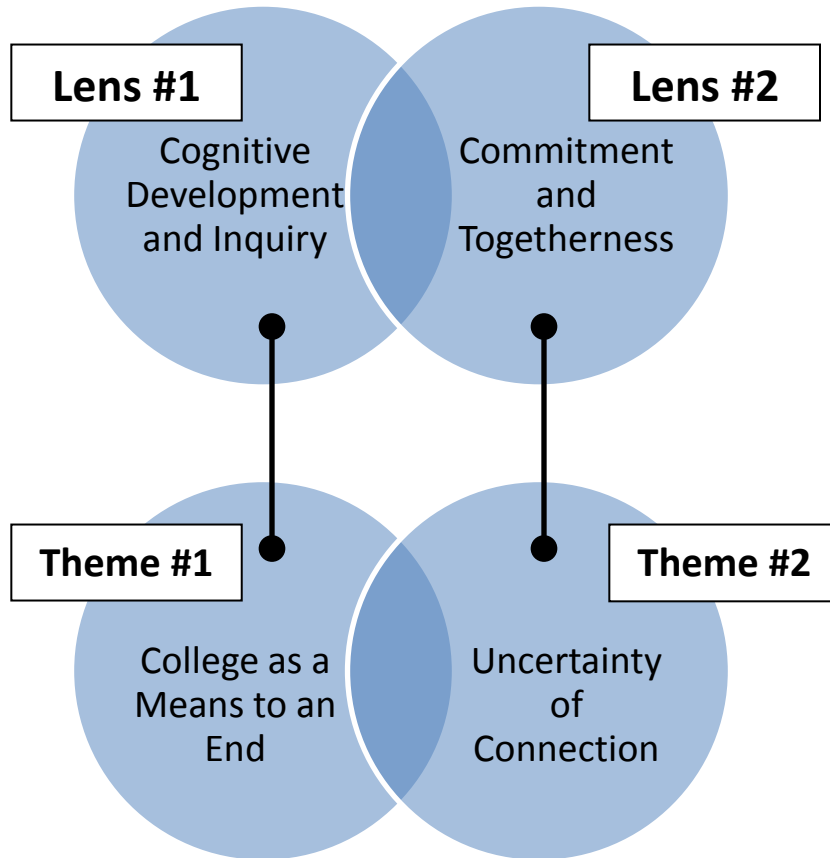
As explained in Chapter V, through the results of this study two key themes were identified. First, we will need to consider: How can educators use pedagogy to help students to gain knowledge that helps them reach their end goal of success, yet does not deny the opportunity for inquiry and critical thinking? Second, we will need to consider: How can educators help students to embrace the uncertainty and possibility of connection with others and how might this contribute to student desires for success? These themes will be analyzed through three distinct, yet related lenses. An in- depth analysis of these themes as they relate to research findings and theories, will be critical to determine if and how students may respond to and gain from classroom communities.

Two Themes and Three Lenses

While educators may see connections with others and the development of relationships as integral to future success, students may need assistance to juxtapose these interests. Furthermore, While it is often socially acceptable and productive to desire success, job achievement, and the accumulation of knowledge, it is not as prestigious to value relationship development as a key element of college education. For this reason, I have chosen to both polarize these student concerns by dividing them into two themes; however, we will inevitably merge the two themes to gain a more complete and integrated understanding of student perceptions.

For analysis, I have chosen three lenses that can also be considered individually and as a unit. A primary lens has been chosen to analyze each of the two themes (See Fig. 12).

Fig. 12- First 2 Lenses for Theme Analysis



First, the role of cognitive development and inquiry will be important to understand student goals and the possible role of knowledge in the search for success. Second, we will consider the possibilities of commitment and togetherness as students both fear and desire relationships and interaction with others. As noted in Figure 12, there is undoubtedly natural overlap between the first two lenses and also natural overlap between the two themes. The connecting lines denote strategic connections that have been made for the purpose of analysis.

While students believe success to be defined by specific job positions and lifestyle, which may be indicative of our greater individualistic culture, we will want to consider how cognitive

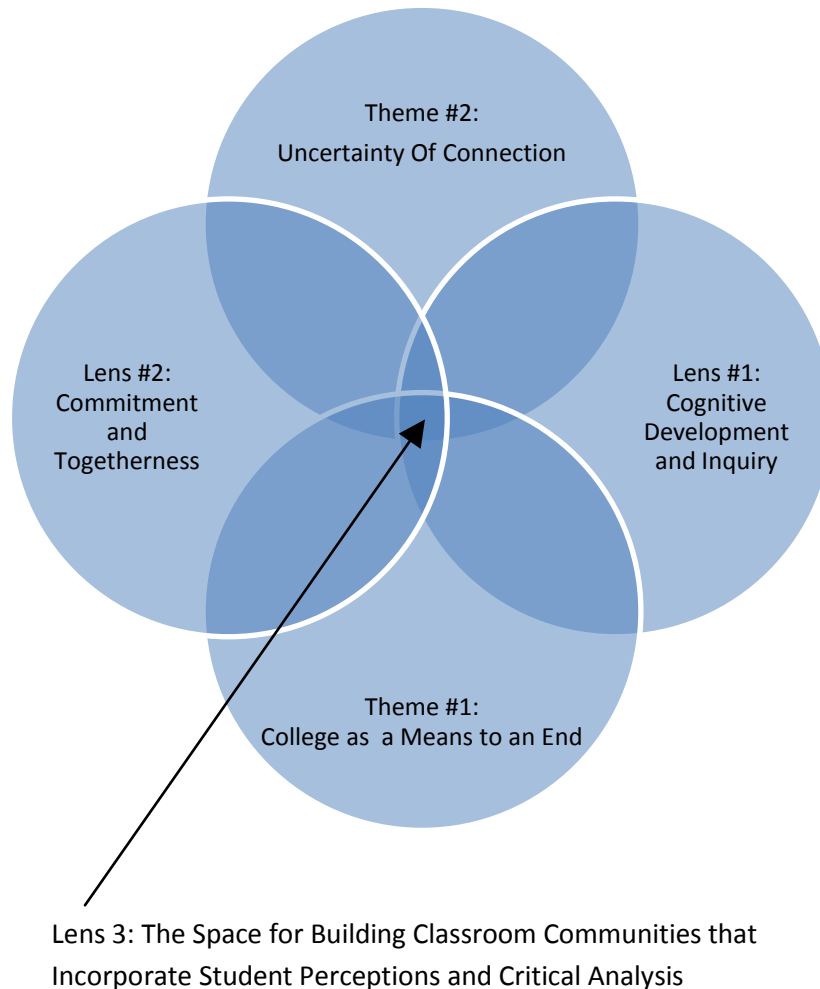
development and inquiry play a role in developing and implementing college pedagogies. Dewey (1929, 1938) provides a framework that will enable us to consider the role of inquiry and experience as a means of gaining knowledge that will help students gain success. Concepts of togetherness and assimilation may affect and possibly supplement these perceptions.

Furthermore, we will need to compare the student's understanding of connection and togetherness to Bauman's (1995). As the students already see connection as related to comfort and sharing, this will undoubtedly require consideration of the first theme and lens. It will be important to consider how this sharing may lead to more learning and how their understanding of learning can be understood and enhanced by the quest for inquiry.

Finally, we will need to consider research on building classroom communities and consider how we can account for and integrate students' perceptions and critical analysis. As noted previously there is certainly juxtaposition of the first two lenses introduced as well as the two themes being considered. For this reason, we will want to introduce a third lens to house and contextualize findings from the two themes (See Figure 13). The third lens will focus on building classroom community and will enable us to consider questions such as: How does current research on classroom communities in higher education inform our understanding of the expectations for and limitations of this pedagogical tool?; How might the challenge of connection and commitment help students embrace the uncertainty that remains in both individualism and community development?; How might the community development experience, encourage student inquiry and consequently a more critical and communal view of success and the means to its end?; and finally, How might the development of classroom communities that incorporate student perspective both meet and fall short of philosophical and progressive hopes for community development? As we turn to explore ideas of connection and togetherness, cognitive development and inquiry, and the development of classroom communities, it will be critical to

continuously listen to, respect, and consider students' evolving hopes and desires for meaningful connection and an overall meaningful college experience.

Fig. 13- Space for Building Classroom Communities



Theme 1: Education as a Means to an End

In considering the history of the purpose of the college education, we realize that education in general has aimed to “prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life” (Dewey, 1938, p. 18). Over 20 years ago, Bellah et al. (1985) wrote about the pressure that

universities were experiencing to “emphasize pragmatic results” while conversely help students to become “more fully developed people and citizens of a free society” (p. 293). As Bellah et al.(1985) warn, focusing primarily on “individual careerism” may eliminate “personal meaning or civic culture” (p. 293).

Perhaps current faculty perceptions of college education recognize the desire to help students find more personal meaning and social understanding. Two of the 5 faculty/staff interviewed spoke specifically to what they felt constituted a meaningful college experience. Both of these faculty members recognized relationships and knowledge as key elements of the college experience; however, neither of them recognized college as a means to an end as was noted by many students. Faculty Interviewee A believes that an undergraduate student would find the college experience to be meaningful if he/she believes,

time was well spent, if relationships were forged, if significant experiences happened and if he /she felt like he/she had gained knowledge and expertise and hopefully experienced moments of significance-probably that sense of efficacy that they feel empowered in some way, form or fashion, in ways that they would not have been had they not come to this institution.

Faculty Interviewee D believes it is important for students to “make a connection between what they are learning in class and the ways in which they are engaged either with their classmates or people outside of the university” and they are “able to have hands on experience where [they] are actually developing context and relationships.” While students share some of these same hopes, it is important to recognize that faculty may have more integrated and complex expectations for students. Students do however seem to recognize foundational elements such as connection and knowledge, as part of the college experience.

As noted earlier, the student surveys recognized knowledge/education as the primary hope for their college education. Sixty-nine percent of students made reference to either gaining

knowledge, education, skills, or learning. Particularly key with this finding is the distribution of the statistics as well as the recognition that education is primarily a means to an end. First, as recognized in Chapter V, While 60% of Freshmen and 66% of Seniors recognized knowledge/education as important to their college experience, Sophomores and Juniors (76% and 83% respectively) seemed to think education was more important. Based on these findings, it is possible that students are being very influenced by greater social expectations. While incoming Freshmen have been inundated throughout their childhood with messages of what college is, it is possible that they do not recognize knowledge as important to the process until they have experienced a year or two of college. Furthermore, Seniors may be more focused on finding jobs and other goals; consequently Seniors may no longer be interested in obtaining knowledge.

Of those students seeking knowledge, 31% hope to gain education that is specific to their career. The most frequently listed reason for this career related knowledge was to be successful in the field, major, or profession. Additional types of education were mentioned such as: life skills, people/communication skills, and an understanding of the real world. These responses were far more common than the idea that one might be “curious when college is over” or become a “student of life.”

Additionally important to this discussion is the 47% of students that specifically mentioned obtaining employment or moving towards a career, as a result of their college career. Ironically, students at University B were more likely than students at University A to list both education and jobs as hopes for their college education.

Students at both universities mentioned other hopes for college including: graduating/earning a degree (20%), relationships with others (20%), experiences (16%). However, the base majority of students seemed to view these hopes as a means to an end. The end for students is undoubtedly success. This success may be a “good job” or simply opportunity in life. College education was

most likely to be a transitional place/stage, as very few students focused on gaining ideas, experiences, etc. that were relevant to the present.

Unlike the modern notions of capitalism and survival of the fittest, the postmodern search for “quality of life” assumes survival to be understood. Instead, human beings can now focus more on seeking and pursuing happiness (Bauman, 1995, p.78). Through the postmodern lens, we can also explore an open, undefined sea of possibilities without finality. As Bauman (1995) states, “The defining feature of the postmodern idea of the good life is the lack of definition of the good life” (Bauman, 1995, p.79). Bauman (1995) claims that the definition of “quality of life” must be developed, even though currently our understanding of this discourse is ever-changing and it exists only as an image inapplicable to universal ideals. Even with expertise and continuously changing frames of reference, human beings will most likely always face an ambiguous and uncertain destination and/or goal in the search for happiness. This may explain part of the struggle students experience as they must accept that chaos is inevitability and that concern with the future is somewhat absurd (Bauman, 1995). The struggle they are most likely experiencing can be seen in the hopes for college education. While they seek success through a college education, which when considered broadly, could be considered a postmodern perspective, we must recognize that these students have a fairly clear definition of what constitutes “quality of life” (Bauman, 1995). Perhaps students are still seeking “certainty” as almost all of the students seemed confident and sure of their answers (Dewey, 1929). Students believe the definition of a successful life includes a good job that provides financial security and/or personal fulfillment. However, most students provided somewhat generic and superficial responses when talking about the purpose of college.

As greater society believes, and the student surveys reflected, college attendance is very much required not just for the postmodern “quality of life”, but in many ways for the modern

notion of “survival”. Bellah et al. (1985) recognize the poverty of our nation that has resulted from our individualistic drive for power and the rejection of the more communal concern for the human race. Perhaps what we should now question is the changing social circumstances. Tragic events such as war and natural disaster may bring a more collectivist framework to the forefront; however, is it possible or even wise to completely adopt this perspective on a daily basis? While students seem to care about connection, they are also focused on individual success. Success and survival have continued to be an ongoing struggle for individuals in a postmodern society (Bauman, 1995, p.81) as clearly seen in many students’ responses. Although the postmodern society encourages openness and endless possibility, it is not void of ongoing considerations of individual and social expectations and understandings, calling us to reconstruct our stories of “quality of life”, and what the students define as “success” (Bauman, 1995).

Possibilities of Learning. The majority of the surveys revealed the students’ desires for success and security, which most of them felt was achieved through gaining knowledge and a degree. While the surveys clearly noted students’ beliefs about the relationship between connection and comfort and consequently comfort and sharing of information, learning itself was not explored by many students. Approximately 9% of student specifically recognized that the ability to hear other’s ideas and opinions will lead to more learning or enable them to “expand their horizons together.” Students often saw the cycle as ending with the sharing of ideas or a general enhancement of knowledge. Very few students that recognized learning as part of this cycle, actually explored specifically how the learning would occur or what it would entail. As noted earlier, Student Interviewees 3 and 8 recognized, “I learned how to defend my ideas quickly when put on the spot” and “it teaches you self-control...it forces you to get more out of your comfort zone.” Most of the students recognizing learning as part of the cycle focused on relational and speaking skills. Only a few recognized that “you learn something deeper and you

find out maybe you agree with them.” This may present a disconnect that students experience as we ask them to belong to a community and commit to others.

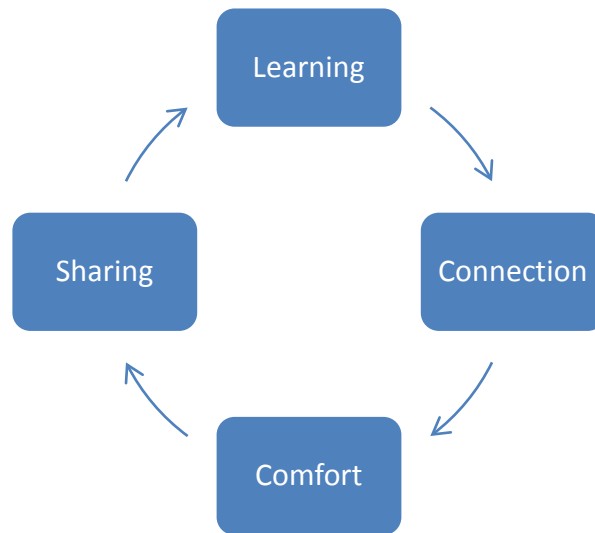
Integral to this discussion, and perhaps what makes this disconnect so apparent is the vast number of students that spoke about learning somewhere in the survey. Approximately 82% of students do believe their learning is impacted by classroom community. Only approximately 7% of students believe that classroom community does not impact their learning. Certainly the 82% included both positive and negative effects. Furthermore, approximately half of the students alluded to learning generally when discussing benefits of the classroom community. Of the students believing learning is a benefit of the classroom community, 14% of students believe that it is possible to learn from others. Students mentioned the ability to get help from others, exposure to more ideas, more engagement, more group work, better grades and/or performance, a better working environment, and various relational skills. While I see great value in all of these causes/effects, there still seems to be a disconnect for most students. Only a few students discussed deeper impacts of learning such as: being able to “better understand other cultures and combine their beliefs to broaden and improve society” and/or “prepare students to become global citizens.” Although the statistics of students recognizing learning as part of the classroom community are promising, the percentage of students recognizing learning as related specifically to connection with others is fairly low. Furthermore very few students expressed a deep understanding or greater possibilities of learning, as many saw learning being increased because they were more likely to make it to class.

From these findings and personal experience, it seems that most students do not fully understand, or did not fully express their understanding of the process and/or possibilities of learning. While students hope to apply the knowledge they learn to obtain success, they may be

more focused on the idea of meeting learning requirements rather than what learning may provide as a means within itself.

As a professor hoping to engage students in critical thinking and inquiry, I hope to explore reasons why students may not readily recognize deep learning as a benefit of community, and how to help students consider more possibilities of learning, instead of focusing on simply hearing diverse ideas and making learning easier. Ultimately, we may need to help students understand how learning may not only result from sharing diverse ideas, but can then be used to build even stronger connections (See Figure 14). If we want to meet the desires of students and help them gain knowledge that can lead to future success, we may need to help them connect the ideas of connection and the possible benefits of learning.

Fig. 14- Incorporating Learning in the Cycle



As stated by Faculty Interviewee A,

how students might perceive the quality of their individual thinking is very much enhanced by the quality of collaborative thinking...If they can recognize the distinction between the two

and how they are building on that value to come up with something unique and original that is even better.

This statement echoes the need for influence suggested by Burke (1935). However we must remember that the majority of students may not be able to see the value of connection and/or learning as it pertains to success, which seemed to be of greatest importance in their definitions of a college experience. Very few students focused on gaining opportunities to explore, question, and think critically. The students' fears and concerns about conflict and vulnerability may suggest the lack of willingness to risk their current beliefs and feelings of security. While we know that students often see college education as means to an end, it is important to consider how this finding may impact student perceptions of and reactions to classroom community as a meaningful element of their education and an opportunity for learning.

Research on adult learning suggests that professors can assume that unlike the learning of the child, adults will be motivated and ready to learn if they find it relevant to their role performance. Additionally they need to understand why they should learn concepts before being asked to do so. Adult learners should be respected as autonomous learners as they have experiences to contextualize their learning and their motivation is primarily internal (Knowles, 1989). While the survey recognized that undergraduates have very much accepted some of these principles of adult learning, they do not appear to perceive all of these concepts to be true just yet. They do seem to be motivated primarily by role performance and specifically by successful role performance as they see it in the future. Students expressed autonomy in recognizing that they can learn from other students and not just the professor; however as noted previously, the depth of learning was fairly superficial. In many cases, the causes and effects of learning were external (e.g. better performance, more likely to come to class, more likely to participate). A few students referenced internal motivation but this was rare. Students did not frequently reference the importance of

understanding why they were learning; however, based on the student responses to their hopes for college as well as surveys that conveyed this (e.g. “which will help throughout life”) , it is probable that students would see the reason for learning as means of meeting requirements (primarily external) for future success. While students were very much future focused when asked about their hopes for college, they were primarily focused on the present when talking about learning and connection. It seems that students are beginning to take on adult learner qualities, but they may also be still dependent on many of the strategies and perceptions of the child learner.

It may be important to consider theories of the self, as many students are likely to still be focused on themselves as individuals. Almost all students focused on personal benefits, problems and overall concerns. The consideration of others was rare and usually consisted of a statement like “we can help each other study” or “some people might be uncomfortable.”

After focusing on what he/she could gain from others, Student Interviewee 9 was asked if other people could benefit from his/her ideas. Student Interviewee 9 responded, “Well I would hope so. I think probably they could at some level... sometimes I have this thought process going and you only hear part of it because I open my mouth in the middle of my train of thought ... but if you were to ask me to explain what I meant...I can fill it in and explain it.” This may suggest that some students may not be confident with their contributions to the community just yet.

These statements may be explained by Erikson’s (1963) stages of psychosocial development. Erikson (1963) presents a series of dialectics that relate to various stages of development. Of particular importance to this study are the stages of intimacy vs. isolation and generativity vs. stagnation. Students may currently be challenged by the “young adulthood” stage which suggests that they must evaluate and balance the desire for intimate relationships with egocentric concerns.

In many ways, this stage, where so many students seem to be, may be critical to understanding opportunity for assimilation and/or accommodation in the classroom community (Tenant, 2006).

Each of Erikson's (1963) stages provide an opportunity to evaluate progress in the previous stage. Thus, if an individual struggles desperately to take chances during the intimacy vs. isolation stage, it is possible that the individual has not moved through the previous stage thoroughly- identity vs. role confusion. If students are experiencing the young adulthood stage- intimacy vs. isolation- they are most likely not yet experiencing the adulthood struggle between generativity and stagnation (Erikson, 1963). While some students may be focusing more on their contribution to society and/or their lack of ability to contribute, the majority are not. This is one way to understand why so many students seemed to focus primarily on what they could gain from college and classroom community, as opposed to what they might be able to provide (Erikson, 1963; Tenant, 2006). Based on student responses, it is most likely that most undergraduate students surveyed are struggling with intimacy vs. isolation. While this does not prevent learning with others, it suggests that students may be focused more on the opportunity to merge and connect with others, yet are not aware of the possibilities of growth and learning as a result of the connection. Later we will focus specifically on the students' understanding of connection with others.

In addition to understanding psychosocial development, we should also consider motivation. As noted earlier, adult students are often motivated by internal factors and the desire for role performance. Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of motivation introduces 5 levels that the individual will desire and/or need. Maslow's (1968) taxonomies have indeed received critique as he claims individuals must meet each stage before moving forward to the next. However, the results of this study may suggest that students experience the paradigm as a hierarchy. Most of the students in the survey did not speak to physiological needs directly. A few students did

identify ideas that may be considered physiological factors in their hopes for college education. They commonly referenced learning and certification as a means of gaining a job. This job may represent a means of meeting physiological needs for some (e.g. “a way to not be homeless later on in life”). It is possible that students enrolled in college and attending class regularly perceive their immediate physiological needs to be met. However, it is important to recognize that when a student’s physiological needs are not being met in the present, he/she may not be motivated or able to contribute to the classroom community. Unfortunately I anticipate that this is true with many of my students who are working multiple full/part-time jobs and attempting to be a productive full-time student.

For the majority of students, the desire for a job seemed to either represent Maslow’s (1968) second or third level. The second level (safety) was recognized as students demonstrated a need for comfort and a safe environment in the classroom community as well as security in the future (e.g. 47% of students desired a job or career from college education; 15% of students specifically recognized safety as a benefit of the classroom community; 25% of students used the terms comfort, safety, security, or less/more afraid when describing the classroom community).

Maslow’s (1968) third level (belongingness and love) is definitely a concern for students as relationships and connection seemed to be a top priority in the survey results. The most frequently mentioned possible benefit of classroom communities was either relationships (21%) or getting to know others (15%). When various types of connection are considered (i.e. relationships, getting to know others, networking, closeness, togetherness, unity, belongingness, and relating to others through common goals) it is fair to say that well over half of the students believe that one of more of these ideas would be a positive result of classroom community. This statistic does not include those students mentioning supporting/help others or simply working together to better group skills, as these may or may not denote desire for connection. Conversely,

the most frequently mentioned problems/disadvantages of classroom community revolved around relational concerns (e.g. 35% of students reported problems with connecting such as: becoming too dependent, becoming too talkative/involved with others, the formation of cliques and divisions, exclusion, diverse ideas, conflict). Belongingness seems to be both a need and a fear. Perhaps in a classroom community, students will need to feel safe before they will be motivated to build relationships.

The bridge between Maslow's (1968) second and third levels seemed natural and somewhat juxtaposed for the students surveyed. As they develop comfort and security, they will also be developing belongingness and relational connections. Many students even eluded to the relationships and connections as the cause of the comfort and security. This speaks to Tennant's (2006) recognition that sometimes fear and danger may drive togetherness. A few students recognized that their class came together because they were all frightened. As stated by Student Interviewee 7, "with a community you kind of overcome adversity sometimes and with her class we had the adversity of our final project, ... you get a lot closer with the people in that class as opposed to the other ones." Even a negative experience, as expressed by Student Interviewee 8- "We bombed the midterm"- can spur unity. Student Interviewee 8 explained,

And he [the professor] just said to the class, I'm willing to give you guys an extra credit assignment to boost everybody's grade a little bit. I'm gonna leave the room for 10 minutes, you guys sit down and talk. You guys decide if you want to take another test... what you want to do; ... we all looked around and we were like- we're a good group let's try to do something really cool together... it was all driven by us- he didn't do anything... And that was really cool because we knew that we had done the entire thing.

It is important to note that the previous quote seems to reference some elements of both self-esteem (Maslow's (1968) fourth level) and self-actualization (Maslow's (1968) fifth and final level of need). However, this was not a common recognition. Most students seemed to recognize

the need for and may therefore be motivated by the opportunity to have safety and belongingness needs met. Students who suggested being able to share ideas in order to better understand self and others pushed beyond the third level (e.g. 8% of students referenced increased confidence and being open with others); however this was not common. Only 2% of students specifically used the words self-esteem and/or confidence when discussing classroom community. When talking to Student Interviewees about future application of classroom community concepts, self-esteem became evident as a motivational factor for the future. Student Interviewees primarily spoke about being able to effectively and even confidently relate to and work with others. As Student Interviewee 9 said, “more exposure to the way other people think and how they operate will just make me better able to work well with them and make the process enjoyable as opposed to grinding away and causing pain.” Again, this quote seems to not only refer to future abilities, but also the need to for safety and comfort.

We will need to be cognizant that students may be focused more on security and belongingness at this point in their lives. If we subscribe to Maslow’s (1968) original theory, we must assume that students may not be motivated by inquiry and mastery of learning as they are focused on meeting the lower levels of the hierarchy.

Uncertainty and Experience. One integral component of meaningful learning is critical thinking. Psychologists and philosophers have explored and encouraged critical thinking, while educators have worked diligently to implement critical thinking in the classroom. Critical thinking gives students the opportunity to not simply practice rote memorization or routine application, but to ask questions, interpret results and approach structures and guidelines with an open mind and permission to step outside of the box. Students in the survey did recognize classroom community as providing them with opportunities to ask questions, become more open-minded, and perhaps most importantly, learn from other students and not just the teacher. Some

students also found these “out of the box” classroom activities to be problems/disadvantages of community. The majority of students did not necessarily see the classroom as providing a way to consider the subjectivity of individual experience, and continuously synthesize and evaluate social structures and apply accepted standards and guidelines (Huitt, 1998). By considering John Dewey’s call for inquiry, we can begin to see why students may be hesitant to embrace critical thinking, but also what elements of critical thinking they are already recognizing.

The quest for certainty has held an irreplaceable and undying role in most cultures for numerous centuries. Greek civilizations were dominated by the search for reason, which was later dismissed by the Western world’s devotion to Christian thought as a means of providing truth and direction (Dewey, 1929). Reason, philosophy, and religion, among others, served as vehicles for determining the beliefs and actions that a culture must follow. Without these guiding forces, human beings would be forced to contemplate and question, resulting in confusion, differing opinions, and most detrimental, a loss of security and stability. It was the modern science movements that introduced the possible disconnection between “what man is concerned with here and now and the faith concerning ultimate reality” (Dewey, 1929, pp.255-256). This disconnect highlighted the role that uncertainty and insecurity must play in practical activity and scientific experimentation. This disconnect also enabled us to recognize that change and chance are filled with uncertainty. Human beings crave certainty and thus, are often opposed to change, experimentation, and questioning. If an individual can grasp a piece of knowledge- a means of knowing- than security once again is possessed; and yet, a complete certainty is realistically impossible- it is only possible in the mind (Dewey, 1929). This desire for security is undoubtedly a strong force behind the development of many philosophic traditions (Dewey, 1929). It may also be a subconscious force behind the students’ perceptions. To focus on questioning and experimenting, in an educational setting, may require a lens of uncertainty and the ability to focus

on the present. As noted previously, students are future oriented; asking them to reveal their uncertainty about the future may be challenging.

Despite the Greek influenced modern ideology that “experience cannot deliver to us necessary truths; truths completely demonstrated by reason”, Dewey (1929) was determined to highlight the importance and role of experience in the development of knowledge (pp.26-27). Dewey would ask students to put whatever is considered “honorable, admirable, and approvable” into practice to confirm and justify the knowledge (Dewey, 1929,pp. 32-33). Not only are students asked to continuously apply material and knowledge previously learned, but they are concurrently obtaining new knowledge that will enable him/her to reconsider and refine that which is already known. Experience provides opportunities to move beyond a single body of knowledge, and use reflective thinking to judge and critique obtained knowledge.

Experience was not a primary theme of the surveys; however it was a secondary consideration for many students. While 16% of students recognized that they specifically desired an experience of some type during their college education, other students seemed to be open to not only the experience of classroom community, but open to the use of experiential education and/or cooperative learning in the classroom. Surprising the most commonly referenced type of experience recognized as integral to their college experience, was the “memorable college experience.” There was however little indication that this experience- which seemed to focus more on creating memories for the future- would actually produce knowledge and ideas that could be applied to the future. Other students referenced the role of experience as a means to gaining success. Students do seem to recognize experience (i.e. either through direct or indirect references) as an educational opportunity; however they did not often reference a thorough exploration of possible learning. We should not overlook the fact that students do seem to realize that some learning may come from the connection experience or the college experience itself.

Currently, most students believe this learning to be very surface level and still providing them with “skills” to use in pursuit of success, someone to be-with for study purposes, and possible opportunities for networking (Bauman, 1995).

Perhaps what is absent from most student responses is Dewey’s (1929) concept of experimental inquiry. If we approach experiences through a lens of experimental inquiry, we will be able to move through the two phases of inquiry. The first phase of inquiry requires us to select and attend to various and all aspects of the object or event. While students are currently choosing to focus on concerns about the possibility of connection and ease/styles of learning, we may also encourage attention to possibilities of quality and depth of learning as well as types of connection expected and existing. Secondly, we must work to find correlations and between this and other events. These two phases of inquiry enable us to move from a shallow recognition of facts and ideas, to a deeper more secure understanding. Dewey defines thinking as the “actual transition from the problematic to the secure” (Dewey, 1929, pp.226-227). Inquiry promotes thinking and encourages us to not simply find one unquestionable answer to the problem or experience, but instead to use our “quest for certainty” to continuously introduce new questions and seek multiple answers and view points (Dewey, 1929, pp.227-229). The mode of scientific thinking promoted by inquiry allows the learner to revel in doubt and develop a natural curiosity evoking an ongoing search. A few interviewees made statements that expressed uncertainty such as, “I don’t know it just really seems like the standard of life now is you have to make it to college or else you’re not going to get anywhere”; however the majority of survey responses seemed to express certainty in answering the question. Only a few surveys overtly stated that they were unsure about their response or the question such as: “IDK” (which I understand to be short for I Don’t Know). Only a few students indicated whether they had experienced the community or not, resulting in answers that seemed to be “proven” regardless of experience. Additionally, many responses lacked variety

and or depth of thought. This may be another indication of the need to appear certain in our society.

Even if students do subconsciously sense the uncertainty Dewey (1929) recognized as part of the experiential process, their fears may be too strong. Educators will need to help students courageously embrace uncertainty and work diligently to seek certainty in not knowing. This component of gaining knowledge and welcoming inquiry is integral for Dewey (1929). As an educator, I believe classroom community is one avenue for helping students to learn experientially: one goal may be to accept uncertainty. We will need to consider whether we can provide a community that provides students with the ability to willingly accept and eventually embrace uncertainty.

The knowledge produced by inquiry allows the knower to explore the meaning and existence of means and consequences, and ultimately gives the knower the power to understand and interact with other objects (Dewey, 1929). As noted by Faculty Interviewee D, he/she hopes students are able to,

make a connection between what they are learning in class and the ways in which they are engaged either with their classmates or people outside of the university... to have hands on experience where you are actually developing context and relationships... is really important for developing a meaningful experience.

Perhaps the university educator will be called to embrace experimental inquiry as a means of discovering new ways to help students seek intelligence and new modes of thinking. Certainly students will need guidance through the steps of inquiry and into a deeper way of knowing. While a few students did feel that the classroom community experience would speak to deeper levels of learning and future application like such as, preparing “students to be global citizens especially by exercising their right to participate,” most did not specify this level of depth or intent to apply

knowledge to areas other than job performance. Even application of skills learned to job performance was not common when students discussed classroom community. A small number of students even believed the classroom community experience would create a false environment that would leave them unprepared for the working world.

Perhaps the most challenging element of using experience to promote inquiry is Dewey's (1929) recognition that a student does not think, until he/she begins to struggle with the "conditions of the problem at first hand" and engages in "seeking and finding his own way out" (Dewey, 1916, p. 160). Understandably this involves confusion and risk as there will be points during the inquiry process that require great uncertainty and blind faith. Students themselves will be asked to take a risk: a risk that encourages all to recognize problems and seek solutions (Dewey, 1929). Dewey believes that "mental quality" is finally achieved when responses are given "to the doubtful as the doubtful" (Dewey, 1929, pp. 224-225). As previously noted, many students are likely to need and be motivated by security and safety. Educators will need to work diligently to help students not only meet Maslow's (1968) second, third, and fourth levels, but then motivate students to seek self-actualization (fifth level). It is during self-actualization that students will be concerned with solving problems and gain the autonomy to take risks or become self-directed (Maslow, 1968; Tennant, 2006). Perhaps as Knowles (1990) suggests, there may be a disconnect between the need to be self-directed and the educational systems' preparation of students to be able to be self-directed (Knowles, 1990; Tennant, 2006). Uncertainty will abound if students attempt to seek critical thinking and/or self-actualization. The challenge will be helping students to feel secure and safe enough to move through Maslow's (1968) hierarchy, embrace the uncertainty necessary for inquiry, and being to focus on generativity. Reaching these levels of development will likely be integral to future job success.

Asking the Faculty. Semester after semester, I ask my students to work together- to use dialogue to connect- and to think critically. Inevitably, I still have students asking for quick remedies and skills. What they fail to see and what I fall short in providing seems to align with larger social limitations of understanding and thinking. Based on the results of this study, I now understand that asking student to think critically may be beyond their scope of experience and perceptions of what is expected and/or gained from the college experience and specifically the college classroom.

We should recognize that the majority of Faculty Interviewees recognized benefits of the classroom community that run parallel to those of students. They too recognized learning as result of engagement, connection, and comfort. As Faculty Interviewee D stated,

I think that you learn more when you are willing to work with each other from a perspective of caring about each other and the work that you're doing... it's not just that you have to do something together but that...there is more of an interpersonal connection between students and so I think that helps sustain them through the course. I think it helps maintain their interest in the class if they feel like they're part of a community. They might feel like they're more obligated or they might feel more compelled to do the reading, to be prepared, to do their best because they care... I think developing community also is about building a trust between each other, so especially if you are talking about difficult topics that might be...difficult personally; I think that it helps ...that you can open up, so I think that it improves communication.

Faculty Interviewee B also spoke to the enhanced sense of comfort by saying, that giving students an “enhanced sense of comfort...make it more likely that they are going to learn.” Faculty Interviewee E, believes it is the

reciprocity of the caring... [that] feeds into their learning. If... I care, they care; they care about the subject, [and] they learn it...they know that I feel that it is important to their success and I want them to be successful... I would almost go so far as to say that you can't have one without the other.

Perhaps Faculty Interviewee E provides us with a link between connection and care and the importance of success for students.

In addition to these ideas, most faculty interviewees also took the possibilities of learning to a new level of recognition. Faculty Interviewee B reminds us that,

in one sense...young people are more connected to each other and to the world than in any generation in America or for that matter world history...At the same time, most of those connections are non-personal connections. Kids don't go out in the yard and play with their neighbors anymore. New housing neighborhoods don't have porches. They just have steps so you can get in the house as quickly as possible and shut the door and nobody sits on their porch after dinner...I remember when I was a kid, after dinner when the house was burning up especially after cooking dinner, you went out on the porch where it was cool and neighbors could talk to each other, kids could go out in the street and play or in the field next door... So there is a greater sense of connectedness on one level and a rapidly diminishing sense of connectedness on an interpersonal level, so I think creating community in the classroom gives us at least the possibility of creating personal connections with folks...I think community in the classroom can help bridge that which I think is really important for us to do.

This comment recognizes a great purpose for connection and interaction. It helps us to understand that student learning may be more than impersonal connecting and sharing, but instead connecting interpersonally to enable students learn the importance of face-to-face relationships and the value this may have in today's society. It also reminds us that learning does not just come from the content of the course, but also from the interaction the course involves. Faculty Interviewee C also indicated that the relationships developed in a classroom community may help students to learn the importance of joining together for greater causes such as, "leading a protest downtown, or starting an educational support group." Faculty Interviewee C believes that the real learning benefit is that students develop "confidence and interest in creating more of a sense of community in their own community." Taking on responsibility and connecting to a greater sense of citizenship was also one element of learning mentioned by Faculty Interviewee D by stating,

community helps students understand that they're in control of their learning and they're responsible for kind of taking and kind of receiving that learning rather than having it

delivered to them...So I think it's more like the habits of citizenship that happen in a community... democracy is a plurality of voices and so you're developing that hopefully in the class.

Finally Faculty Interviewee A recognizes that a classroom community can provide the space that embraces the "power of values coalescing and creating the kind of life and quality of life that I want to be a part of."

By beginning with the functional considerations of learning, as indicated by the students, and then incorporating some of the philosophical expectations and constraints of learning, we can begin to see the possibilities and larger implications of student learning in the classroom. While we might assume that students need to change or enhance their understanding of the possibilities, Faculty Interviewee E believes,

it's our [educators'] understanding that you need to enhance... Because we know that community matters in a learning environment then we have to create environments that enhance that learning and that community. Students are too young and too immature and they don't understand the impact of what it is.

I do not want to ignore student perceptions, yet I do not want to assume that their understanding of learning cannot be supplemented by a positive classroom community experience. We must continue to explore philosophical and experiential opportunities and challenges.

As Greene (1988) recognized, a great deal of education focuses on survival skills, which is heard in the voices of the students. Students are not educated to consider why situations occur and what they really mean; however, educators can help individuals become aware, empowered and enable them to make sense of numerous experiences. Educators can use classroom communities to help students "reach beyond themselves, to wonder, to imagine, to pose their own question" and consequently, enable them to "learn to learn" (Greene, 1988, p.14).

As noted in the results and earlier in the analysis, most students do believe their

learning is impacted by the classroom community. A vast majority of the students not only believe that their learning will be impacted by classroom community, but they also believe their learning can be affected negative or positively by the classroom environment. As suggested earlier by the intimacy vs. isolation stage, students seemed to see their learning as primarily affected by the success or failure of the interactions involved in the experience. Rarely did they speak to practices or aspects of learning itself, but rather the means by which something can or cannot be learned; for students, the means of learning primarily revolves around issues of commitment, assimilation, and togetherness.

Theme 2: Uncertainty of Connection

As noted by so many scholars (e.g. Bellah, 2008, Greene, 1988; Tocqueville, 1835/1965) and practiced by so many people, individualism and independence often constrain and/or discount community and connection. However, it is this very connection with others that often enables us to find “happiness, self-esteem, and moral worth” (Bellah et al., 2008). Undergraduate students seem to very aware of the ironic interdependence of these two concepts and readily apply these ideas to the perception of classroom community. They believe connection and relationships to be both promising and fearful elements and outcomes of classroom community. Connection also seems to be both the best and the worst part of community; it was a reoccurring theme for most students. Students also believe this connection in the classroom could lead to learning and or academic growth (27%), but too much connection could have negative impacts and less learning may occur. Again, this reflects the idea that some connection will be valuable, but autonomy and self-reliance must be protected. Perhaps it is intuition, but students have identified one of the key elements of community. Communities must enable the individual to come closer to understanding and becoming a successful self (Bellah et al., 2008). A few students surveyed did mention the

possibilities of self-growth; however this was not a common theme. The fear of losing individuality was more frequently recognized.

Students do not always believe the entire class will be involved in the community, and they accept that individuals may not desire to be a part of the community or may be excluded from the community (approximately 12%), yet these students also believe this to be potentially problematic. Finally, some students are still holding on tightly to the pride and responsibility of individual accomplishment. Approximately 7 % of students did not believe their learning would be impacted at all by a classroom community and made comments such as: “I am an independent person and community is more of a dependent thing” or “I can work alone just fine.” As noted by Faculty Interviewee C, students may “have been trained frankly through their educational process to be very individualistic and of course a lot of our messages don’t help.”

While we still harbor individualistic notions and practices, our discovery of self occurs through interaction with others (Bellah et al, 2008; Goffman, 1967). Greater institutional structures and cultural expectations often determine how and when we interact with others. Ultimately whether we recognize it or not, human beings do not see themselves as ends, but instead act as part of a larger system or groups (Bellah et al., 2008). As stated by Bellah et al. (2008) “we are parts of a larger whole that we can neither forget nor imagine in our own image without paying a high price.” We must attempt to understand how we connect with others as well as how we assimilate into a larger collection of individuals, while still maintaining our individual agency, uniqueness, and worth. Approximately 8% of students reported fears of being negatively influenced including: peer pressure, loss of individualism and conformity, and negative attitudes. If we know that many students fear loss of individuality, and anticipate peer pressure from others, then as Faculty Interviewee A suggests, “development of individual thought within community would be a goal of community building within the classroom.” As we begin to connect frames,

we may find Dewey's methods of inquiry to be helpful in not only our search for deeper thought and learning, but also as a means to building individuality. Additionally, we should turn to studies of togetherness and assimilation to focus on how an individual becomes part of a group, but does not lose his/her individual identity.

In recognizing the possibilities and opportunities for connection, we would be remiss to not recognize that numerous studies have already been performed that focus specifically on student perceptions of group work and consequently connection. While classroom community calls for more than small group and/or collaborative practices, many of the same concerns and problems are likely to be present. In my experience, students fear and do not genuinely view group work as positive for a variety of reasons. Group scholars recognize that possible conflict with group members and negative impact on grades (both of which were identified as student concerns in this study as well) create negative perceptions and beliefs about the group work process (Feichtner & Davies, 1985; Mello, 1993). However, we cannot refute that these "myths" may be based on some degree of truth (Livingston & Lynch, 2000). We need to find ways to ensure that the development of classroom community is not one of the pedagogical structures that reinforces these myths, but instead helps students to see connection and group interaction in a more positive light. In the current study as well as in many others, we must admit that student perceptions are often developed and spread void of actual experience with group interaction (Pauli, Mohiyeddini, Bray, Michi, & Street, 2008). Regardless, prior beliefs and expectations may affect openness and ultimately positive group outcomes.

Togetherness and Being. In a search for continuity and connection, we not only search for means of finding others, but we reach further to discover forms of togetherness and strive, sometimes unknowingly, for a state of being-for the other (Bauman, 1995). However, Bauman

(1995) clarifies this understanding of connection and togetherness by exploring several different forms.

Encouraging students to seek togetherness and connection may allow many students to “leap from isolation to unity” (Bauman, 1995, p.51). This requires students to embrace being-for others, and may enable students to use the classroom community as a means of finding agency and belonging as they transition into the college setting. Bauman (1995) would caution all students and faculty alike that the true benefit of classroom community would require being-for others as well as emotion, commitment, and hope; thus, creating a society of individuals responsible for and committed to the well-being and positive future of one another.

As Faculty Interviewee A reminds us, as a society, “we have materialism, consumerism, and competition- these elements very much undermine certain values of community.” Faculty Interviewee C believes that if community is implemented in only certain classrooms, “the tide of individualism is so strong” that students may recognize that specific classroom community as one experience, but then once again embrace individualism.

Mobile togetherness is what Bauman refers to as “street-style togetherness” as we often encounter other beings in passing and see them as mere objects or obstructions (1995, p. 44). Bauman (1995) notes that individuals often try to avoid being with the other in these situations, much like during stationary togetherness, which is usually inevitable, but unwanted. Stationary togetherness occurs often in situations where strangers gather knowing “that they will soon go, each one’s own way, never to meet again- but that before that happens they are bound to share this space here and now” (Bauman, 1995, p.45).

As students talked and wrote about connection and relationships, they often referred to the opportunity to meet people, study with others in class, and more importantly, making connections that will provide them with help and comfort for the class. I would argue that students in most

classes, regardless of community, exhibit at least mobile togetherness, but this may be the only togetherness experienced in some classes. Bauman (1995) would consider this to be “episodic”. For students to experience what Bauman considers stationary togetherness, they must be able to recognize each other as sharing a space for a defined time period. This form of togetherness may explain the recognitions that community may be temporary. As explained by Faculty Interviewee D, “in some ways your community classroom is temporary; it’s never designed to be permanent.” This temporary structure may limit the class to stationary togetherness. As recognized by Faculty Interviewee D, classroom community “nurtures things like trust and openness and communication to feel like you’re part of that in group kind of thing, but I think that when the classes are over, then it’s gone.” Faculty Interviewee D imagines that students will wonder if they “have to have attachments to everybody” and “trust everybody.”

Tempered togetherness is different from the previous two forms of togetherness because it requires a purposeful togetherness, usually revolving around a greater goal or mission: often found in offices or in organizational groups. When human beings gather to form a mass or crowd, driven by a much larger external purpose, manifest togetherness is most likely occurring. Contrarily, postulated togetherness is often stimulated by an inner need to identify with others. Finally, meta-togetherness is designed to provide the opportunity for connection and a greater promise for welcomed encounter and interaction (Bauman, 1995).

After speaking with faculty, I believe these later forms of togetherness, specifically meta-togetherness are preferred and desired by many educators. As stated by Faculty Interviewee D, in an ideal classroom community “students would be coming in and they would be socializing with each other and care about each other personally.” Faculty Interviewee E finds that “when you have to learn everybody’s name, that creates community. If I know your name, I’m going to commune with you. I feel some responsibility. I have ownership of the person you are in some

small way.” As explained by meta-togetherness, this basic interaction and immediacy provides connection but also a greater possibility of responsibility and commitment to each other.

Faculty Interviewee A expresses the need for community members to have an ethic of care. An “ethic of care means it’s not all about me but your well being; my well being is totally tied up in your well being.” However Faculty Interviewee A also recognizes that this is not a natural way of thinking and that “when we are frightened, when we are fearing scarcity, we move into self - protection and I think that we are wired that way.” Faculty Interviewee A used the example of Katrina to demonstrate that as a community it is important to have social capital in a group and expectations of each other that are upheld. Yet, we must realize that in a disaster or catastrophe, the social capital and ethic of care “breaks down very quickly.” If students feel threatened or challenged in any way, they may not be able to reach this form of togetherness. Ironically, the threat or fear mentioned by most students was interaction and connection itself. This encourages us to reflect on Maslow’s (1968) hierarchy and Erikson’s (1963) stages. As mentioned in the previous section, students may be motivated to meet needs of safety and belongingness, and they are most likely to be facing intimacy vs. isolation. How might we encourage students to uphold their expectations and responsibilities to the community if their current perceptions and needs are challenged?

Two of the 5 faculty interviewed specifically mentioned that they believe students that care about others in the community will be more engaged and invested. This care may be considered emotion, and thus it logically follows Bauman’s (1995) arguments that individuals will no longer be indifferent or apathetic. The majority of students in this survey did not convey a deep sense of care or commitment to the community. Student surveys in this study did not frequently use the word “care” to describe interaction with others. Instead, the focus was on developing opportunities for help and support. Almost 12% of the students mentioned helping others and 7%

of the students believe they feel supported; help and support may or may not involve care for others. Students also referenced the motivation and/or encouragement to engage and perform. While these concepts were not always linked, some students may agree with the faculty members' beliefs.

Students and faculty see the possibility for more than being-aside, yet they may not fully embrace the commitment required in being- for. Students in a classroom community seem to desire the opportunity to be-with others and value the possible relationship that emerges from this encounter (Bauman, 1995). Bauman (1995) believes the highest form of togetherness privilege being “whole and continuous”, and a continuous communication between human beings that completely embraces the possibility of a perfect totality is considered a form of “being-for” and not simply “being-with” (p.51). While it is possible for various forms of togetherness to display the state of being-for, it does require a shift from standing side-by-side to finding a deeper sense of obligation and commitment. It requires “tearing-off the masks until the naked, defenseless face shows itself and is seen” (Bauman, 1995, pp.59-60). It is only by recognizing the true uniqueness of the other and experiencing an “emotional engagement” that one can live being-for another and experience a primal commitment to one other than the self (Bauman, 1995, p.62).

Emotion plays a key role in transforming the individual into a human being-for the other. The emotion experienced allows the individual to escape “indifference”, instill openness and positive uncertainty, and finally help the individual to discard repetitive routine and embrace a world without universal laws and codes (Bauman, 1995). While faculty members may hope for this emotional investment, Faculty Interviewee C, “some students are unwilling to share emotionally.” This may prevent and/or challenge engagement in the classroom as well as the possibility of being-for.

Although being-for attempts to alleviate and diminish loneliness, which was recognized as a benefit of classroom community, it requires responsibility to the other as well as a continuous stretch to reach and pursue the future (Bauman, 1995). As one student warns us, if there is “too much commitment, people won’t be able to handle it.” Furthermore, the lack of emotional commitment may be reason for lack of engagement and willingness to join a community of individuals in the classroom. While some students recognized the lack of participation as being problematic, other students indicated that they did not need nor desire classroom community. As recognized earlier, several students even suggested that while some connection and relationships were positive, the closer the relationship became, the greater the risk negative impacts on learning. Students may only be comfortable with Bauman’s (1995) “episodic” togetherness.

Assimilation and Accommodation. As individuals come together, they often begin to operate and structure themselves in ways that convey adaptation, which Piaget (1973) believes consists of two components- assimilation and accommodation (Tennant, 2006). As students encounter classroom community, they are likely to experience both assimilation and accommodation. Students exposed to the structure and pedagogy of classroom community will likely assimilate by forcing the experiences into a pre-existing schema of group interaction. As noted in the results, students commonly understand community to people with commonalities and possible interaction. They are likely to compare and analyze classroom community through their expectations for and experiences with communities in school organizations and living situations. Their experiences with past groups and beliefs about coming together will frame and cloud the ability to interact effectively with members of the classroom community.

Conversely, students will also be practicing accommodation as they begin to change their perceptions and possibilities of community through experience with the classroom community.

Additionally, beliefs about coming together and belonging to a group will be affected and molded as well.

Educators using classroom community as a pedagogy are most likely hoping that student will adapt- through assimilation and accommodation- to the structure and connection required in classroom community through a series of interactions and encounters. We believe that not only will coming together integrate a continuously transforming view of pedagogical structure, but it will also challenge students to reconfigure their understandings of individual and collective existence. However, as we have found, this may be too great of an endeavor for some students.

For Bakhtin (1968/1984), the adaptation, or transformation process is explained through the notion of carnival. Carnival represents a type of transformation, involving a break and reversal of previously established principles of order. The previously established order that so many students may be facing is defined by the individualistic views of society. This moment of carnival provides the individual with feelings of agency and a movement from helplessness to power (Bakhtin, 1968/1984). It is only during carnival that power structures and hierarchical ideas, and all inequality is suspended. When the distance and isolation of diversity, are eliminated, an ultimate form of empowerment can be found. Perhaps it takes a moment of carnival to encourage students to sit with the uncertainty they may experience and remain open to possibilities of being-for the other (Bauman, 1995; Dewey, 1929).

As noted earlier, students believe connecting with others leads to a more comfortable environment that should promote the sharing of ideas within the classroom community. Dewey (1960) believed this sharing “in the open air of public discussion and communication” is what leads to the best choices and idea development (1960, p.286). However, the majority of students did not explicitly explore the ways that this dialogue and sharing of ideas would impact them. We must therefore explore the possibilities of using dialogue in connection and possible assimilation.

Mikhail Bakhtin also studied the use of dialogue in human interaction and its contribution to the transformation process (Bakhtin, 2001). For, dialogue exhibits the possibility of change and progression. Dialogue provides options and is very empowering. Bakhtin (2001) sees life as constantly offering potential for interaction with the “diverse other” through the use of dialogue. As noticed by one senior talking with “different people from different backgrounds impacts my learning and helps shape me as a student.”

Like Bakhtin (1968/1984), Burke (1935) recognizes the role of dialogue and interaction within the transformation process. Burke, however, seems to allude to the persuasion that is evident within the conversion. Burke (1935) introduces ‘psychoanalysis’, a form of non-religious conversion. The psychoanalytic model presents a framework in which the individual is influenced through the verbal language. Burke (1935) suggested that individuals in dialogue may influence each other by shaping attitudes and future actions. A transformation of the individual may then occur and result in re-identification. As noted previously, several students seemed to allude to influence when discussing how others’ ideas helped to shape their opinions; however, the word “influence” was only used to describe negative persuasion (i.e. approximately 12% of students referenced negative influences as a result of classroom community).

An important element of Burke’s psychoanalytic model is the recognition of autonomy for the human agent, and the interest the individual must take in the transformation process itself (Burke, 1935). Student Interviewee 7 stated, “I think one of the best things about college that we didn’t have as much in high school is the discussion that we have-where people start contributing collaborative[ly and] building a new paradigm [or] outlook on whatever your topic is.” This student is not only aware of the role that dialogue plays in shaping attitudes, but seems to welcome the transformation process.

If students begin to see their successes and failures as collective and not individualistic then they may have experienced psychoanalysis (Burke, 1935). By using language that recognizes the community of a collective unit, Student Interviewee 7 stated, “We’d fail together, we’d excel together.” While this language was not common, and most students used singular pronouns such as “I” and “You”, the transformation of identity may occur with time and commitment. Again, these factors may be limited by stationary togetherness and/or being-aside or being-with others (Bauman, 1995).

As individuals merge from independent existence to group identity, Chesebro, Cragan, and McCullough (1973) believe 4 stages are experienced. First, and perhaps most easily recognized by students in this study, is the process of credentialing. By telling stories and sharing thoughts, individuals will begin to gain a greater understanding of others and their connection to the group. Several students did indicate that hearing diverse opinions and ideas was a benefit of the community (i.e. 14% recognized learning from others as a benefit of classroom community; 6% referenced the benefit of hearing diverse opinions; 9% believe learning is enhanced by being able to hear diverse perspectives). Many of the surveys and student interviews recognized the connection between hearing ideas and opinions and learning from this situation. Student surveys recognized that the “exchange of ideas helps the flow of knowledge” and a few students would agree that if students “share their thoughts and ideas, resulting in increased, focused discussion, that can lead to a higher level of learning.”

Despite these recognitions, only a few students seemed to recognize these opinions as influential. In defining community, very few students recognized influence as present. Student Interviewee 3 recognized that in classroom communities he/she,

was able to have heated debates and know the next time I see that person in class it would not be with harsh feelings, just a feeling of readiness for the next debate. I also learned how to defend my ideas quickly when put on the spot.

This seems to indicate that hearing diverse opinions and defending your own played more of a role than influence. Conversely, one Faculty Interviewee described an experience in a classroom community that involved influence from dialogue. Student Interviewee 8 believes this classroom dialogue,

opens you up to another perspective... because I kind of find myself middle of the road and I look at the crazy conservative or the crazy liberal [and] I'm like how can you be that way, but then they talk and they're so passionate about it and then you're almost more passionate about it, not one way or another, but you learn and you hear things that you didn't hear because you only hear things that are in the media and depending on what you're listening to, you're only getting one side of the story, so it was kind of cool to get both sides of the story coming at you from either end. So I think that helps you a lot...because you like to be around people that agree with you. When I say I hate McCain or I hate Obama, you want them to go 'yeah me too.' But when they don't, you're forced to think 'why do I believe that?; what can I say to persuade somebody else that doesn't?'

This statement indicates the possibility of being influenced, yet unlike Interviewee 3's statement, the focus seems to be on persuading others. Furthermore, we must be aware of the possibility of both positive and negative effects of hearing diverse voices. While diverse voices do give us the opportunity to hear and even possibly be persuaded by others, when one voice or speech overpowers another's in dialogue, individuality is overshadowed by a secondary identity (Bakhtin, 1968/1984). This overshadowing eliminates the opportunity to be-for the other (Bauman,1995).

Second, as referenced earlier by Burke's (1935) psychoanalysis and Bakhtin's (1965/1993) carnival, groups experience polarization (Chesebro, Cragan, & McCullough, 1973). Not only do groups begin to use rhetoric that conveys their belongingness and commitment to the group, but they commonly "polarize" or see themselves as separate from others. Separation from others may

take various forms and certainly may lead to the exclusion that several students referenced; however, it is considered an important step in group and/or community development. The possibility of exclusion was referenced by students, and noted by Faculty Interviewees C and D. As stated by Faculty Interviewee C, “the notion of community is kind of an interesting one because of course by definition it excludes. The community members are “focused on some collective action [and] if somebody’s not” they may be excluded. Additionally, “if students come in and they have already made friends... it may end up feeling to someone else that they’re not invited in, even if that’s not the case.” Even in a strong classroom community, Faculty Interviewee A recalls, “you saw people who were not choosing to be involved in the community, being somewhat isolated by their peers in that classroom.” Ultimately, those excluded become “they” as those individuals accepted into the community become “we”.

The final two stages of what Cheseboro, Cragan, and McCullough (1973) term “consciousness raising” or the talk exemplified as a group forms an identity, incorporate the creation of new group values and the implementation and exhibition of the new group consciousness (Cragan, Wright, Kasch, 2004). The final two stages are most often seen in well-developed groups. While it is certainly possible that classroom communities may exhibit elements of these stages, it would require a great deal of time and commitment. Students did not seem to perceive these stages as elements of the classroom community experience. A few Faculty Interviewees did make references to the ideal classroom community as taking initiative to act on group values and desires. As stated by Faculty Interviewee A,

They’d be aware of the issues in their community... they would take action... that they would want to take action... they would tell me what they are going to do and how they are going to do it...they would be generating their own ideas and programs.

Perhaps this agency and potential new group consciousness may be achieved with more classroom community experiences and opportunities to practice being-for others.

Conflict and Emergence. Additionally, as noted earlier, a fair number of students were fearful of and/or concerned by the possibility of conflict and/or arguments occurring as a result of connection. If a community chose to handle the conflict destructively through dominance or avoidance, as opposed to constructive engagement, the conflict will quite possibly result in arguments and consequently negative perceptions of group work or connection (Desivilya and Eizen, 2005; Pauli, et al., 2008).

Perhaps the most challenging element of conflict is that most groups/communities need to experience positive conflict to enhance cohesiveness, develop problem-solving skills, moderate growth and change, as well as enhance quality (Nicotera, 1997). The avoidance of this conflict, may be a result of the fear and apprehension that community members feel. Certainly destructive conflict, often caused by dominance, can negatively impact the development of consensus, productivity of the group, and member satisfaction (Cragan et. al, 2004). It may entail incessant arguing and dissension. Understandably, students having experienced or heard about negative conflict will want to avoid this encounter.

It is also possible that the students do not fear the actual conflict, but instead what Bauman (1995) refers to as chaos, or “a state marked by fluidity, formlessness, indetermination, indifferentiation, and total confusion of all elements” (p.12). Although chaos is accepted as inevitable, we still seek an escape providing structure and order, to gain a freedom from anxiety and ambiguity (Bauman, 1995). In many ways, chaos requires Dewey’s (1929) uncertainty and desire for inquiry. Postmodern citizens seek comfort in society- a society that is both created by the fear of chaos, and the creator of the fear itself (Bauman, 1995). As discussed earlier, this chaos may be a result of lack of certainty about the situation and the unfamiliar recognition that

an experience must take place to move through this confusion and reach higher levels of performance and knowledge.

In these moments of chaos and tragedy, Chodron (1997) encourages us to breathe in the poisons: passion, aggression, and ignorance. Instead of making us suffer more, ingesting small doses and recognitions of these poisons will help us to develop “compassion and openness” (Chodron, 1997, p.122). We can encourage our students to sit with and see reality as it is and to “relate honestly to the immediacy of [their] experience and to respect [themselves] enough not to judge it” (p. 32). Secondly, we should lead our students in the process of refraining and making the “restlessness and fear” familiar (Chodron, 1997, p.34). It is only then that students will find the courage within themselves to take off the masks and remove the padding they are clinging to so tightly. Each student who can embrace the pain and courageously face uncertainty will learn more about themselves and their emotions, which is an ongoing adventure for all.

The Space for Building Classroom Community

Although there are many challenges to building community in the undergraduate classroom, perhaps the most important challenge for our purposes is the analysis and possible integration of expectations and perceptions of the millennial generation. As previously stated, the two themes with which we are primarily concerned are: 1) Education as a Means to an End: How can educators use pedagogy to help students gain knowledge that helps them reach their end goal of success, yet does not deny the opportunity for inquiry and potential reconsideration of the connotation of success?; and 2) Uncertainty of Connection: How can educators help students to embrace the uncertainty and possibility of connection with others and how might this contribute to student desires for success? These themes have been analyzed through two distinct yet overlapping lenses: 1) Cognitive Development and Inquiry; and 2) Commitment and

Togetherness. Finally, we consider both themes as analyzed through the lenses through a more contextually specific lens- Building Classroom Community. We will now need to consider such questions as: How does current research on classroom communities in higher education inform our understanding of the expectations for and limitations of this pedagogical tool?; How might the challenge of connection and commitment help students embrace the uncertainty that remains in both individualism and community development?; How might the community development experience encourage student inquiry and consequently a more critical and communal view of success and the means to its end?; and finally, How might the development of classroom communities that incorporate student perspective both meet and fall short of philosophical and progressive hopes for community development? As we turn to explore ideas of commitment and togetherness, cognitive development and inquiry, and the development of classroom communities, it will be critical to continuously listen to, respect, and consider students' evolving hopes and desires for meaningful connection and an overall meaningful college experience.

Understanding Community. As noted earlier, students are familiar with the concept of a community. They mainly define community as a "group of people" (at least 63%). Approximately 40% of students believe that the body of people may share a geographic location or environment, while 23% believe these people may live in this environment together. While this provides a strong foundation for building a classroom community as it does involve people and they often share a "classroom" space, only approximately 24% of students believe the people in the community may share a common goal and/or interest, while 7% recognize the people as having shared beliefs, emotions, or values. Finally, at least 12% of students perceive communities as having some other connection such as shared characteristics, bonds, connections. A few students suggested that people might share social needs, concerns, and resources. While these

commonalities were the most frequently mentioned aspects of community, even when combined this statistic represents less than half of the students surveyed (approximately 43%).

Through the results of this study, we know that students are bringing a basic understanding of the word community into their college experience; however, as noted by Faculty Interviewee C, “while they may get and understand the notion of community, they don’t embody it.” While students do seem to recognize that community is constituted by people coming together and sharing commonalities, they commonly referenced group activities and cooperative learning activities as examples of community in the classroom. Students believe they have seen or experienced these communities during college; usually communities are thought to exist in groups and organizations (58%) as well as living spaces (47%). Only 23% of the students specifically recognized the classroom as a community; however the number of students who did mention classroom community may be higher than we expected. This may indicate that students are a part of or at least subject to the concept of community development in the classroom at the undergraduate level.

Christiansen et al. (2002) highlight an important notation concerning the communities we are experiencing in the twenty-first century. They refer to these communities as “posttraditional” and believe they often exhibit incongruity and disconnections within the community as well as steady and vibrant renewal and change. Secondly, Christiansen et al. (2002) remind us that today’s communities take on multiple forms and meanings. Often we can see that “there is a need for a sense of enclosure at the same time as there is a drive to open out to the wider social world” (Christiansen et al., 2002, pp.55-56). These considerations help us to frame how communities are currently understood by educators and students. Considering student perceptions and previously established definitions of community, will enable us to understand possibilities and limitations of implementing classroom communities in higher education.

Elements of Community. Approximately 21% of students believe community members are involved in activities together or suggested that they interact together in some general way. When originally asked to define community, approximately 3%-4% of students mentioned one or more of the following elements: support; togetherness and/or belongingness; mutual concern with well-being and success, care, or protection of all; and working together to benefit either the group or the surrounding environment/others; feelings of comfort, safety, and/or home and family; and close-knit relationships. Only 2% of the students surveyed referenced the sharing of new ideas, learning, or growth. Less than 2% of students made any indication that you should or do have the opportunity to choose your community or the people that surround you. Additionally, only 2% of students believe people in communities influence one another. Without influence and strategic choices being made to be a part of the community, learning and growth may be difficult for both teachers and students. Only 4% of students perceive diversity as a possible part of the definition of community. From these initial perceptions, students seem to believe community may involve some commonality between individuals and/or some shared activity. Students have diverse ideas about other elements of community. While through other questions we have learned that students do perceive connection, comfort, learning, support, etc. to be important parts of a classroom, these factors may be seen only as benefits and/or problems; they may not be considered necessary for community development.

Many scholars suggest that community involves belonging and bonding together (i.e. Christiansen et al., 2002; McDill et al., 1973; Wood, 1992). Sergiovanni (1994) reminds us that these "collections of individuals who are bonded together" must have a "natural will" and desire to be a part of the group, but they must also have "shared ideas" (xvi). Drucker (1992) echoes many of these definitions, yet he helps us to understand that a community is often understood and defined by the tasks it performs. Faculty Interviewee A believes that if there is not "a shared

value, there is a shared respect and trust within the community, [and] there is interdependence within the community.”

While students do seem to agree with many of the basic ideas of community, the majority of the students did not convey a deep understanding of what is actually involved in a community. First, we should remember that students’ beliefs about connection may challenge the idea of “being-for” (Bauman, 1995). Students did express Sergioivanni’s (1994) idea that there is a bond or shared ideas (i.e. 24% of students recognized shared goals/interests; 7% recognized shared beliefs, emotions; 12% shared characteristics and/or bonds). Yet, the bond that students may experience may be limited to stationary togetherness and/or episodic encounters (Bauman, 1995). Second, Sergioivanni (1994) recognizes the need for autonomy in choosing to be a part of the community. As previously noted, 16% of students believe community is automatically evoked by an individual’s immediate surroundings. Only 2% of students referenced the idea of having any choice in community involvement. Conversely, the classroom community is often viewed as a forced community. Perhaps students are so accustomed to being forced into communities, that they no longer recognize choice. If students believe they do not need to make a choice to be a part of a community, they may not recognize the responsibility or agency that community members often possess.

Drucker’s (1992) definition of community by task performance aligns closely with students recognition that community members are likely involved in a common activity or interaction. Approximately 21% of students believe communities involve shared activity/interaction. Members of the community would however need to define a shared task. As one student mentioned, the task may simply be trying to pass. Several students believe they are working together to “do well.” Perhaps the question becomes: Might we help students to define a task that

is more integral to learning and the students' future success? Might we consider the task to be experientially connecting with others to develop knowledge that can be used to gain future success?

Broadening the definition of community as Wenger (1998) suggested, allows us to see the community as "a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence" (5). Wenger (1998) encourages us to consider that community is a descriptive term embracing those social interactions and gatherings that present worthy opportunities for involvement as well as a means of recognition for our involvement in this group. Additionally, Rovai & Lucking (2000, 2003) remind us of the belonging and responsibility that is evoked from competent participation in the community.

While the classroom community provides an opportunity for involvement, students will need to see this opportunity as worthy of their participation. Based on the results of their desires for college education, students most likely need to see their participation as connected to gaining information that can be used to find or excel in a good job.

The second half of Wenger's (1998) definition of community may be one of the many challenges to the undergraduate classroom community. Wenger (1998) recognizes the importance of recognition for participation with the community. How are students recognized for participation in a classroom community? How do we encourage students to desire recognition for commitment to others when they have most likely only seen recognition for individualism? This recognition may need to evolve from member pride and unique symbolic identity, often developed through consciousness-raising talk, as explained through small group theorists (i.e. Bales, 1970; Bormann, 1975; Chesebro, Cragan, & McCulloch, 1973). This recognition and pride does seem to be a possibility as several interviewees mentioned feelings related to these ideas. As noted by 5 of the 9 student interviewees, some sense of connection and/or unity is present when

they are a part of a community. Three of these 5 specifically focused on the idea of belongingness. As stated by Student Interviewee 5, this recognition could be that “I matter as an individual” or as Student Interviewee 6 suggested, “It feels good to be accepted and liked by everyone around you”. Ultimately you may recognize yourself and be recognized as “being in a large family.” Eventually students may recognize what Faculty Interviewee E expressed,

when you are part of a community you feel better about yourself as a person. You feel you are contributing to something. That you have value as an individual and it’s always good when you think that other people care about you and what is happening to you.

As stated by Faculty Interviewee A, there is possibility for community to evoke, “a profound sense of gratification, belongingness,...[and] a sense of support that I am not in isolation either in my work or my family, or my leisure, or my pleasure.” The belongingness and sense of mattering as an individual may be the only recognition students receive. Students may desire a more external award. Additionally, finding ways to help students recognize each other’s commitments may be challenging. While grades and peer evaluations will serve as a very familiar form of recognition, education about community expectations and methods of constructive feedback will likely be necessary. Regardless, the recognition received would need to be worthy of the uncertainty and chaos that be required in commitment to others (Bauman, 1995; Chodron, 1997).

As students noted (11%), exclusion of community members may be a problem in classroom communities. This exclusion may be both self and other initiated. While community can enhance inclusion, it can also evoke exclusion of others (Greene, 1993). We must be careful to give open invitations to anyone who might like to join the conversation and intentionally incorporate voices that may not be heard from the constituents in one classroom community. We want all community members to feel belonging and responsibility (Rovai and Lucking, 2000, 2003).

We must also consider the possibility of using belonging and responsibility to enhance learning. The act of sharing and juxtaposing various ideals for the community is what evokes and fuels the “focus and energy for learning” (Shields, 2003,p. 49). The undergraduate classroom community can become a place of care, respect, and encouragement for all (Kohn, 1996). Self-concept and self-esteem are enhanced by this connection and as research shows, positive self-concept and healthy self-esteem contribute to student success in the learning environment. As Frank (2004) noted, when any community of people are working toward common goals, appreciating and respecting contributions from all, and maintaining a safe environment, individuals begin to “make connections at a higher cognitive level” (17). As previously noted, educators will need to focus on encouraging students to reach for knowledge at higher cognitive levels, as that is not currently a commonly perceived benefit and/or opportunity of most students. However, 6 of the 9 Student Interviewees spoke specifically about learning during their interviews. While some see it as something received, most believe it to be a process, involving, and “the act of pursuing unlearned knowledge.” Several students did reference the application and connection of this knowledge for self-improvement purposes. Others simply saw learning as absorbed material or opportunities to make better grades.

It is fairly commonly accepted by educators that community does indeed play a positive role for many by enhancing growth and learning, but also as a means of meeting the human need for connection and belonging (e.g. Bloom, 1966; Christiansen et al., 2002; McDill & Rigsby, 1973; Wood, 1992; Sizer, 1984, 1992, 1996). Christiansen et al. (2002) believe that it is the narratives and concepts shared and negotiated within a community create both personal and social identities (Christiansen et al., 2002). Students did commonly recognize the ability to share ideas as a result of the connection and comfort of the community. Only 9% of students seem to recognize the possibility of learning from others through this sharing. Only a few students referenced

development of personal identity. Again, students' perception may provide a foundation for reaching these benefits of the community, yet students will need assistance and experiential learning to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to really connect, as well as how this connection and commitment can enhance growth and learning.

Wenger (1998) furthers our understanding of community and a potential means of enhancing growth and commitment, by introducing what are known as "communities of practice". Communities of practice are considered to be groups of people who come together sharing a common passion or interest to exchange ideas, and consequently grow and learn from one another. These types of communities can be a meaningful way to learn, if all members share a common appreciation or interest in the subject matter. Initial common interest in the subject is most likely only possible in elective courses, yet it may be possible for a professor to create a common interest within the class. As noted earlier, this interest may be connected to the commonly defined task.

While several faculty members interviewed hope for communities that exhibit characteristics of the "community of practice", this may or may not be a view held by students. As stated by Faculty Interviewee D, community incorporates "shared values [and] shared commitment, so it's both what you believe but also how you act and help out one another when needed." Students did recognize the opportunity to study together and working together on projects and a few seemed to really value learning and growing from interaction with others. If a common interest can be established and students are open to learning, a community of practice may be the beginning of greater possibilities of commitment and helping each other to excel and grow individually.

Because there is a need for shared ideas and tasks, Dewey suggests that we work towards "like-mindedness" in any community (Dewey, 1916, p.47). However, we must also recognize and support individuals of the community to gradually learn their stories and ideas. While members

are undoubtedly shaped by community, they are also shaping the common beliefs, interests, and values (Christiansen et al., 2002). Students would need to be open to creating common beliefs within the community, and not just forming community around those already established. As Christiansen et al. (2002) remind us, being part of a community requires that individuals understand one another. This can only happen if students are willing to take risks, focus on cooperation, challenge various viewpoints, and engage in problem solving (Frank, 2004). Community members should become dependent on interdependence (Freeman & Anderman, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Lee & Davis, 2000; Rovai, 2002).

While we often assume that communities are always exhibiting “togetherness and negotiation” it is not uncommon to see communities struggling and experiencing numerous strains (Christiansen et al., 2002, 57). Students recognize that there will be strains, yet they seem to feel this is indicative of an ineffective or failing community. As stated earlier, 12% of students believe that a negative community will detract from their learning. Certainly many of the problems and constraints suggested (e.g. distractions, discomfort, lack of initiative, conflict, etc.) will harm both relationships and learning; however, negative environments may present opportunities for learning, if students are willing to address and work through the tensions and differences experienced.

According to Wood (1992), there are three basic steps that can be used to steer the development of community in the public education system. While Wood studies and speaks specifically to developing communities in secondary education, his insights provide important considerations for the possibility of undergraduate classroom community.

First, Wood (1992) believes educators and students must be surrounded by an open and comfortable space. This includes physical surroundings as well as relational surroundings. While most students did not indicate physical preferences for the classroom, they were clearly

concerned about comfort and security of the group itself. Faculty on the other hand, did have many thoughts and concerns about the physical environment. Three of the 5 faculty interviewed felt that size was important. As stated by Faculty Interviewee C, “I think another obstacle is size and scale and that’s true of all communities, I think not just in the classroom.” Faculty members believe classroom community is most easily achieved with 20 to 25 students. Two faculty believe 20 is the ideal number, yet as Faculty Interviewee B explained, “I like 25 because if you are talking about an authentic college environment, everyday you’ve got two or three folks who are out for whatever reason.” This size

allows people some distance, allows them some space, if you are not interested in getting into the community at that size you’re probably not the only one so again there’s some comfort, ...and your peers don’t see you as the only one in the room not participating.

This quote reveals two additional factors and possibly constraints of undergraduate classroom community. As we know, attendance in college classes is often sporadic. Perhaps the hope would be that classroom community would motivate students to attend, yet a developing community may require attendance by all. As noted earlier, connection and care can evoke responsibility; however this may take time and presence to develop. The lack of student attendance, as noted by Faculty Interviewee B, could lead to exclusion. Students may also choose not to participate as was noted by the student surveys. Furthermore, if we consider student hopes and desire for college, we need to remember that most students do not see the development of connection and relationships as hopes for their college education, although they are personally interested in connection. Will these perceptions of what is taken away from college affect students willingness to attend and/or participate? These concerns complement Wood’s (1992) additional requirements for building communities.

Wood (1992) believes educators must help students to become actively involved in their education, and to gain control over their lives and their learning. Consequently, students must understand and appreciate the value and experience of being “part of something greater than themselves, realizing the strength that lies in working together for a common goal” (Wood, 1992, p.118).

In developing their unique community, they will undoubtedly need buy-in and all community members will need to feel a sense of ownership (Wood, 1992). The community should require commitment to honoring diversity and to finding strength through collaboration. While a few students did recognize the importance of diversity in a community (i.e. 4% included diversity when defining community; 6% believed diverse perspectives to be a benefit of classroom community) others seemed to feel that difference could be detrimental (i.e. 6% believe diverse ideas could be problematic). As noted by Student Interviewee 2, classroom communities should be small so that, “you could still have people getting along and it wouldn’t be that much...difference.” While some commonality will most likely be needed, the diversity and difference that is important for continuous growth and learning may not be fully embraced. Students may be willing to share the joys and disappointments that arise for individuals (Wood, 1992). They may even appreciate the shared history, identity, and vision, and become like family and help all people to feel respected and appreciated (Wood, 1992). However, we must be aware of the possible avoidance and/or fear of handling diversity. As noted earlier, students seem to be leery of conflict and conflicting opinions. Without conflict communication, groups (and possibly communities) risk groupthink and “resort to agreement at the expense of critical thinking” (Janis, 1983, p.206).

Many of the definitions explored here can be altered to meet the needs of each particular classroom; however we must be cautious to integrate some of the unrecognized aspects of

community that we feel are critical for success. If we want to honor students' voices, we need to sure to help them find value in their commitment to the responsibilities of the community.

Leading the Classroom Community. The faculty member will play a key role in the development of classroom community. Student Interviewee 8 recognizes that “you form a community a lot quicker if you have somebody sort of pulling all the strings together and getting everybody cohesive.” This does not need to be the faculty member; however in the classroom context, the faculty member is often the most well suited for and experienced community facilitator. Not only may students see the faculty member as responsible for developing and maintaining the community, but as Faculty Interviewee B believes, it is important that a faculty member, “understands the value, and is willing to commit a level of time to that, but by the same token is a committed academic to his or her coursework; and the test is how to create community within the context of your coursework.” While understandably many faculty do not have the luxury to spend a lot of time, having someone to guide and facilitate the community may be critical.

As discussed in earlier chapters, I do attempt to create community in my classrooms, but we must also recognize that not all faculty members privilege community. Even those that believe it is possible and beneficial may not choose to emphasize it. While several Faculty Interviewees believe they are intentional and overt in their implementation of community in their classrooms, it is important to remember, as Faculty Interviewee B states,

It's going to take time with the class... I don't know of many people who don't feel as though they don't have enough time as it is to cover the material they want to cover...[and] there are constant pressures to examine the time frames that we are working with and what are we going to try to get our students to learn...any intrusion into that time makes most of us uncomfortable; there are some real trade off issues there.

Because all of the Faculty Interviewees were chosen for their connection and commitment to students and/or community, the divergent ideas expressed by Faculty Interviewee B would likely be more common if a more random sample had been identified. There are “real trade off issues” in creating community. The time and energy required to not only build classroom community, but also understand and account for diverse and contradictory student perceptions, is extensive. The students do not seem to recognize the benefits of community as particularly relevant to their hopes and desires. Educators would need to strategically connect the goals of community and the students’ desires for success. Are the benefits of connection and togetherness and possible learning worth the commitment required?

When faculty attempt to engage students in community building, they often find that students are not “used to it” but they are often “open to it.” Faculty Interviewee E believes that student response to community development in the classroom, “depends on the exercise.” Faculty Interviewee E recognizes that “nobody wants to work in groups. They get annoyed and they don’t like how I do it...so it’s not that they don’t welcome the community, it’s that they don’t like my process in getting there.” The process in getting there may be what many students believe constitutes community. The activities and discussions used to build community may also spark many of the concerns students have about community. As Faculty Interviewee C noted, “I think that some of our readings even discourage it [community], so I think we have to find readings that are challenging- that are edgy.” Interviewee C further explains,

if we’re not having it [community] I think it is my fault, that I haven’t set up the conditions appropriately or properly so I’m always working on that. I think it is very difficult to get there when you have all these things that you have to accomplish in terms of covering certain content areas.

Despite the challenges that faculty face, many, including myself, remain hopeful that we can lead the development of a classroom community that will be valuable in an undergraduate's college experience. Faculty interviewees mentioned that they hoped that students would interact, be able to discuss and argue points, do the readings, and work together in small groups. Faculty Interviewee D hopes for students to share what they want learn, while Faculty Interviewee B would like for students to be inquisitive. Three of the 5 Faculty Interviewees hope to have students in their classrooms that are interested in the course and able to find meaning in the material. As noted by Faculty Interviewee D, in his/her ideal classroom

the faculty member is working with the students to construct the knowledge and it's a very organic experience and so the student's knowledge and what they understand is brought into it, whereas the reverse would be just the faculty member lecturing and giving facts... but there needs to be I think a chance for students to talk about what's important to them and try and make those connections to their experiences.

Finally, we must consider that even in the most ideal environments, the previously suggested attributes and behaviors cannot guarantee community. They can however lead those schools and constituents working to develop a strong school ethic, to developing the "connections [that] make community in the larger sense possible" (Wood, 1992, 119). Ultimately we must remember that a community is only what its constituents and observers believe it to be. The understanding and possibility for development rests upon each institution creating meanings and practices (Sergiovanni 1994). The flexibility of the post-traditional community and the importance of institutional creation make community possible and maybe even beneficial in so many different spaces - and specifically for our purposes- in so many different educational environments.

If educators hope to implement classroom communities successfully, student desires for success should be considered. Faculty and society will need to help students see connection and togetherness as not only an element of a classroom community, but perhaps a desired aspect of

their college education. As Student Interviewee 8 stated, “it’s a lot easier and will happen a lot faster if you have a single catalyst.” This catalyst may very well be the professor. It naturally follows that this will require all to embrace a shift in thinking to recognize togetherness as integral for or at least possibly enhancing future success. The bigger question here may also involve a consideration of inquiry and learning. What can we do as educators to help students see connection as both an experiential opportunity to develop relational knowledge and as a means of developing a context that inspires inquiry and promotes higher levels of learning? We must help all students to understand what one student stated so clearly: “If there is no sense of belonging, success is at risk.”

So What?

I have chosen to end this analysis with a common reflection question used in experiential education for two reasons: 1) I have presented a great deal of raw material and perspectives with few, if any, concrete conclusions. While I find all of this valuable as I continue my teaching career, I will continue to ask myself inquiry questions (e.g. So what?) both about the findings and the practical implementation of these concepts; and 2) I want to be clear that I do not, nor will I ever believe the development of classroom community to be finalized in theory or in practice. Just like the question- so what?- there will forever be a final component of the reflection on this and other pedagogical tools used to meet the perceptions and expectations of the Millennial generation(Frank, 2004; Kolb, 1981, 1984). We should continuously be asking ourselves not only “so what” but follow this with a question of application that requires us to completely embrace uncertainty. This “final” question is - Now What?

As the purpose of higher education is continuously transformed into a reflection of greater societal desires and expectations, undergraduate student perceptions will evolve as well.

Millennial generation research suggests that students born in 1982 and after often view their college education as yet another hoop they must jump through to reach their ultimate end: a well-paying job. Students may not even connect the idea of a college education with the learning as educators understand it, as they commonly understand learning to involve a meaningless task that is disconnected from their real lives (Zajonc, 2006; Sandfort & Haworth, 2006). The emergent themes of this study seem to both complement and challenge these ideals. I would encourage educators to embrace the findings and perceptions they find most transferable to their own students. Furthermore I would invite educators to join me in thinking critically about the pedagogies we privilege and the assumptions we make. Finally, I would encourage all to ask the question- Now what?

CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Limitations and Future Directions

A 1999 study by Kruger and Dunning suggested that individuals often overestimate their competence and as a result make poor choices and numerous errors. Furthermore, they do not realize their errors (Kruger and Dunning, 1999). This presents a caution as we begin to consider student and educator perceptions and their beliefs about the possibilities of classroom community. If individuals overestimate their abilities, might they also overestimate the potential benefits or opportunities from classroom community? Would they then make poor choices while in the community and fail to see the problems and constraints that their actions are causing. It is a possibility and something to consider. When we develop classroom communities, how will we account for student perceptions and expectations? How will this ultimately affect the outcomes and learning of the students involved? How do students perceptions complement and contradict current beliefs about classroom community development?

The previous study and questions demonstrate just one shortcoming of this study. Perceptions cannot begin to determine actual action or responses; however as we have considered, they can provide a lens through which to consider possibilities. While this study has provided important perceptions for consideration and analysis, it has many limitations. While I have tried to use integrity in all steps of this study, I surely have misinterpreted student responses. My attempt to capture numerous student voices has certainly limited my ability to deeply analyze the responses. The repetitiveness of many of the responses most likely led me to both seek alternative views and

overlook minute differences. However, as a researcher I have been careful to note possible areas for expansion and complementary studies as I moved throughout the research process.

First, while we understand general student perceptions, it will be important to begin the differentiation and comparison of these and other results. This study was limited to the perceptions of students in fairly general courses in two different universities. It may be important to limit the studies to particular contexts and programs, as well as strategically focus on gaining fairly consistent number of participants from each level classification. This way the results can be compared and analyzed to the results of this study to determine if sample size is an important factor in this study. Also, if possible researchers will want to obtain sex information from each participant; this will allow for a comparison and contrast of perceptions. A study with a more longitudinal design and fewer participants may provide a deeper and clearer understanding of student perceptions and how they change - both through assimilation and accommodation- as students experience a classroom community. Additionally, great consideration should be given as to how to encourage/entice students to volunteer for the study. While my survey students were captive members of an established college class, obtaining student volunteers for interviews was extremely difficult. Students did not seem to be motivated to participate unless “class credit” was given, which is somewhat unethical. Perhaps this says something about our expectations as researchers as well as the perception of responsibility to others.

Due to the vast amount of literature and possibilities with this study, I chose three lenses through which to analyze the emergent themes. I felt these themes were most relevant to both the student’s perceptions and the greater themes of community development and benefits. This presents room for alternative lens and foci with future studies. While I chose to focus on the juxtaposition of two of the three themes, others may choose to focus on the discrepancies of these

lenses. I would also encourage others to consider a comparison study of student and faculty perceptions as this would certainly help us to clearly see differences between the two roles.

An intriguing element of this study revolves around timing and social circumstances. The surveys and interviews for this study were performed in the months prior to Barack Obama's inauguration as president. While we might assume that many individuals were bound together by the campaign and movement for change, not one student in the survey or interview referenced this idea. Student Interviewee 8 did mention a political discussion as a way to see diverse views, but this Faculty Interviewee Also mentioned that the content was not the determining factor of the possible connections built. Meanwhile, in the first few months of 2009, the American economic status was problematic and frightening. The National unemployment rate in February of 2009 hit 8.1%, which was higher than had been experienced in 25 years (Isidore, 2009). Will struggling economic times encourage students to become more competitive and individualistic as they use college to gain access to a limited number of jobs? Is it possible that the economic downfall could encourage more compassion and collaborative effort, or will it merely increase students' desires for money and success? Will the connotation of success be altered? A longitudinal study might focus specifically on student perceptions in a changing world and/or a failing economy.

I have found myself asking key questions as I analyzed this data such as: why do students not speak openly about diversity and race?; how can something students want and need so evidently, be fearful and threatening?; how can we meet all of these needs and still honor the content and processes we believe to be important and integral? I would encourage all to continuously ask questions and pay attention to your students' voices to seek answers and probe your questioning. While intensive structured research provides a foundation for basic phenomenological understandings, your students will undoubtedly provide you with the most trustworthy and transferable results possible. I have also found that making students overtly aware of my

intentions and the reasons for my pedagogical choices is perhaps more powerful than any suggested strategy. They are- or are at least becoming- adult learners. They want to know why and how they will learn. Many of the students I work with want desperately to understand how what they are doing in the present will help them reach their ultimate goals of “survival” and “quality of life”. Our personal and professional experiences- both positive and negative- with pedagogy in the classroom should also allow us to know with certainty that perhaps the only foolproof method for understanding and accounting for student perceptions is to: 1) experiment with strategies that you and others have found to be successful, while allowing room for risk and creativity; 2) reflect on not only what happened in the classroom, but how this addresses cognitive, affective, experiential, relational, and any discipline specific principles; and finally 3) implement new ideas that incorporate the new knowledge you have gained, while remaining open to idea that you may need to repeat this process tomorrow, next week, and for years to come.

Conclusive Remarks

I took it all with me. In the spring of 2009, I taught a new course on the connections between communication and learning, and I took everything that I had considered, analyzed, and learned with me. The syllabus became a living document that reflected- consciously and subconsciously- the handful of “bad” evaluations that still tasted slightly bitter on my tongue, the trials and errors of my teaching career, the 323 surveys that expressed a desire for knowledge and success as well as the hopes and fears embedded in connection, and the voices of educational scholars, university students, and faculty. By no means did I feel as though I had the answers when I began the course and I was very open with the students that this was experimental and that together we would explore the interdependence of communication, community and learning as it related to their undergraduate lives, but also as it would pertain to them in the future. Many of the students were

planning to pursue jobs in teaching or training, or they knew they would be involved in some type of helping relationship in the future. We decided that all of these endeavors required a focus on and understanding of learning as well as the ability to connect and communicate with others.

Within the first 15 minutes of the course, the students and I were again reflecting on our perceptions and connotations. I wrote three words on the board: education, school, and learning. I asked the students to reflect on their connotations and beliefs about each of the words. Gradually, the three words began to have more and more meaning. The students begin to shout out words and phrases that I scrambled to capture on the board. They labeled education with words such as: “necessity” and “required”, while they used phrases like: “too much time” and “stressful” to describe school. We approached the word learning, and to my surprise the students began to use only positive words to describe this concept. I probed their thinking to remind them that learning was not always easy. They quickly added words such as challenging and difficult to the list.

Finally, I stood back. I asked the students to reflect on what they had just created. After a few seconds of silence, a brave student responded, “We like learning, but we don’t like the institutions that provide them.” Another student chimed in with, “we want to learn, but in our own way; we want to learn what we want to learn.” Nodding and agreement spread through the room. With this foundation, we began to consider what they wanted to gain from this course and what would be needed to successfully achieve this. They wanted new knowledge; they wanted to learn better ways to positively affect someone else’s life; they wanted to understand the learning process and how to adapt with the changing economy; they wanted to know how to challenge themselves; they wanted to know how to teach others; they wanted to connect learning and real-life situations; they wanted to find ways to engage in life-long learning; and they wanted to understand how to work better in a community. Perhaps even more surprising was the insightfulness displayed when considering what they needed. They needed respect, dialogue,

diversity, honesty, constructive criticism, the ability to learn from each other, resourcefulness, commitment, support, open-mindedness, engagement, active listening, and perhaps most importantly the recognition that we are all learning together.

Although the students' desires in this class challenged my perceptions of students in the twenty-first century, they invited me to once again intentionally consider the role and importance of community in the classroom. We will have days when no one wants to learn, but we will also have days when I find myself fighting to hold back tears because the learning- concerning intellectual discoveries and practical life application- are powerful transformative experiences for the entire classroom community. Certainly this course too will illuminate flaws in my teaching and the greater educational system; however, I am confident that by listening to the voices of the students, we can better serve their needs and help them to learn what they want to learn. Furthermore, I will become a better teacher- someone who better understands how to help others learn and how I can learn from others. Perhaps the individual voices and desires represent a form of individualism that should not be eliminated from the classroom. As noted by Faculty Interviewee A, the "development of individual thought within community would be a goal of community building within the classroom." It is my hope that my students will always be able to maintain their individual thoughts as well as learn to appreciate and share various diverse thoughts. It is our role as educators to continuously hear those individual thoughts and analyze our teaching practices to offer students experiences and content that we believe are critical for growth and development, but that also speak to the needs and desires of our students.

While I still believe classroom community to be a promising pedagogical technique for bringing students together and inviting them to not only balance the isolation and intimacy they are most likely facing, perhaps the adaptation process can encourage consideration of generativity

(Erikson, 1963). This may provide a stronger foundation for student success as they will begin to recognize their potential for contribution to our society- an individualistic culture with pockets of collective identities working diligently to explore and harness the power of connection and community. While students may not embrace Dewey's (1929) quest for inquiry or exhibit the necessary commitment to develop Wenger's (1998) community of practice, they may be open to learning and growth as it meets their understandings and perceptions of future success.

It is my undying hope that undergraduate classroom communities may create a space where we can inquire together and seek intelligence, gain a greater appreciation of each other, of the process of knowing, and the importance of actively experiencing inquiry as a means of growth and a more certain understanding. The American society has remained so desperate for certainty for centuries, that it would take great risk to embrace inquiry and face difficulty in the moment of the experience. Yet, this will be necessary for students in particular if classroom community is to provide benefits that not only meet but exceed student expectations. From my understandings of classroom community- effectiveness is not simply engaging students and making learning easier, but speaking to our greater need for a democratic society of individuals willing to be-for one another. The students' care and concern surrounding connecting and relating, bring this greater need to the surface and remind us that it is only when we move through Erikson's (1963) stage of intimacy vs. isolation that we can focus on our competence and agency in the community. Classroom communities may require us to commit to connection and higher levels of togetherness, in an effort to inquire and discover knowledge together. What can we hope for from this type of community? A certainty that is not void of change or options, but is instead without ignorance.

In closing, I have chosen to address a few of the overarching questions presented in the beginning of the study from an informed, yet understandably subjective perspective- as that is all

any of us can hope for in our quest for inquiry. First- Is the assumption that learning and belongingness are interdependent a perception that is also held by undergraduate students in the twenty-first century? Yes, in many ways students perceive learning and belongingness to be inextricably connected. The caution presented in this study is that the correlation may not be positive and the concepts may be understood in a variety of ways. Pedagogical strategies that provide opportunities for connection must be strategically designed and maintained, with a focus on student perceptions and willingness to commit. Some connection is perceived as positive and helpful, but too much connection is threatening. Diverse connotations of both learning and belongingness will likely complicate and provide opportunities for growth.

Second- Is it possible for diverse students with differing expectations and perceptions to find a sense of community in socially “masculine” undergraduate classroom? Possible, yes, but it will be extremely challenging and require teachers and students to face chaos and uncertainty. Just as progressive education attempts to implement a feminine perspective successfully in a masculine framework, a classroom community embracing diversity will likely include students fearing difference and the potential conflict it introduces. Students have been trained by a masculine educational and social system, leaving them focused on primarily individual achievement. The possibility, lies in the undying appreciation for connection opportunities. In an individualistic society that has taught students that the college education is a means to later success- which is inclusive of both “survival” and “quality of life”- students still want to connect. They want to belong. Like most of us, they are scared and uncertain of what is required.

Third- Is the desire for community really a greater social need that is being mirrored by our educational system? Yes. I found the student perceptions to be honest and authentic representations of greater fears. In our daily lives, we often feel forced to respond in very instrumental ways that reflect our understanding and appreciation for individualistic and

masculine values. This was reflected in the majority of the students' responses to the question concerning what they hoped to gain from their college education- a very socially constructed combination of classes and experiences that provide you privilege and a path to success. However, the desire for community was evident in their focus on, hopes for, and fear of connection. As I reflect on the Presidential Election of 2008 and the Inauguration of 2009, I am intrigued by the juxtaposition between these events, the students' perceptions, and our desire for classroom community. The introduction of a communal perspective on life and politics was both welcomed and feared. As citizens we embraced and rejoiced in the newly introduced and adopted structure, but we continued to doubt and question as our uncertainty loomed. The creation of opportunities for community allow us to escape- even if temporarily- the instrumental focus on upholding and competing in the battles of society.

Finally- How might these findings help educators to bridge any existing educational gaps between the millennial students and our current university educational system? After much inquiry on our quest for a more comprehensive understanding of student perceptions, I am forced to step back and work to both accept and embrace the uncertainty that remains. While we know more, this study may have introduced more questions than answers. In the spirit of Dewey (1929), I have chosen to view this study as an experience that both confirms and challenges our previous understandings and allows us to reconsider our expectations and hopes for classroom community. Although difficult, I believe we must remain open-minded about our expectations for students and the beliefs they have for college connection and learning. Critical thinking, inquiry, and experiential reflections are undoubtedly valuable for helping students to engage and learn in ways that appreciate their agency and competence; however, we need to recognize their purposes for college education and recognize their struggle to both meet human needs of belonging and societal needs for status. Whether we overtly or subtly introduce cooperative learning and

classroom community, we need to remain aware of student hopes and fears, and anticipate our need to explain and encourage them to experience deeper connections and possibilities.

Ultimately we must facilitate connection between what appear to be internal and external desires of students. We can help students to experience meaningful commitment to others that yields appreciation for the power of connection. We must strategically enable students to inquire about the possibilities of this learning for their future success. Finally, we must remain “uncertain” about the pedagogical techniques we choose to implement as they are only tools to help students reach higher levels of learning and growth. Conversely, we must respect the potential power of undergraduate classroom communities, as they both remind us that we are human and challenge us to face our insecurities surrounding individualism and commitment.

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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol (Face-to-Face and/or email)

Participant Code:

Interviewer:

Time:

Date:

Place:

1. Please describe your role at _____ University. What is your classification? (senior, junior, sophomore, or freshman)
2. How would you define education, learning, and college?
3. What do you believe are the biggest influences on your current beliefs and definitions of college, learning, and education? (ex: media, peers, parents, specific experiences, etc.)? How have these influences shaped your thoughts?
4. How would you define community? What factors, beliefs, messages, etc. have contributed to this definition?
5. How do you feel when you are part of a community?
6. Have you ever experienced a connection with class members that might be defined as a college classroom community? If so, why do you think this college classroom community developed?
7. If you have experienced classroom community, how did it specifically benefit you (if at all)? How did it challenge you? If you have not experienced classroom community, what do you perceive as possible benefits and challenges and why? Please note whether you have experienced the community or if this is a belief about what might happen.

Additional Questions (used as needed and may include but are not limited to):

- How do you define perception?
- What connection if any do you see between classroom communities, education, learning, and college?
- What opportunities if any do you see for building community at your University?
- As a student, how important is classroom community to you?
- If you could design a college course, how much emphasis would you place on building community?

IRB Approved

J. S. [Signature]

Date: 12-22-08

APPENDIX B. CLASSROOM SURVEY

Classroom Survey

Please answer the following questions based on your experiences and beliefs.

Feel free to use bullets. If you do not wish to complete the survey please let the survey administrator know. He/she will provide you with another assignment. This is in no way required by this course and you may end the survey process at any time without penalty.

I am a : Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

- 1) What do you hope to gain from your college education?

- 2) How do you define community?

- 3) Where have you seen/experienced communities at your university during your college education?

- 4) What benefits, if any, do you believe can come from creating **communities in undergraduate college classrooms?**

- 5) What problems/disadvantages, if any, do you believe can come from creating **communities in undergraduate college classrooms?**

- 6) Do you believe your **learning is impacted in any way by classroom communities?**
How so?

APPENDIX C. CODING SAMPLES

Interview Coding

Characteristics of Community

Group of people-#2,#3,#5,#6,#7 (5 of 9)

Involves people- #1,#2,#3,#4,#5,#6,#7,#8,#9 (9 of 9)

Relation/Connection/Unity-#1,#3,#5, 9 (4 of 9)

Common Goal/interest/like-mindedness-#2,#3,#4,#5,#9,#7,# 8 (7 of 9)

Growth as a whole-#6 (1 of 9)

Support/providing for needs-#3,#4 (2 of 9)

Leadership-#2 (1 of 9)

Key Ideas

9- "You have communities of necessity where you all work together because you're gaining something and then there are sort of communities where you feel connection on more emotional or maybe less concrete level- you're all there because you're interested in the same thing or like something"

8- "In high school you're friends with the people that are cool, or that you think fit your personality and your look...but when you get to college its like-mindedness...there's a connection, there's something deeper there"

Survey Coding

Question #3- Codes Used for Analysis

Total Surveys: 323

Total Seniors: 12 ; Total Juniors: 31; Total Sophomore: 137; Total Freshmen: 143

(Numbers + Letters /Grey) University B----Surveys (103); Classes (5); Seniors (6); Juniors (11);

Sophomores (75);Freshmen (11)

(Numbers/ White) University A-Surveys(220); Classes (11); Seniors (6); Juniors (20); Sophomores

(62); Freshmen (132)

Question #3/ Domain: Where have you seen/experienced communities at your university during your college education?

Organizations/Groups/Clubs

Class Code	Freshmen	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors	Total by Class
4	4	4			7
10	6	2	2		10
11	6	2			8
5	6	2		2	10
7		4	2	1	7
13	9	3			12
8	5	1		1	7
9	5	3	4		12
3	6	3			9

6	6	4	1		11
12	3	5	2		10
2B2		12	2		14
1B		15		4	19
2B1		11	3		14
2B3		13	1		14
0B	6	15	2	2	25
	56 (39%)	98 (71%)	19 (61%)	10 (83%)	189- 58% (U B- 86)- 83% (U A-103)- 46%

Type of Org: Greek Organizations

Class Code	Freshmen	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors	Total By Class
4	1	1			2
10	4	2			6
11	1	1			2
5	2				2
7		1			1
13	6	1			7
8	3				3
9	2	2	3		7
3	4	3			7
6	1	1			2

12	2	2	1		5
2B2		8	1		9
1B		10		2	12
2B1		8	1		9
2B3		11	1		12
0B	3	11	2	2	18
	29 (13%)	62 (60%)	9 (29%)	4 (33%)	104= 55% of those who said org. 60-B=69% of Those above 44-A= 42% of those above