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Girls are us: A collection of oral histories from the JMU community

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Girls Are Us: A Collection of Oral Histories from the JMU Community

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An Honors College Project Presented to

the Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Arts and Letters

James Madison University
_____

In Partial Fullfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
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by Anne Merrell Sherman

May 2017

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at Senior Honors Symposium on April 21, 2017

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Thank you to all the faculty members who served on my advisory board of my Honors Thesis Project: Professor Sarah O'Connor, Instructor and Internship Coordinator Cynthia Allen, and Associate Professor Elisabeth Gumnior. Your advice and guidance have been invaluable during these past semesters. This project is dedicated to you.

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MISSION STATEMENT

On a campus where women make up a majority of the student population, it is especially important that female voices are heard and given a platform on which they can control their own narrative. I wanted to give those female-identifying voices that platform. I conducted a series of interviews to examine how college-aged female-identifying students feel about their identity and how they construct that identity within the climate of the JMU community. I was particularly interested in the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, and ability. I asked each person to share their stories of times when they were confronted with their difference as it relates to identity, talk about how they define themselves, and offer up advice to the public on how to create a more inclusive environment as it relates to their needs as an individual.

I interviewed ten women, all undergraduate students at James Madison University. Those women are Madeline (Maddie) Graney, 22; Bia Jackson, 21; Yasmine Maggio, 21; Divya Williams, 21; Justine Chester, 21; Kathryn (Katie) Potter, 22; Melanie Rudd, 23; Flora Lindsay, 20; Denise Bozek, 21; and Cecily Thomas, 20.

I asked each female-identifying student the same set of questions:

- What is your personal definition of the word, identity?
- How do you identify yourself?
- Can you share a time when you were confronted with your identity, your difference, while at JMU? What were the circumstances of the situation and how did this experience make you feel?
- Has there ever been a time when you feel that the JMU community has not advocated for an aspect of your identity, or made you feel unwelcomed or different? If so, please share.

- What can individual members of the JMU community do to make you, and others who identify similarly to you, feel welcomed?

- And finally, what can the administration do to make you, and others who identify similarly to you, feel more welcomed?

Within the following pages, each student's responses to these questions are recorded. Before I interviewed these women, heard their perspectives, and listened to their stories, I wanted to get a baseline for where I stood by answering the questions I was asking of my subjects.

At the end of project, after reflecting on my own identity and interviewing ten women about their identities, I aimed to investigate, were there any trends or patterns that I noticed within my responses and the responses of the other women? Within these reflections, what steps can the community take to create a more inclusive environment? What can the administration take away from this project?

Lastly, throughout my project, I made the deliberate choice to use the pronouns 'they/them' as singular and gender-neutral when referring to individuals who have not disclosed their gender to me. All of my interview subjects self-identified as using 'she/her/hers' pronouns, but I did not want to exclude non-binary people, gender nonconforming people, and trans* people in my analysis, reflection, and application. According to the 2017 AP Style Guide, 'they/them/their' is acceptable singular, gender-neutral pronoun usage.

PERSONAL RESPONSES TO INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

In my reflection of identity, I sought to answer those six questions stated previously, of which I would ask the same of my interview subjects. Rather than a call-and-response interview format, my identity reflection took form in a personal narrative essay:

To me, identity is the way that I see myself, all things that make me who I am. There are parts to my identity that only I see, because they are so internalized. An example of this would be my crippling depression. Not many people know that I suffer from depression but it is something that heavily influences my identity -- my sense of self, my sense of belonging, my sense of isolation, my sense of difference. There are also parts of my identity that other people see that I have no idea define me, parts of myself that I am blissfully unaware shape how I am perceived. I only become aware that these characteristics when someone tells me how it is they perceive me. An example of this layer of my identity - invisible to me but visible to anyone with which I interact - is my need to be right, to have all the answers. Until one of my close friends pointed out that I have an irritating tendency to need to be the smartest person in the room, I was unaware of much how much that quality defined me.

On top of defining identity as how I see myself personally or how others see me, I also characterize it as how I categorize myself in order to find my place in society. Identity helps me determine where I fit, with whom I am similar; it is how I align with socially-constructed categories. My identity is shaped relative to other members of society, the similarities and differences between us. If I had to use a categorical definition of my identity, it would be as follows: cisgender woman, white, college-educated, feminist, atheist, heterosexual, upper-middle socioeconomic standing.

I think that, as a white cisgender hetereosexual woman, I am rarely confronted with my difference on campus, as my identities are not marginalized ones at JMU. That being said, however, I am conscious of how some of those around me have different identities than my own and some of those identities are singled out on our campus, by our fellow community members, and by our administration. For example, one of my good friends identifies as a transgender woman. When we go to the University Recreation Center, UREC, she has to choose between the women's and men's locker rooms in order to enter the pool area; there are no genderless locker rooms, no gender-neutral throughway she can utilize to gain access to this section of our campus athletic facilities. She is constantly confronted with the fact that her difference is not accommodated for at JMU, that her identity is ignored systematically by the institution.

The community at JMU is generally very accommodating to me because I am in the majority. There are times, however, when I feel like I don't know my fellow students because they show a side of themselves I didn't know existed, and exclusionary divisive side. I feel certain members of the community are not aware of the importance of their words and actions, how they can make or break an inclusive environment. Individuals are not aware of their power to influence the collective here on campus. For example, the day after Trump was elected to the Office of President of the United States, the Quad was covered in graffiti that used strong hateful language, such as "Trump that Bitch," "Build that Wall," and "Clinton sucks, but not as much as Monica." This rhetoric plastered on the walkways of our campus set the tone that the JMU student body, even if it was only select members of the community that actually carried out the act of vandalism, does not care about the immigrant population, is xenophobic, does not care about the hypersexualization of women, is chauvinistic. It hurt me to think that there are members of my community who thought that it was an acceptable way to think and act.

In order to make all identities welcome here at JMU, the student body needs to be open to listening to different perspectives and be willing to accommodate for those difference. Actually, I don't like the use of the word *accommodate* because it carries the connotation that one group is *allowing for* the acceptance of another group; this rhetoric carries with it a power dynamic that I think should not exist between social groups. The student body needs to be loving toward all people, embrace and welcome difference, not reinforce power hierarchies or social dominance. The student body should not be isolating members of their fellow community because of their difference and the administration should not be facilitating or allowing for these acts perpetrated by the student body to continue.

The administration could do more. The administration shouldn't be worried about public perception, pacifying donors, and appeasing both sides of a political debate. The administrations and its representatives need to take a stand; they need to denounce acts that are deserving of denunciation, such as plastering hate rhetoric on the sidewalks of campus. I do not care about JMU's standings and rankings within the national public; I care that victims and survivors of sexual violence get justice, are heard and not ignored; I care that if the health center gives condoms away for free, that those who need it also have free access to necessary health care such as tampons and sanitary pads; I care that non-white students do not feel singled out, isolated, and unwelcome because of their religion or the color of their skin. The administration has the power to make these things that I care about come to fruition. It is within the section Future Action that I make further suggestions on ways in which the administration can do so.

After mulling over my responses to my six interview questions, I realized that I needed to dig more into the academic and intellectual understanding of identity. So, I delved into scholarly work that focuses on identity in the fields of sociology and psychology. Through this process, I

hoped to better understand where my project, the conceptions of my subjects and myself, fits into the dialogue that already exists in academia.

IDENTITY DEFINED

Before I could give my subjects my full attention in the interview process, I needed to be able to fully appreciate their perspectives on the construction of identity as it related to them personally. In order to do this, I had to have a more comprehensive understanding of what identity means to various social scientists, how those definitions overlap and differ. The biggest problem I faced in doing so is similar to attempting to separate out a few drops of water from the entire ocean -- the word identity has variation among scholars just as it does among my interview subjects, and there are hundreds of thousands of scholarly interpretations, thus hundreds of thousands of varied definitions. So, I decided to focus on the definitions that most closely aligned with the concept of identity as I understand it because I needed to be able to understand the concept of identity on its most basic level. From there, I could build a more comprehensive and complex definition that fits the needs of my interview subjects.

Educator M. M. Madileng conducted a comparative analysis of definitions of identity, addressing the variety of academic and sociological voices. According to Madileng, George Herbert Mead, a prominent social psychologist, conceptualized the self as something that "can arise in a social setting where people engage in social communication; in these engagements people learn to assume the roles of others and to monitor their actions accordingly" (Madileng 2028). Mead sees identity as something that evolves throughout one's entire life, that the person's environment is a heavy influencer (Mead 67). With this definition, identity is influenced by a person's environment, which for my subjects, is primarily and currently the climate of James Madison University.

In analyzing the application of identity to education systems, James Paul Gee posits that identity shifts and changes based upon the situational circumstances that people find themselves

in, and that the individual interprets their concept of self based on the context (Gee 100). He outlines the four major processes for the definition of identity, the process through which identity is given, and the source of power: the first is "a state developed from forces in nature," the second, "a position authorized by authorities within institutions," the third, "an individual trait recognized in the discourse/dialogue of/with 'rational' individuals," and finally, "experiences shared in the practice of affinity groups" (Gee 100). To apply this definition from paper to reality, one must first choose which of the four situations apply to their life in that place and at that time -- whether the forces of biology determine the self, those in power enforce and define identity, fellow individuals one's affirm one's personality traits, or similarly-identified people share an affinity. In this conceptualization of identity, the self is constantly shifting based on the situation in which one finds themselves; it is adaptable, complex, and malleable.

Jo-Anne Dillabough, in her feminist critique of professional identities and teacher professionalism, explains identity to be tied to the concept of difference. This concept is exemplified in the passage, "feminist critical theorists have argued that 'difference' carries enormous power as a normative concept, which explains, theoretically and empirically, how one comes to identify oneself and others within the state" (Dillabough 389). She continues by explaining that in order to understand one's own identity and place within their society, they need to understand the ways in which they are different from those around them; only by knowing what they are not, can they define themselves.

Iris Marion Young asserts, in her book *Inclusion and Democracy*, that our identity is not the same as our group affiliations. While our gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability, and socioeconomic status may inform our lived experiences and shape our world, we have agency to take our reality and make of ourselves what we want. Young explains, "You can take the

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constraints and possibilities that condition our life and make something of them in your own way" (Young 101). With this definition of identity, one is much more than simply the categorical group identities they subscribe to; an individual's identity is shaped by how they react to and respond to the opportunities and hardships that their group identifiers afford them.

From all of these rhetoricians, I understood identity to be a concept of self that is constantly changing based on the person's life circumstances -- the physical body into which they were born, the community they inhabit, the interactions they share with other individuals, and the political and economic climate that influence collective attitudes toward them -- all of which create circumstances of success or setback. With a deeper understanding of the academic perspectives on the basic concept of identity, I was able to apply the theoretical definitions of M. M. Madileng, George Herbert Mead, James Paul Gee, Jo-Anne Dillabough, and Iris Marion Young to the reality of my subjects. I was able to construct a cohesive definition that serves to collaborate the understandings of my subjects.

How is the sense of self affected by the physical body, the environment, one's peers, and the systems of power under which one lives? That is what I set out to uncover through my interviews.

COLLECTED ORAL HISTORIES

The following section contains the collected responses from the ten female-identifying students who voluntarily shared their stories, outlooks, and values with me through their responses to my six questions.

Q: What is your personal definition of the word, identity?

"I guess, how one sees themselves." - Maddie Graney

"I think that identity is just the aspects of your life that you are prideful of. It's hard not to use the word identity in the definition of the word identity, but it's the aspects of yourself that you are comfortable with and that you're proud of and that make you feel comfortable in your own skin." - Yasmine Maggio

"I definitely feel that identity is something personal to you, something that you resonate with. It is also something that is constantly evolving, too, because it is something that you will always readjust and realign." - Bia Jackson

"I guess identity is just who you are, the little adjectives that make up your sense of self." - Melanie Rudd

"Your identity is more than just your background and where you come from things. It's kind of what you want to pursue, what you want to make your future. It's something that, sure, you can take ideas and opinions from other people but it's your personal brand of yourself." - Katie Potter

"Identity is a combination of things. For me, identity means how you view yourself and how that therefore affects how you live, go about in the world, and how you see the world." - Cecily Thomas

"Identity is how you feel about yourself but in relation to other people as well." - Justine Chester

"I would define identity as anything that describes me. It's just who I am, the first thing that comes to mind when I think of myself. It is what defines me, like how I look and how people think of me." - Denise Bozek

"It's when your smaller identities like class, gender, sexuality -- all of those interact with each other. And when those identities intersect, that is what your identity is." - Divya Williams

"Identity to me is how you see yourself fitting into the world, but also how society looks at you and makes decisions about you from what they can see." - Flora Lindsay

Q: How do you identify yourself?

"I personally identify as a woman and... I guess as a feminist woman." - Maddie Graney

"I would say that I identify most closely with being Middle Eastern and with being a Muslim. I have many other aspects of my identity but those would be the two that I am most prideful of." - Yasmine Maggio

"I identify as Black, queer, woman, feminist. I feel like those are the basic things to my identity if someone were to ask me 'what is my identity in a couple words.'" - Bia Jackson

"I am a cis female lesbian." - Melanie Rudd

"I identify myself as a woman who enjoys very immature things about life. I like making people laugh. I like making new things. I like creating things. But I also prefer to be around a lot of different people. I like being around a lot of people and I like to make people happy." - Katie Potter

"I identify myself as fun and also cute [laughs]. In terms of definitive identities, I identify as a mixed-race, gender-flux, pan-sexual, pan-romantic person who loves crochet and long walks on the beach." - Cecily Thomas

"I identify first and foremost as a feminist, then as bisexual and a geographer and naturalist. Feminism, to me, is striving toward equal representation in politics, in equal treatment in social, economic, and political realms of our society." - Justine Chester

"Female. Friend. Sister. Daughter. White. That's about it." - Denise Bozek

"I am an Indian first-generation. Straight. Cis. Able-bodied. Woman. I think that all comes with a lot of privilege, too." - Divya Williams

"I identify as a white woman, of the upper-middle class. I'm able bodied, straight, culturally Jewish as well as an atheist, a vegan, a feminist, a sister, and a daughter." - Flora Lindsay

Q: Can you share a time when you were confronted with your identity, your difference, while at JMU? What were the circumstances of the situation and how did this experience make you feel?

"As a biological woman, I am often not confronted with my identity but I think it's important to check your privilege because I am a white straight woman. So if you see someone else's identity being threatened, it is important to stand up." - Maddie Graney

"When I came to JMU -- JMU is a predominantly white campus -- I was very worried because at the time I didn't drink because it is against Islam to drink. So, I was worried just about college life in general. You know, with what you see on TV, what you see in movies, you just associate college life with drinking all the time. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to make friends because I didn't drink. Surprisingly, my hallmates were very respectful of that and

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were very accommodating. I still went out with them but they never once judged me and they never once pressured me to do anything like that. That was a surprise but it was a good surprise."

- Yasmine Maggio

"I am confronted with that all the time. I definitely think that being someone who is Black, queer, and feminist, and like JMU spaces are different and not unusual but it's hard. I'm in a lot of academic spaces and have different power roles that normally someone who is Black and queer wouldn't have at JMU so that experience is different. But also, the fact that I'm confronted with these same identities in a way that I still feel the hurt of being at JMU, as a predominantly white institution. I still feel this non-inclusive queer environment at JMU. It can feel tokenizing at times to be that one Black person in the room or that one Black queer person in the room. It just shifts and it molds. I wouldn't say that there is one particular instance because I get these little instances throughout my entire experience here. Every day I have one instance of 'Oh, I'm Black.' or 'Oh I'm queer,' 'Oh, I'm queer and Black,' 'Oh, I'm a queer Black feminist.' I feel like it's real. I haven't known any different so I'm not like 'Wow, this shit is terrible,' but I guess in a lot of ways, this shit is terrible but it is something that I have been used to. It's not something that is polarizing from how I have experienced my life. It's definitely eye-opening sometimes and sometimes it's just, this is the normal for me." - Bia Jackson

"When I took my Queer Lit class, that was pretty cool. We were all pretty open about our identities in that classroom. It was just a super different experience." - Melanie Rudd

"Freshman year was not the nicest year for me. I was placed in a room with someone that I didn't really get along with that well. And I realized that yes, not everyone is going to like me -- I knew that. I was aware that not everyone was going to like me. That's something you grow up with. But, being around that person who didn't like me that much for that long. That made me realize

that my self confidence has to come from myself and that as bad as it was, that it was going to get better. I was going to learn from this situation. That situation was when I was fully aware that I was in control of myself: I was in control of my own emotions and who I was. I didn't need my roommate's validation. I feel confident in what I am doing and if they don't like it then I'll find new friends." - Katie Potter

"I feel like I am confronted with my identity multiple times all day every day because most of the time I am confronted by my friends. My friends recognize my identity and that is important to how they interact with me and how they value me as a friend. That is reciprocal, so that also affects how I interact with them recognizing their identities. I've been called for diversity panels. On days when I dress more masculine I've been asked if I was gay. I've received prejudice because of my race and I don't think any of them came from malicious intent, it just came from a matter of ignorance and people not knowing how to interact with other people that they haven't interacted with before. It makes me feel comforted that people are open to learning about different identities and it makes me inspired to be a voice for my own identity, as well as educate themselves as well as learn about their identities. Sometimes it feels kind of belittling but I can't take that stance all the time because people are people. Even if they do come from malicious intent, it's because they may not know what my story is and I am open and willing to share that." - Cecily Thomas

"My ex-roommate was apparently homophobic, though I was unaware of the situation until one of my suitemates told me later. It just made me feel unappreciated with how I was able to treat her friendly. It just made me feel weird and gross." - Justine Chester

"I haven't really been confronted with my identity at JMU because I believe my identity is not too different than others so I have felt like I have blended in during my time here." - Denise Bozek

"Every day that I am in class I am hyper-aware that I am usually the only one of color and there are always those situations where we are talking about race or gender when people are either tiptoeing around it because I am present or it sounds like they're speaking for me, but I am there and can speak for myself. It made me feel, not as aggressively as the word alienated, but just ignored. Because I am in really awesome programs where people are aware and conscious of things like this, so I am surrounded by really awesome people every day, but you still run into situations like that on a campus that isn't that diverse." - Divya Williams

"While I've never dealt with true confrontation because of my privilege in this society, I've gotten certain questioning reactions to certain identifiers I used earlier. Once someone told me I couldn't be Jewish and an atheist, but from my point of view being Jewish is about culture and honoring my family's lineage, as Jews have been persecuted throughout history. Being an atheist is about not finding solace or faith in a high power." - Flora Lindsay

Q: Has there ever been a time when you feel that the JMU community has not advocated for an aspect of your identity, or made you feel unwelcomed or different? If so, please share.

"No. I'm in the most liberal part of JMU. So my minor is Women and Gender Studies and my major is English. So when something happens on campus, those two departments will send out emails in support of whoever is being victimized. So I think that I am lucky that I chose a major and minor that support everyone." - Maddie Graney

"I think that Muslims and non-Muslims generally don't interact with each other. Especially, I tend to see visible Muslims, like women who cover, in groups by themselves. I just

don't normally see people associate with them and that could be maybe their choosing or that people just don't want to talk to them. I think that there is not enough communication between different intersections of religions." - Yasmine Maggio

"Yea, I definitely think so. This is a hard question because the student body, in a lot of ways, they think that they're doing things that are progressive or they're being different than the administration, but sometimes they're not. For a lot of JMU students, progression means to uphold this white, alternative, marginalized identity but in a lot of ways it's still exclusive. In order to build community, I still have to find my queer folks. I still have to find my Black folks on campus. And even that can be exclusive because sometimes you don't always have the two merge. With the student body, I think the lack of, the not recognizing a person as a marginalized person. Let's say a white woman for instance. She's like 'Why do you want a Black woman space? Why do you want a queer Black woman space?' Well, because I'm not getting what I need from a white woman space. I guess, in a lot of ways, it is just this idea of them [white women or people] being excluded but not really realizing that diversity goes beyond just picking out one intersection and catering to it." - Bia Jackson

"Again, with my Queer Lit class, one of the projects that we did was that we advocated for having more queer classes here. Because, looking at the list of classes, especially in the Women and Gender Studies minor, there really isn't anything else. A lot of us were thinking that, for a school that preaches diversity so much, we really don't have a lot of diversity in the classes especially in terms of sexuality and gender identity." - Melanie Rudd

"Well, as a cis hetero white female, I have not felt that because I am very much in the majority here. I actually feel like I am a little bit too catered to sometimes actually. As unique as

I like to think I am because of the things that I like, I'm very just… white girl. I don't know how else to say it. [laughs] I'm just a white girl." - Katie Potter

"I am constantly in environments that are relatively inclusive and I tend to avoid environments that might not be as inclusive. So, as a whole for JMU, maybe we need more gender inclusive bathrooms but other than that, not really." - Cecily Thomas

"I would say that the JMU community is generally welcoming and open with different kinds of identities. There's always that one or two people, but generally as a whole I think the JMU community is very welcoming." - Justine Chester

"The JMU community has never made me feel unwelcome or different but there are many people that I'm sure are not able to say the same." - Denise Bozek

"Not my identity, but I see it happening with other identities, like trans or queer folks or sexual assault victims. It makes me sad to see that there are people here that are just as much people as I am but they're not being advocated for by the school that they chose to come to." - Divya Williams

"I personally, again because of many of my privileges, never felt like JMU hasn't accommodated my identity." - Flora Lindsay

Q: What can individual members of the JMU community do to make you, and others who identify similarly to you, feel welcomed?

"I think that the most important thing is to be kind. You don't know what anyone else is going through. That's what Ricky Gervais says, so…" - Maddie Graney

"Education is important because I just think there is a lot of tension between certain groups on campus, especially religious groups and religions don't understand each other's identities and each other's religions. So I think that whether it's just having a casual inner-faith

dinner or having an inner-faith discussion, anything like that. Those are just a good way to educate each other and educate the rest of the community on what's important and the values that we each hold" - Yasmine Maggio

"Listen. And also even being welcomed. I don't want people to feel like they have to cater to me. Because that is also a level of privilege of being able to be like 'Oh, I see. You are different than us. Let's cater to you particularly.' But if we work on things that make, not only your perspective, but also my perspective included, it's not just catering to me it's catering to a bigger institution. The JMU student body could definitely do a better job at that. They're always like 'Well, what is the Black perspective?' They don't even say queer, they say gay. 'What is the gay perspective?' The thing is, there shouldn't be a Black perspective, a gay perspective, a Latinx perspective. It shouldn't be any of that because it should just be one perspective that's inclusive, that's intersectional." - Bia Jackson

"Don't be a dick. Can I say that? Yea. Just don't be a dick. Just be nice to people. I've never encountered someone being directly mean to me or any of my immediate friends, but I'm sure it happens. Being nice to people is not hard." - Melanie Rudd

"I do believe that everyone deserves a chance to be heard, whether they come from the richest background or the poorest background. Everyone has their own problems and I feel that conflict management would definitely be a thing to push further. There are people here with a lot of different personalities, some work together and some don't. Mental health is a very, very important thing, especially when you're moving into a new area. If we are to make this community more inclusive, we need to make communication more of a thing. Make it more of a situation where people can say 'Yes, I have this problem. Here's how I'm going to deal with it,' or 'I don't understand this. Can you teach me or give me some advice on how to handle it?' So,

even people who aren't in my same identity, they can explain to others or can share what they believe in and how they feel. Everyone can feel better about themselves and their relationships with others." - Katie Potter

"If you see anyone being harassed or questioned or made fun of because of how this individual may identify, I would say something. That is the most comforting feeling when you know that you're not alone in situations like that because that can be the hardest thing. When someone is confronting you and harassing you, you start to question your identity, which is probably one of the most difficult things you can do as a person. I feel like being a voice, just saying 'hey, that's not cool' or 'maybe you shouldn't say things like that,' can be really impactful and helpful. It's just the little things." - Cecily Thomas

"I think as a feminist the best thing to do would be to make the Dukes Step Up orientation better and promote the 'see something say something' initiative. Make sure that you're looking out for your fellow Duke. Make sure that you're not doing anything to hurt your fellow Duke, men and women included. Just looking out for your classmates, your roommates, your friends, people who aren't your friends. If they're a human, then they should be looked after." - Justine Chester

"I don't think there are certain things that individual members of the JMU community can do for my personal identity but I would definitely want to know if there would be anything that I can do for someone else." - Denise Bozek

"Opening your eyes to the fact that not everyone who goes here is the same, and that there are so many different identities and so many different intersections of those identities. Making yourself aware and conscious of that is a big step in the right direction." - Divya Williams

"I think what people really need to learn about other people and learn what it means to be a true ally, so that if they are faced with a situation they know how to act to best help the victim, but also no silence or speak for that person." - Flora Lindsay

Q: What can the administration do to make you, and others who identify similarly to you, feel more welcomed?

"I think a good example would be right after the Muslim Ban passed by Mr. Trump. The President of JMU sent out an email saying that we are here to support and provide resources to all those people affected by that. I think that was really important because then other people who might not be affected by [the Muslim ban] will read the email and think 'oh yea… maybe I should start to act that way, too.'" - Maddie Graney

"Encouraging everyone to be respectful, but also encouraging that dialogue, not just between students but between the administration. If there was a space that they could create where administration could talk to people who identify as Muslim and say 'what can we do to make you feel more comfortable?' I think that would be a productive way to go about that." - Yasmine Maggio

"Oh Lord, there's a lot. We [you and myself] even discussed earlier Alger's statement about the immigration ban. I think that was very lackluster. If you look at other schools like George Mason, and also Virginia Tech, there has been a lot of hard hitting statements like, 'We definitely do not agree with this. We want to make sure that refugee and undocumented immigrant students feel welcome here.' I think that is something that is missing [at JMU]. JMU is so hesitant to be radical and to say what it is. That also goes along with the Trump writing on the Quad. Just say what it is because you are doing a disservice to the students who are not white, who are not straight, who are not cisgender. You are doing a disservice to them by playing

down what actually happened. That is the main thing that is important to me. Just call it what it is. This immigration ban is racist. This immigration ban is xenophobic. This immigration ban is Islamophobic. Saying those things is the first step. You don't have to necessarily take total blame for something just because you identify with what the perpetrator identifies as. You recognizing [the reality of the situation and calling it what it is] is a step forward to progressing and realizing that this is a problem and we have to work together to solve it. That is one thing that JMU does a lot. They're like, 'Diversity of thought,' but diversity of thought means nothing if there's not diversity of practice." - Bia Jackson

"This isn't about my identity, but I know that our campus is not really disability-friendly. Not every single building is accessible and a lot of buildings don't have gender neutral bathrooms, which is hard for some people who don't want to use a specifically gendered bathroom for whatever their reason may be. Accessibility in general isn't as strong on this campus as it could be." - Melanie Rudd

"I would say that, it would be great if freshmen had this opportunity to find groups of people where they feel like they want to be a part of. You need to be proud of yourself no matter who you are. I think the administration would do well if they celebrated the differences we have, because inclusiveness is great and it's awesome to have a unified university, but at the same time, be proud in who you are because you don't have to be like everybody else. I think that if we pushed more talk and communication it would be good. I'm not sure exactly what kind of program that would be, but we could push the services that we have such as counseling and conflict management." - Katie Potter

"Making the Title IX information a requirement to have on all syllabi as well as sexual harassment information and resources a requirement on all syllabi. Also, the LGBTQ+ and Ally

Education Center as well as CMSS as resources that are a requirement for all syllabi to make sure that people have access to said resources. Also, creating a requirement to become Safe Zone trained as a professor because, even though you may not agree with how an individual identifies, it's not fair as a professor and someone who is in charge of this person's education to be exclusive to how they may identify because of your political views. Those are a few things that would make a big difference. Education is really important and resources are really important." - Cecily Thomas

"Policy-wise, I would say create an anti-rape campaign, a more in-depth Dukes Step Up that's more than just focusing on what-if scenarios, because I know that sexual assault is a huge issue, not just on this campus but on all college campuses. It's important that the administration acknowledges that this is a huge issue so that we can make steps to change it." - Justine Chester

"I don't think there are certain things that administration can do for my personal identity but there are probably things that they could do to make people feel welcome that do not identify with large groups of people on campus." - Denise Bozek

"If the administration was a little braver for stepping up for their students. I know it's hard for an institution to do stuff like that, but you have to stick up for the people who came here and are calling themselves Dukes. I don't think that has been happening here. A girl was sexually assaulted on her spring break and they found him guilty but they decided to punish him with expulsion after graduation. That just seems like a super disrespectful to that girl to say 'yea we know, we believe you that you were sexually assaulted but we're gonna let him graduate anyway.' That, to me, would be the worst punch in the face from the institution that I chose." - Divya Williams

"I think it would be great if the administration had a general education class to teach these things and how to be an ally. I took Intercultural Communications for my minor and even though I consider myself to be a well-educated and open person regarding issues of identity, I still gained so much out of that class." - Flora Lindsay

POST-INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Having conducted the interviews, along with having a basic philosophical understanding of identity under my belt, I felt that I needed to draw attention to trends that I noticed among my subjects. I wanted to answer the question, is there variation or similarity among responses? Why might these responses be (dis)similar and what factors contribute to that variation?

At first glance, the most obvious component was the variation in responses based on the group identification of the subject. When I was talking to female-identifying students who were in what is considered the norm or the majority on campus, white cisgender heterosexual women, they seemed secure in their identity here and they seemed to have little to say in terms of what needs to be changed or altered here on JMU's campus.

Those who identify with the norm tended to self-identify more vaguely than their marginalized counterparts, such as Denise Bozek using the identifiers, "friend," "sister," and "daughter," and Katie Potter identifying as someone who "enjoys very immature things about life," and "making people laugh." These identifiers are more relational and interpersonal, rather than definite groups. In contrast, those who are not in the majority cited their difference and marginalization as some of their main personal identifiers, such as Cecily Thomas identifying as "mixed-race," Melanie Rudd defining herself as "lesbian," and Justine Chester using the term, "bisexual," to define her personal identity, all of which are clear group identities; these trends reinforce the division of the norm and the other.

These observations connect back to the definitional concept of identity formulated in the Identity Defined section as a result of the written works of M. M. Madileng, George Herbert Mead, James Paul Gee, Jo-Anne Dillabough, and Iris Marion Young. A reminder, that conglomerated definition of identity is understood to be a concept of self that is constantly

changing, but rooted in the physical body a person inhabits, the community they inhabit, the interactions they share with other individuals, and the political and economic climate that influence collective attitudes toward them. In this definition, difference is a major factor in identity construction because it informs how a person identifies with other individuals, the creation of social identity groups, and how collective attitudes are directed toward them, the process of othering. I was able to see this definition take form in the reality of my interview subjects, as exemplified by the fact that those who identified as members of marginalized groups were more likely to identify with their difference, citing their marginalized identifier as a main aspect of their overall personal identity, while those who are not marginalized in the context of the JMU community were not always aware of their privileged identity and therefore did not cite it as a major actor within their concept of self-identity.

Personal identity can color someone's experience of their community and their world, which has become evident from hearing the varied experiences and critiques of female-identifying JMU students. It became clear that individuals identify with their difference because of the way in which those identity factors compare to others within this community and interpreted by community members. Flora Lindsay pointed this out when she expressed, "I've never dealt with true confrontation because of my privilege in this society." While a non-marginalized female-identifying student may never experience a feeling of confrontation, tokenization, or isolation here at JMU, that doesn't mean that experience is the reality for all students. As Bia Jackson said, in contrast to Flora Lindsay, "It can feel tokenizing at times to be that one Black person in the room or that one Black queer person in the room… I wouldn't say that there is one particular instance because I get these little instances throughout my entire experience here." Divya Williams also expressed that sentiment when she said, "Every day that I

am in class I am hyper-aware that I am usually the only one of color and there are always those situations where we are talking about race or gender when people are either tiptoeing around it because I am present or it sounds like they're speaking for me." A student who identifies differently from the norm or majority within a given climate is constantly confronted with that difference. That difference forms a sense of self that, in turn, can shape the experience of that individual in a given environment. There is a disconnect between the experiences of those interviewed who feel outside the norm and the experiences of those who identified within that norm. As the people in the classroom, on and around campus, who are not white or not heterosexual, individuals such as Bia Jackson and Divya Williams are forced to confront their difference. If, on a daily basis, one is confronted by their difference because fellow community members are pointing it out, that difference becomes a prominent identifier, a major aspect of their personal identity within the context of the JMU community; if members in the community continuously point out how a person does not relate to everyone around them, that is how that person will begin to see themselves internally.

FUTURE ACTION FOR THE JMU COMMUNITY

Through reflecting on the analysis of the interview process and taking into account that devised definition of identity, I wanted to take the time to speak directly to the members of the JMU community -- the student body, the professors, and the staff -- about the practical application of my observations into changed mindset that we must adapt.

It is important to remind people on our campus that just because an individual identifies with a group such as Muslim people or queer people does not mean that those identifiers are their only identity. Identity of the self is not just the collision of group identities; it is how those identities shape that individual's world and influence how that person sees themselves fitting within that world. Every person identifies differently, so people cannot be placed into rigid boxes or stereotyped. Lived experience is complex, and so are people. Identity cannot be boiled down to a simple sentence nor is it a code to be cracked, despite how my project attempted to do just that.

It is also important to remind people of the fact that, just because something doesn't affect them personally does not mean that it is irrelevant for everyone. Nor does it mean that people should be ignoring things that do not affect them. "As a biological woman, I am often not confronted with my identity but I think it's important to check your privilege because I am a white straight woman. So if you see someone else's identity being threatened, it is important to stand up," Maddie Graney stated. Divya Williams said it best when she asserted, "it makes me sad to see that there are people here that are just as much people as I am but they're not being advocated for by the school that they chose to come to." As a community, we all need to be more conscious of the realities and experiences of our differently-identified fellow Dukes and respond accordingly in order to ensure that every student feels embraced and welcomed by their peers,

and prove that every individual here is willing to step in if that inclusion is threatened. Just because policies and actions committed within this community may pose no direct threat to one person, whether that threat is an immigration ban or binary bathrooms, does not mean that they pose no threat to every single member of this community. So, those who are not affected need to be aware of the climate in which they live and be willing to respond accordingly, to react, to intervene, and to speak up.

However, noticing difference is not enough for a fully inclusive campus. In fact, it may end up doing more harm. As Iris Marion Young says in her book, *Inclusion and Democracy*, "It is important to notice differences of social position, structured power, and cultural affiliation…" however, "Justice-oriented politics requires transcending social difference towards a common good" (Young 81-2) because only then can we move toward a system of justice that benefits more than the majority without isolating the non-majority groups, further dividing us as a community. A well-functioning community is "inclusive not simply by formally including all potentially affected individuals in the same way, but by attending to the social relations that differently position people and condition their experiences, opportunities, and knowledge of the society" (Young 83). In other words, the community of JMU cannot simply 'include' all marginalized people equally in community spaces, but must address the mechanisms within the community that marginalize them in order to provide equitable solutions for change.

FUTURE ACTION FOR THE JMU ADMINISTRATION

The JMU administration could take a number of actions to create positive, equitable change amongst community members and on campus. Asking for an institution to change can be met with quite a bit of pushback from the administration, however, as they have worked hard and are proud of the institution that they shaped. As Lisa García Bedolla of the University of California, Berkeley puts it in her article addressing how to alter representation within her university, "Any disruptive force will lead to pushback from those for whom these changes are uncomfortable or are perceived as threatening to the advances they have struggled for decades to achieve" (Bedolla 449). However, that does not mean that we should just accept the flaws within our own institution. It is beyond the scope of this project to tell the administration *how* to go about making changes, but the following recommendations directly relate to the well-being and success of students. These suggestions are inspired by the voices of my fellow female-identifying JMU students:

- Facilitate the creation of healthy dialogue and productive spaces for communication between individuals and different identities. In order for us to embrace our differences, we have to understand one another.

- Admit that we, as an institution, have a problem when it comes to the prevalence of sexual assault, including but not limited to the protection of perpetrators rather than adequate punishment for their actions; a lack of protection of victims and accusers; perpetuation of stigma surrounding sexual violence, which causes individuals to not speak up; a lack of proper training, education, and orientation of students on topics of sexual violence on college campuses; and a need to protect the image of the university at the detriment of the protection of the student body.

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- Enforce mandatory Safe Space protocol and diversity training for all faculty and staff to ensure that LGBTQ+ students feel welcome and included. Increase the number of single-stall bathrooms on campus by mandating the creation of at least one non-gendered bathroom in every building across campus.

- Facilitate the inclusion for differently-abled students by making every building and every floor of every building accessible across campus.

- Take a stance as an administration by releasing statements to the student body, similar to the press releases from the Office of the President, that have substance and convey a clear stance on issues when addressing political climate or government policy, rather than attempting to appease both sides of an issue. Openly and proudly declare the JMU campus a sanctuary campus in order to foster that feeling of inclusion.

- Do not allow hate rhetoric and fear-mongering language in university-owned facilities, particularly as it relates to the safety and inclusion of Muslim students and students who are immigrants. Amend the student code of conduct, to which all students are held accountable, to create systems of reinforcement for cracking down and pursue punishment for those students who perpetuate that style of rhetoric.

- Do not tokenize members of the student body by tokenizing them in classrooms and around campus. Create an additional training session for faculty on techniques to stay away from tokenizing language and steering students away from tokenizing language, which force students to speak for the whole group of their particular identity.

Every single student on this campus belongs to various group identities, but they are their own individual with their own needs from this institution. Do not ignore the perspectives and voices of non-white students, of non-Christian students, of non-cisgender students, of non-heterosexual

students; make an active effort to include us and embrace us but not in a way that inevitably isolates us from the rest of the campus. Stand up for the needs of all of your students, JMU. Stand by us. Protect us. Advocate for us. We deserve that much.

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