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The Senior Year Transition

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THE SENIOR YEAR TRANSITION

by

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This research focuses on how college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college. The senior year experience should be a time of reflection and closure of their undergraduate experience. The students in this study identified how types of involvement led them to self-reflection and recognize individual strengths and outcomes that prepared them for their post-graduate lives. By capturing these students' voices through their experiences the research examined the need for all-inclusive support during the senior year transition. The data provides implications for programming and services, with the intent to facilitate reflection and closure.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A majority of colleges and universities tend to focus more on the First Year Experience, but may not focus on coming full circle with the Senior Year Experience. As these students have persisted in college, what opportunities have been provided for them to reflect and prepare for their time left before they continue on to their post-graduate life? What has college has meant to them, and what does their impending graduation represent? Have they been challenged to reflect on how their experience has shaped their views of themselves?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to focus on how college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college. The intent of this research is to understand the senior year transition, and how an institution can use this information to create and provide more resources to help ease the process towards graduation.

Henscheid (2008) urges higher education administrators to be intentional with providing resources for graduating seniors to promote closure for their transition out of college (p.79). By focusing on this population, the data will give insight to higher education administrators and provide more resources and services to graduating seniors. Twelve interviews (three interviews per person) were conducted with four individuals who will be graduating in May of 2014.

Research Questions

In order to understand the experiences related to the senior year transition, the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended

questions. The main and only research question was: How do college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college. Sub-questions included:

- How do these students define readiness for success?

- What values and strengths have these students developed?

- How do these students create legacy in college?

The participants selected for the case study are from a Midwest land-grant institution, referred to as Heartland University. Using semi-structured interviews, the study was designed to find common experiences about the senior year transition between the four people**.**

Definitions

The following definition was used in this study:

College senior: an individual who is currently enrolled in an undergraduate institution and is currently completing their final year of college, determined by credit hours.

Delimitations

Because the case study methodology was used, the delimitations were set from the beginning. The participants, three males and one female, had to currently be in their final year and had an expected graduation date of May 2014. The participants had to be at least 19 years of age to participate in the study. There were no other requirements in order to be a participant in this study.

Limitations

The process of choosing my sample population was decisive because the participants were internally recruited through Student Affairs faculty, staff, or graduate

assistants. Due to the nature of a case study and time frame to complete the research, there were only four participants. This cohort of four may not be indicative of the senior population at Heartland University.

The findings and conclusions of this study may not be generalizable to the rest of the graduating senior population, due to the nature of qualitative research. Limitations of this study included a convenience sample that was homogenous. The participants consisted of three males and one female. Three out of the four participants are white. The study may not represent the experiences of seniors who are racial minorities. Also, the study was male-dominated, and the female voice is not as well represented in the study. The study may not be representative of seniors who are not involved on campus, or who hold internships.

Due to my being the primary research instrument for this study, I may have injected my own bias into the findings from the research that was collected and interpreted. Below, I explain my position in the reflexivity statement. Though data validation techniques were incorporated to offset any bias there is still a possibility that my personal biases will show up in the findings.

Reflexivity Statement

As my introduction may hint, I wanted to look into this topic because I myself was struggling with coming to terms with transitioning into my post-graduate life. Due to my personal investment in my research, I may have expected similar answers or experiences from my participants. I'm also only two years out from my undergraduate years, and I will be graduating this May, as well, with my masters. I may have inserted my bias by expecting to empathize about the senior year transition with my participants.

My bias with institutions not providing enough resources for their seniors may also show in the tone of the research. I personally felt that my undergraduate institution could have taken more of an invested interest in providing resources for their seniors. I'm a firm believer in First Year Experience programs, but I question why institutions aren't coming full circle with providing a Senior Year Experience program, or at least providing resources to promote reflection.

Conclusion

The transition year from college senior to college graduate is a year of change, regardless whether the student wants it or not. Change isn't always easy, but what can faculty and administrators do to help ease this transition? The literature provided on this topic mostly looks at the attitudes and preparedness of obtaining a job, and the structure of senior year capstone classes that are academic in nature. Institutions of higher education typically provided these services to their seniors. However, are we coming full circle with their emotional journey from when they first started on a college campus?

Gardner (1999) argues that though there is an acknowledgment that there is need "for specific interventions to help students successfully make the transition into college, the problems and needs associated with the transition out of college have received little attention from college and university personnel, let alone researchers" (p. 7). Faculty and administrators owe it to college seniors to challenge them to reflect on what their collegiate experience has meant to them, and how this process has prepared them for their future after graduation

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Capstone Courses

Most curriculums at higher education institutions require or suggest that seniors

take a capstone course during their final matriculated year. These courses can impact

seniors in a positive way to prepare for their transition out of college. Higher education

institutions need to be mindful about how they incorporate professional development into

their senior seminar and capstone courses. Assignments such as "cover letter/resume

writing, mock job interviews, informational interviews, and in-class career services

workshops" (Bulger, Lindauer, & Jacobson, 2007, p. 96) are informative and practical

ways to incorporate professional development into a senior capstone.

According to the 2009 NSSE Annual Results, participating in a senior capstone

had a significant impact on how students interact with faculty and classmates as well as

provided opportunities to share ideas (Kinzie, 2012). In general, seniors report that

satisfaction with their academic career stems from interaction with faculty members

(Keup, 2012). The Boyer Commission of Educating Undergraduates in the Research

University (1998) suggests that capstone courses "should bring together faculty members,

graduate students, and senior undergraduates in shared or mutually reinforcing projects"

(The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 28).

However, what exactly seniors take away from capstone courses is unique to the

individual. For example, seniors most commonly reported their seminar or capstone

course contributed to their growth in thinking critically and analytically, learning

effectively on their own, developing intellectual curiosity, and making decisions and

judgments based on evidence or reasoning (Kinzie, 2012). Conversely, fewer students

claimed these classes helped them in their ability to make ethical choices, understand

global issues, and acquire work-related knowledge and skills. Overall, seniors felt their

capstone courses fostered a range of desirable learning outcomes (Kinzie, 2012).

   Capstone and seminar style courses are "where final learning outcomes should be

demonstrated" (Henscheid, 2012, p. 94). More specifically, capstone experiences include:

cultivating a knowledge base of world cultures and an appreciation for the physical and

natural world; having a distinguished skill-set that includes the ability to work with a

team; thinking independently; being able to effectively communicate (both written and

oral); and thinking on a critical and creative basis. These skills in general are not only

functional but intellectual as well (Henscheid, 2012). Another outcome of student

engagement *vis-à-vis* capstone courses is a sense of ethical and civic responsibility to

themselves and the world and, finally, using the knowledge they gained in the classroom

and in practical experiences to face any challenges in their career and life after graduation

(Henscheid, 2012).

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informative and practical ways to incorporate professional development into a senior

capstone.

   In general, allowing seniors to develop confidence and a useful skill-set for the

career world is vital. Capstone courses are considered highly valuable by seniors in

regard to culminating experience but also to preparing for life after graduation (McGill, 2012). Also, capstone courses are valuable to students who receive efficient mentoring from the faculty member who is facilitating the course (McGill, 2012). Capstone courses are essential high-impact practices that offer seniors "a final opportunity to bring together the pieces of their undergraduate education into a coherent whole and realize the culmination of their education journey" (Kinzie, 2012, p. 72). Capstone courses help students connect what they have learned in the classroom to see how it applies to their future workplace, especially in regard to how seniors can utilize transferrable skills as they transition into their career (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008).

Perceptions of Graduating Seniors

Approaching graduation may cause unease or stress for seniors. College seniors may legally be considered adults, but in regard to behavior and psychological development, they are not (Yazedjian, Kielaszek, & Toews, 2010). College seniors commonly voice feelings of unease, stemming from job uncertainty (Yazedjian et al., 2010).

However, the concerns of college seniors go beyond simply getting a job. College men are less likely to express their concerns and seek assistance during a graduate/professional school search (Taub, Servaty-Seib, & Cousins, 2006). Mentorship and female role models may help college women feel that graduate school and/or career goals are attainable (Taub et al., 2006).

Life Transition Stress

Kreig (2012) found that undergraduate seniors have additional layers of concerns and perceptions. In particular, seniors' stress levels are uniquely different from first-year

students given transition demands of graduation and job placement. Seniors are stressed

with the responsibility of transitioning to adulthood. Achieving adulthood is typically

characterized by obtaining "stable employment " (Skipper, 2012, p. 26). Thus, graduating

seniors prepare for life transitions while under the stress of academic responsibilities.

Additionally, Arnett (2005), outlines three universal criteria that represent the hallmark of

adulthood. They are: (1) accepting responsibility for yourself; (2) making independent

decisions; and (3) becoming financially independent (Arnett, 2005, p. 15).

> Emerging adults know they are supposed to have a Plan with a capital P,
> that is, some kind of idea about the route they will be taking from
> adolescence to adulthood, and most of them come up with one. However,
> for almost all of them, their Plan is subjective to numerous revisions
> during the emerging adult year. These revisions are a natural consequence
> of their explorations (Arnett, 2005, p.10).

The transition from undergraduate education to the workplace (criteria three)

involves challenges that extend beyond securing employment" (as cited in Perrone &

Vickers, 2003). During the career search and transition a student may or may not

experience frustration. Some may feel more confident than others. Levels of self-

efficiency and stress may be factors of how seniors approach their career search (Yang &

Gysbers, 2007). Uncertainty can paralyze a student who is unsure of where they'll end up

after graduation. Helping them create a "structured career path" will help with anxiety

and boost the student's confidence in regard to their post-graduate plans (Wood, 2004, p.

73).

Though college seniors are faced with an ambiguous future, their attitudes aren't

ubiquitously negative. Most college seniors report that they feel prepared for the

transition from college to work life. More specifically, students feel that college helped

them develop problem-solving skills (Yazedjian et al., 2010). Also, Yazedjian et al.

reported that students were most excited about starting a career, having an income, leaving the demands of college behind them, becoming independent, and using knowledge gained from their studies in their chosen career. However, with excitement comes despondency from leaving college. The biggest concerns college seniors typically share are their career plans after graduation and the inevitable change and sense of loss as they move forward (Pistilli, Taub, & Bennett, 2003).

Preparedness Strategies & Solutions

As seniors prepare to graduate they may also be preparing for a future career. A resource that could be utilized by seniors during this time is career counseling. According to Wendlandt and Rochlen (2009), "Career counseling in the university setting is primarily focused on choosing a major, improving resumes, practicing interview skills, and providing job search assistance" (p. 152).

Professionals who work in career services in the college setting can utilize positive interventions to help seniors become prepared for the culture change they may experience in the work setting. A suggestion from Maietta (2012) is helping students beyond the walls of a career center, i.e. facilitating presentations in residence halls and classrooms. This helps create a positive relationship with seniors, especially when their alma mater approaches them for financial support as alumni. Career counselors also need to address the reality of having a career compared to being a student. Students who held part-time jobs during their college career are more likely to have a smoother transition compared to those who did not. However, adding mandatory internships into the curriculum would allow students to apply theory in a practical setting (Wendlandt &

Rochlen, 2008). Seniors may be additionally hesitant given the unique challenges future

workplaces present.

> Assignments seldom have a simple solution, or even one solution, and
> require collaboration across organizational, cultural, and political
> boundaries, increasing their complexity. Ambiguity stems from anxiety
> over one's role (e.g., conflicting job demands and multiple supervisors),
> flaws in organizational communication, and confusion over knowledge
> and information. The constant churn in the workplace drives the
> workplace but, at times, with little sense of structure or stability. New
> hires must construct their own agendas (gone are the 15 page course
> syllabi to serve as guides) (Gardner & Perry, 2012, p. 136).

Another obstacle a new hire may experience is learning how to interact with

coworkers, especially when they may have an isolating cubicle to work in (Polach, 2004).

The lack of structure and autonomy may also cause anxiety for new hires, unlike having

set expectations from professors (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). New graduates are used

to being consistently updated about their performance whereas they may only get a

review once a year as an employee. Also, another challenge new hires may face is that

the growth of and contribution to the organization is the main focus, not an individual's

development (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). However, employers want their future

employees to still develop on an individual basis. Supervisors want individuals who take

initiative, have the capacity to build and maintain interpersonal and professional

relationships, use critical thinking skills, and have continuous learning (Keup, 2012).

Overall, students need to be efficient with their communication, teamwork,

problem solving, and listening skills to be successful in the work environment (Bulger et

al., 2007). One opportunity to help prepare seniors for the workforce is offering extended

field experience, i.e. internships (Tweed, Judson, & Simmons, 2010). Requiring students

to have two-year field experience allows students to create realistic expectations about

having a career after college. Allowing students to have practical hands-on experience while in college is "critical to the successful transition from student to professional status" (Tweed et al., p. 79). These experiences also allow students to have a foundation for graduate school if they plan on continuing their education. For the most part, seniors graduate college and become reflective thinkers (Skipper, 2012).

Career counselors may also want to utilize focus and support groups to help students internalize and process their impending transition into their career. These sessions can especially help students obtain a sense of control, but also to have a sense of camaraderie with individuals experiencing the same frustrations and concerns (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). Higher education professionals should encourage students to identify their skills and interests and what careers positively influence those skills and interests. Then these mentors should encourage students to be proactive about applying for jobs (Wood, 2004). Student and academic affairs professionals need to realize and accept that they play a crucial role in creating supportive environments for students (Noldon, Kim, & Sedlacek, 2000).

Investing in College Seniors

College seniors are put in position to prepare for a future that may not be written in stone. Gardner (1999) stresses the emphasis of why institutions still need to invest in their seniors. First, students likely contribute to their alma mater (Gardner, 1999). This is important given that donations from alumni create funding for scholarship.

Second, seniors have specific needs and concerns. Gardner and Hunter (2012) urge institutions to consider how their senior programs and services allow their soon-to-be graduates to reflect, provide closure, integrate the academic experience to post-

graduate life, and provide information regarding the transition out of college. Ceremonies or specific traditions may help seniors with their transition (Gardner & Van der Veer 1997). Institutions may also allow seniors to plan the events themselves to help develop skills that would be useful in a career setting (Henscheid, 2008).

Areas of Improvement

Institutions of higher education have a vested interest in making sure they meet the needs of their students in order to meet the demands of the workforce. However, just offering academic and career support isn't enough.

> … the most basic need of seniors is for the opportunities for reflection on the meaning of the college experience, integration and closure, and holistic support during the transition to post-college life. The senior year experience provides a vehicle for raising campus consciousness about addressing these long neglected issues (Gardner, 1999, p.7).

The literature on college seniors provides a picture of providing services on academic and career preparedness. Concerns and perceptions of college seniors are mostly based on career preparedness. From the moment students come on campus as first-year students, they have a personal journey. First-year experience programs are common on most campuses to help retain these students. However, are higher education institutions coming full circle with facilitating personal closure for their seniors? How do seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year in the college setting? The purpose of this study is to explore this phenomenon.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

Current literature highlights senior services such as perceptions about career preparation, purpose of capstone and seminar courses, and what role career counselors play. All of these functions are vital for seniors to be successful academically and in their careers. The purpose of this study was to focus on how college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college. Most institutions have first-year experience programs as a retention tool to help new students acclimate to campus. However, institutions may not be coming full circle with their seniors. Are administrators and faculty creating programs or providing services that foster reflection? The senior year, in general, brings on anxiety about life changes that will follow after graduations, i.e. going into the workforce. However, the literature seldom mentions how seniors make meaning of their transitional period on a holistic level. Obtaining a college degree is an expected part of a process to obtaining a job; but the growth of the individual and the experiences they have may not always be explored.

Research Questions

The research question for this study was: "How do seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college?" Subsequent questions include:

- How do these students define readiness for success?

- What values and strengths have these students develop?

- How do these students create a legacy in college?

Purpose of Using Qualitative Research

The purpose of this study was to capture how college seniors transition through their final year of college on an emotional and mental level. I wanted the cohort of participants to reflect on what challenges they faced, how they utilized support systems, and how they created hopes for the future. Quantitative measures would not be able to capture the unique individual experiences for purposes of utilizing reflection. In order to answer the research question on a meaningful level, I want to understand how my participants experienced their senior year of college. As a researcher I was trying "to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world." (Crestwall, 2013, p. 25). Overall, I wanted to understand how individuals experience and make sense of their own world (Merriam, 2009).

Purpose of Case Study Research

The purpose of this study was to understand how college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college. In order to accurately observe and capture this experience, I had to follow my participants through the fall and spring semester. The participants in the study also had to be graduating the spring semester of 2014. This narrowed my applicant pool to a specific group at Heartland University.

I wanted to know *how* my participants experienced their senior year as they transition to their post-graduate lives**.** According to Merriam (1988) a "case study is a basic design that can accommodate a variety of various disciplinary perspectives" (p. 2). I wanted to know how and why my participants experience their senior year**.** A case study specifically looks at a phenomenon "such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group" (p. 9). Utilizing the case study structure fits well for the

purpose of this study. The literature on college seniors tells the audience how seniors feel about being prepared for a career; not how they experience the process of transitioning out of college. A reason to select the case study approach was because "one wishes to understand the particular in depth, not because one wants to know what is generally true of the many" (Merriam, 1988, p. 173). The case study structure will showcase the progression of the transition experience of the senior year and what factors influence that experience.

Researcher Position

As a researcher I have an interest in the millennial generation and what is considered a quarter-life crisis. I graduated from my undergraduate alma mater two years ago in May of 2012. I am not far removed from my own transition out from my undergraduate experience. My current position could be considered very similar to those of my participants. This could be a challenge while collecting and interpreting the data. I may unintentionally assume that my participants will experience the same process as I did when I was an undergraduate.

Using an Epistemological Approach

As I stated, my purpose for using a case study structure is to understand how my participants create the meaning of transitioning through their senior year. How and why do my participants create their own truths about their experience as they prepare to graduate? As a researcher I wanted a "more personal, interactive mode of data collection" (Mertens, 2010, p. 19). There will be an established connection between myself, as a researcher, and my participants (Mertens, 2010). I will be taking a constructivist lens when conducting my interviews and when I code the data. As a researcher using this

paradigm as described by Mertens I am "attempting to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (as cited in Schwandt, 2000).

Participants

The participants who were involved in this study are current seniors who will be graduating the spring semester of 2014. The participants were nominated by peers in the Student Affairs cohort at Heartland University. The group of participants for this study was purposefully selected based on when they would graduate, and on being active participants in the campus community. Though the registrar's office at Heartland University would have a record of seniors who be graduating in the spring, I wanted seniors who are involved on campus. By going through members of the Student Affairs cohort who supervise or advise student organizations, I would be able to find participants who meet my requirements but also may be able to reflect on a deeper level. The purpose behind this reasoning was to have participants who accent the interview protocol with informative and comprehensive answers. This is known as "purposeful sampling" (Patton, 2002, p. 243). This will allow the data to speak for itself. I was able to "select information-rich cases strategically and purposefully" (p.243). I was able to contact the participants once I was given contact information from my peers. Participants were sent a recruitment email that provided detailed information about the study and the length of the commitment needed.

Research Site

The research site for this study was Heartland University. This institution was selected for the entire research study because of the timeframes of the case study

structure. Also, the participants' experiences as they transition through their final year are connected to Heartland University. It made sense to just focus on one institution since the cohort of participants was directly linked to Heartland University.

Heartland University is a land-grant research institution located in the Midwest. There are currently 25,000 students, undergraduates and graduates, enrolled at Heartland University. A senior is defined as an individual with 89 credits or more completed. The enrollment of seniors for the fall 2013 semester for men was 3,430 (56.3%) and 2,520 (43.8%) for women. The total enrollment for seniors in the fall 2013 semester was 5,760. According to the 2013 – 2014 fact book for Heartland University the six-year graduation rate was 66.8% for the 2007-entering cohort. Heartland University's three key missions are teaching, research, and service.

To make sure my participants felt comfortable and would be able to give detailed answers, I gave them the option to choose our meeting location. The only caveat I had was that it should be a location that would be private and quiet to conduct the interview; but ultimately it was their decision where they would like to meet to me.

Data

The data collection process was conducted through individual interviews. I chose to do individual interviews to get more in-depth answers and to assess whether their answers changed over the course of the study. The participants were asked about their feelings about graduating, how they have developed through their time in college, and how they created their hopes and expectations for after graduation. Given that these are unique experiences to the participants, it was best to capture their responses by interviewing them individually.

Through my recruitment efforts I was originally able to obtain five participants. One of the participants dropped out by the second interview. This left me with four participants for the final cohort. I met with my participants once in each October/November, December, and January. Each interview lasted 25 to 50 minutes and utilized the main research question with eight guiding questions. The final interview was completed in January. I will refer to the interviews as "timeframes." The timing of the case study was a benefit because it allowed the participants to reflect on their college experience and their feelings as they transitioned out. This allowed the data provided from their answers to be insightful and detailed. After the interviews were transcribed, they were sent to the participants for member checks. The transcription and member checks process was completed by March of 2014.

I utilized a semi-structured protocol for my interviews with my participants. Using open-ended questions allowed the participants to reflect and give in-depth answers about their feelings toward transitioning out of college. By utilizing this type of protocol my participants were able to create their own truths about their experience. As the researcher I was able to view how my participants constructed those truths. The protocol allowed the participants to guide the answers in an organic process.

Artifacts

Along with conducting individual interviews, I also collected data by having the participants bring in a physical object, also known as an artifact, to one of their interviews**. "**An artifact has a story to tell about the person who made it, how it was used, who used it, and the beliefs and values associated with it" (Norum, 2008). In this study the artifact could be anything that the participants felt represented their college

experience. Allowing the participants to discuss their artifact, helped them reflect and make meaning of their transition out of their undergraduate experience. It allowed me as the researcher to see how participants constructed key experiences of their college career through a physical object.

Interview Protocol

The following questions were utilized through a semi-structured interview protocol.

1) What comes to your mind about graduating?

2) How do you feel about your life after graduation compared to the one you're living now?

3) What challenges are you facing right now prior to graduating?

4) What strengths have you developed during your time as an undergrad?

5) What roles have peers and/or family members had in helping you make your postgraduate plans?

6) What hopes do you have and how did you create those?

7) As you take on a new role in society, what has prepared you for that?

8) What haven't I asked, that you wish to share with me in regard to your transition out of college?

Data Analysis

In order to find themes, I had to create codes and categorize the data I collected from the three sets of interview for each participant during three different timeframes. I started with open coding (the first tier) and read through twelve total interviews. I didn't have a set coding strategy beforehand, because I wanted the data to emerge organically.

During the open coding process, I selected quotes from the participants that stood out to me. I organized them based on similarity of the topic the participant was talking about, i.e. uncertainty and peer support.

After open coding, I co-coded with a peer evaluator, a colleague who comments on codes and themes as they emerge (Merriam, 1988). The participants were given a pseudonym and any identifying information was removed from the transcriptions before the peer evaluator saw the transcripts. During this process we discussed how the participants' answers were consistent in Timeframe Two and Timeframe Three. As the primary researcher, I decided to drop Timeframe Two from the coding process. There was significant data in Timeframe One and Three. Timeframe Two was similar to Timeframe One and the answers weren't as detailed. This could be because Timeframe One and Two interviews were conducted close together.

Once the peer reviewer read through the transcripts we developed codes. There were six initial codes in the second tier of coding. Those codes consisted of 1) how a career defines the participant, 2) uncertain yet confident, 3) beliefs about college (experiences, learned, and preparatory), 4) reflective scholarship, 5) artifacts, and 6) social support (peers and family members). Once we identified which codes weren't as prominent we dropped them from our code list. The codes were restructured for the third tier of coding. The beliefs about college code were broken into two categories; types and self-awareness.

Though this was a tedious and time-consuming process, it was important to review each transcript with the consistently updated codes. This allowed my peer reviewer and I to analyze each transcript through a different but constant lens. Once we

were able to reduce the codes to the most prominent, we were able to see themes emerge. The peer reviewer and I developed themes from the codes that remained steady during the coding process. During this process the themes were then connected to findings. We found that the codes were interconnected and told a story. These will be discussed in chapter four.

Data Verification

In order to make sure that the data I collected was valid and reliable, I implemented data validation techniques during the research process.

The first data validation technique used was member checks. Incorporating the participants in this technique kept me as a researcher accountable for portraying them in an accurate light. According to Maxwell (2013) "this is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misrepresenting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstandings of what you observed" (p. 126-127). I provided the participants their raw transcripts to make sure I captured their tone and our conversation accurately. Only a few corrections were made from the participants' transcripts.

The second data validation technique used was having a peer evaluator. I asked a Ph.D. student in the Child, Youth, and Family Studies department to open code on her own as I did. We then joined together and created and collapsed codes until we found themes that linked to the findings. By coding with a peer evaluator I was able to see if our interpretations of the data matched and selected the most relevant codes to create the themes of this study. We coded until the data was saturated; "the point at which you

realize no new information, insights, or understandings are forthcoming." (Merriam, 2009, p. 183). As stated before, this was a time consuming process but this was another way to validate the data. This indicates that as the researcher I spent ample time being involved in the data coding process.

Limitations

The sample size of the study could be considered a limitation. The original sample size was five participants but dropped to four when a participant dropped out unexpectedly. However, having the four participants still allowed me to have an ample amount of data and reached saturation (Merriam, 2009). The themes that emerged from the data are unique, yet consistent enough to be presented in the findings.

Another limitation is the nature of case study research. Merriam (1998) discusses the issue of generalizing.

> Overall, the issue of generalizability in case study research centers on whether one can generalize from a single case, or from qualitative inquiry in general … Those who view external validity in terms of traditional research design take one of two positions: Either they assume that one cannot generalize from a single case study and thus regard it as a limitation of the method, or they attempt to strengthen external validity by using standard sampling procedures (p. 174).

It may be viewed as a limitation to generalize because different cases are unique, but I think that finding common threads from multiple case studies can allow higher education administrators to know how to engage this population more effectively.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the methods and the rationale for the methods used in this case study. The process of how the research participants and site were chosen was explained. This also included how data validations and methods were

described and used. The role of artifacts in this case study was also discussed and will appear in subsequent chapters. Chapter four will discuss the findings from the data collection process. Significant themes emerged from the participants' stories specifically in regard to experiencing their final year of college.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand how college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college. The study utilized three sets of interviews with four individuals that ranged from 25 to 50 minutes. During the interview process the participants described their thoughts, preparations, and skills that have developed as they transition through their final year and graduate in May. Three themes emerged from the coding procedures (discussed in the Methods section). This chapter presents these results, as well as other relevant findings regarding how graduating seniors experience their final year of college.

Participants

Participants were seniors graduating from Heartland University in the spring semester. Participants were actively engaged leaders on campus. Three of the four participants were male and one was female.

Madison. Madison is an advertising and public relations major with an art minor and is from a mid-size city in Nebraska. She has helped planned campus-wide events and held a leadership position in the Greek community.

Jack. Jack is an advertising and public relations major from a small city in Nebraska. He has also helped planned campus-wide events, is involved with on-campus music organizations, an academic college advisory board, and volunteer organizations.

Charles. Charles is a communication Studies major from a large city in Missouri. He is involved with the multicultural center on campus, assists with orientation sessions, and is also an undergraduate teaching assistant. He is also a fifth-year senior.

David. David is an engineering student from a mid-size city in Nebraska. He was a transfer student from a community college. He is involved with a religious organization on campus and currently has an internship. He is also a fifth-year senior.

Research Themes and Relevant Findings

The three categorical developments conducted revealed three pertinent themes oriented to beliefs about college. They were: (1) types of experiences; (2) self-awareness; and (3) outcomes and individual strengths.

Types of Experiences

Each participant discussed different types of collegiate experiences (e.g., study abroad) that have shaped their undergraduate journey. The participants were cognizant of what specific experiences or individuals contributed to their involvement up until their senior year. These experiences were study abroad, Greek leadership, university programming, etc.

Charles spoke about how being at Heartland University allowed him to have a plethora of opportunities to build and expand his leadership skills.

> I started off getting involved on campus, holding positions, and right away I became president of my [residence hall] floor, which was something I wasn't used to … I became an orientation leader in 2011, which is a pretty prestigious role on campus, a very sought-after role. And I was able to be an orientation leader for a year, and then the last two years I acted as a supervisor who trained the people who will be orientation leaders. So, I feel like I have to be a leader in that sense, and I am also a TA for a class. So, sometimes I am guiding the structure of the class, and what we will be doing. I actually develop quizzes and grade quizzes. When papers are being graded I input the grade, and that was kind of all-encompassing

because I was doing things a typical student would do, something that an instructor would do, and that definitely helped me when I was supervising over the summer and during the school year.

Jack described how he struggled to feel a part of the Heartland University community his first year. However, after taking a study abroad trip to India with the journalism school, he actively turned things around.

> India was just like a really, really defining experience in my college career … I felt really sorry for myself and didn't take responsibility for going out and finding things to do because I am an introvert, and I am bad at putting myself out there in meaningful ways … Then I went [to India] and I found a group of people who were really passionate about what they are doing … So after I came back, I felt empowered. So, I got more involved at my college, and got more involved with the programming board, and did other stuff, and it really kick-started me into, what I would say, a good college career.

By having this pivotal experience Jack was able to find his place on campus and create a meaningful college experience. Jack also made comments about other aspects and types of experiences that promoted preparedness for life after college.

> I think the answer most people want to hear is school, but really classes and academics are like maybe 10 percent of how I feel prepared for things. Because my real world experience, and actually physically doing things, through an internship, or just hanging out with people or going on a trip, has prepared me so much more for my new role in society.

Madison also had a study abroad experience that made her realize that making connections was part of her college experience. Madison described herself as someone more likely to go with the flow rather than to make many plans. She is also very aware that her strengths are being empathetic and open-minded. These are skills that she attributes to her study abroad trip.

> My first mentality was this is a semester; it's not going to really matter. But by the end of the semester, they all became my closest friends. So, being able to, like, do that made those connections so much stronger. And I felt like I connected with those people in four to five months, more than I

did in my whole first year of college. Which was, like, surprising to me, but really cool.

David talked about how his internship with an engineering company prepared him for life after college. During the interview process of the study, he was offered a full-time position at his internship site. He was very optimistic his internship would turn into a job. Overall, he had a positive attitude that things would turn out great in his favor. David also described how he enjoys seeing physical representations of his work around the city.

> I'm a part-time intern as a steel detailer. So, an example I use is all the buildings you see in the city, all the steel that goes up. That's what we do. They'll get plans from the architects, and we have to re-draw the plans, give them to our shop, and they make all the pieces … It's neat I can go downtown or around campus and point out, 'Hey, I drew that!' Stuff like that. I got to work on a new arena, which was really neat.

Madison contributes her beliefs about types of college experiences to her leadership roles through her sorority, being on the programming board, and participating in a student-run advertising agency. This also included the people she has met along the way.

> I have been in a lot of things and have worked a lot. So, I feel like I gained quite a lot. You gain something new from every class you take, every job you take, every place you're living… I feel like I gained a lot of perspective through various jobs and activities.

She also made an interesting point that being prepared for life after graduation is more about how to take on the world. Through her experiences outside of the classroom, she is able to feel prepared for her life after her undergraduate career ends.

> Just knowing how to work hard and have grit, I guess. [Laughter] I don't know. I feel like college prepared me for that, but I don't necessarily think that it's just college that could have prepared me. It's more my life experiences that have prepared me.

Charles also described that having key people such as mentors and peers contributed to his success during his undergraduate years. He described that having these individuals in his life was something he didn't necessarily have until he came to Heartland University. Interactions with key people and the experiences that Charles had at Heartland University contributed to his beliefs about his college experience. He described a scholarship program that also allowed his future in higher education to be possible.

> They [the scholarship program] established that hope within me, because I was a first-generation student and I wasn't really pushed, but when I got into that program I had people tell me that the college was very obtainable, and I should go after it. And just having those key figures in my life… It was something I never really had before.

During the interview process, Charles was the only one who specifically brought up mentorship. He talked enthusiastically about having the need to have people in your corner.

> … It's nice when you have people in your corner that's rooting for you. And then when you have a success and you see that they are proud of what you accomplished, it's good to see that you have pleased them in a way… All [of them] had some stake in the way that I form my hopes, and the dreams that I've had for myself… I think everyone needs to have some mentor, some friend, peer, family member, someone rooting you on because you need someone to lean on when you're going through your college journey.

Self-Awareness

During the interview process the participants were able to reflect on what contributed to their experiences and how they developed from those experiences. The participants of this study are highly involved on campus. Through their involvement in their organizations (or other commitments) they were able to identify specific phenomena

that impacted their college experience.

Charles talked about always creating a "Plan B and C," but because of his experiences on campus he feels confident that he will get into a graduate program for student affairs. Also, he feels that his connections with his peers and mentor pushed him to look internally and see his own value and the ability to persist regardless of challenges.

> I know there's always going to be challenges. That's life. Life is not easy, and no one knows what's going to happen in their life. We have this plan of how we want it to go, but it never goes 100 percent according to plan. So, I am ready for it. I feel like I can take on a lot now because I've been through so much, and I know that I'll encounter struggles and obstacles along the way, but I feel confident enough that I'll be able to overcome those.

Charles's confidence in his ability to complete not only his bachelor's, but also a master's degree, is irrefutable. By creating a support network of family members, peers, and mentors, as well as becoming involved, he has created a path for himself to obtain his goals.

> I feel like I've been put into different situations to where I was forced to think outside of the box, or I was forced to make sure that I'm listening to other people's ideas. Also, taking into account my own ideas and all parties involved to make sure that I come out with the best outcome as possible. And just being here around like-minded individuals who want to be successful, who are coming here [Heartland University] to get an education. A lot of my friends, they are here to make sure that they're bettering the lives of others, and it's not just selfish, and they're just having a better life for themselves. They truly want to help people.

Jack is aware that he needs to have control to feel comfortable in his environment, and about his future. Jack claims to have developed self-awareness during his time at Heartland University. Through his experiences, he found what involvements matter the most.

> I thought I could conquer the world, and coming to undergrad, and seeing people who are way better than me at some things, and finding the thing I

am the best at, and that I'm passionate about what I'm doing, and not
having to be a jack of all trades was really the most growth I have had…

Jack also described himself as a job-oriented person. He also works for career

services at Heartland University. This creates an environment where he is positioned to

think about a career on a daily basis. However, when asked about his hopes and dreams

for the future he took a very direct and objective approach.

So, I don't have hopes and dreams, I have goals and aspirations. I call
them goals and aspirations because they are tangible and theoretically
doable… I've always been a kid who's going to leave, destined for bigger
and better things. I'm like the girl who walks off the bus in New York with
two suitcases and three dollars in her pocket or something. So, I think part
of it comes from that, that's how I created that goal, but also I do want to
go and experience things.

Madison discussed how even though she is involved in organizations or

internships related to her advertising major, she realized that's not exactly what she wants

to do. She described how she didn't like the idea of sitting behind a computer at multiple

points during the interview process. Madison described how being put into leadership

positions made her realize how she can be a leader once "you become comfortable with

yourself." She continued to describe that "once you have achieved being comfortable

with yourself you can extend your role as a leader and become a mentor." Overall,

Madison realizes that she wants to be in a career that allows her to work with people and

not sit behind a desk. David became self-aware by being able to manage his time

effectively between his engineering classes, internship, and commitments to his religious

organization on campus. He spoke about his appreciation for being able to apply theory

in the classroom to his future workplace. Being a student at Heartland University allowed

David to redefine who he is beyond academics: "I guess when I started college I would

probably describe myself more as an introvert, but now I am definitely an extrovert."

Outcomes and Individual Strengths

Between the first and third interview, consistent ideas and meaning-making about the participants' undergraduate experiences emerged. Some of these strengths were touched upon in the other themes. Participants are able to link their experiences to specific strengths and thoughts about their desires for their future. By creating meaning of their experiences the participants were able to create a canvas of what they want for their future and how to utilize their strengths to achieve their vision.

Charles was able to take his leadership skills and create a foundation of his passion for student affairs. He found meaning in his own value by helping others.

> I hope that I find my passion, which I think I have, which is student affairs, and to help students find their passion, even if it isn't student affairs. I just hope I am able to be an integral part of some person's life… I just hope I can make a positive impact on people my age, as well. So, that is my ultimate goal. I want to be happy, do something that is bettering me, and just helping people find out what they're passionate about and what they love to do.

Overall, Charles showed an appreciation for his education and opportunities to be involved on campus. By becoming a leader he feels confident to continue on to a graduate school and become a student affairs professional. Charles sees the value that education can bring not only to himself but to others.

> College is a growing experience. You learn so much in the classroom, but I definitely feel like you learn way more outside of the classroom, and that's the type of education that is going to help you navigate your way through life and to be successful; make yourself happy; navigate situations that may be uncomfortable for you. So, education is everything.

Jack was transparent about his challenge to find his place on campus his first year at Heartland University. From his India trip to his involvements with the programming board, he was able to find what he was most passionate about and who he is.

> I think that the college has definitely helped me become a lot more comfortable with who I am. I'm kind of weird — it's fine, it's a thing — and before, in high school and in my early years in college, I actively spent a lot of time trying to fit a persona or fit a brand — advertising again — fit a brand that I thought people wanted, and absolutely just realized that's futile and really stupid and made me really unhappy. So, in the last couple of years I think I've gotten to know myself a lot better and have become more comfortable with the fact that there are people who aren't going to like me and that's just the way it is. College has helped in that in — not necessarily getting a thicker skin — but in understanding that I have a skin at all.

Through this realization, Jack was able to draw upon his strength of being self-aware. During his undergraduate career, he was able to assess himself on a daily basis. Though he claims himself as an introvert he has taken on the challenge to create deeper relationships. Through creating these relationships and challenging himself, Jack was able to improve on his communication skills.

> I think that has lead me to be a much better communicator and I'm getting to know people a lot better. I've gotten more comfortable talking to people and learning from them and letting conversation — like letting myself learn organically about them instead of this very direct route, "Who are you? What do you do? What's your major? How old are you? Where are you from?" I'm much more comfortable talking about real things now. I think that has helped me. I have grown in my skill set and in my knowledge — but I feel so much more equipped to tackle challenges and face the unknown…

Madison was very upfront about being empathetic and having good communication skills since the beginning. She was also very clear that, through internships and student organizations, she learned she doesn't enjoy the idea of sitting at a desk all day. Madison knows that she wants a career that will allow her to help others.

> I want it [a career] to impact people and be satisfying to myself, as well. I want it to be a win-win situation, where I can help others and then also do something that I can spend my time doing and like doing it. So, what else? I guess maybe — I just don't want to sit behind a computer. I want to be

up and out, and interacting, and doing things, and making things, or being with people, and that kind of stuff.

Madison also shares a similar thought between her and the other participants in regard to getting involved.

Get involved in things that excited you and challenge you, and just keep trying things out. Don't ever stop learning past the classroom. Don't think that you can just go to college and just go to class, because that is not going to be enough… Find a couple things outside of class and devote your time to it. I think that's just as important as finding those things, because the classroom gets old, but it's finding the joy in learning the other things outside of the classroom.

As reiterated in the self-awareness theme, David was able to utilize his time management skills to be successful in his career. David also acknowledged that he had seen growth in himself from the time he transferred to Heartland University through his senior year. He alludes to how he has transformed during the interview process. When asked about his feelings towards his plans after graduation he shared that he felt prepared and happy with his decision.

That [happiness] was what kind of led me to take the job here. Because I like it here and I like the job. And I didn't want to be in a job that made me miserable. So, I knew I liked this. I figured, why go someplace else? And there was a lot of opportunity for growth and moving up in the company.

By finding a niche these involved seniors were able to find a different set of experiences that would mold them into the leaders they are today. The participants were able to create connections about what specific opportunities enhanced or created newfound strengths, and by understanding their strengths they were able to envision their future careers.

Relevant Findings

During the coding process, other relevant findings emerged but not consistently enough to become themes. However, these findings bring up significant observations about how college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college.

Social Support: Family & Peers

The participants were interviewed three times during the 2013-2014 academic school year at Heartland University. During the interviews participants were asked how family members and peers influence their post-graduate plans. They were asked this question for all three interviews, but their answers were more detailed in the first interviews compared to the second and third. Only one participant, Madison, described in detail how her family has been supportive of her transition through her final year of college.

> They are all really supportive. I have really great friends and family which I am so thankful for. I mean of course my parents and my sister being teachers they are very good counselors. It's funny. My dad told me, he says; cause I tend to worry about the future a lot, and I like think about what I am going to do. He is like, now slow down and look at what you are doing now, and focus on your goals for right now. So a lot of what he tell me is not to worry about post-graduate, more to worry about finishing my goal. And my goal right now is school, so he says to soak it in; you only have one year left, and to make sure it's worth it. That's been kind of his influence and my mom's influence

Madison has a unique social support system given that her parents and sister are teachers. Madison did bring up her friends, but she had a more visible support connection with her family. David also utilizes family support but the family has a more passive role.

> Family not so much, they let me do my own thing — People I work with influence me a lot — I really like it there so they kinda lead me to stay there, and they give me really good advice. They [family] have been

mostly just been encouragement. I wouldn't say that they helped me a lot
that they just — you'll be fine. It's like — that's the way my parents are,
like, 'You'll be all right. It will work out.' And it always has.

Family does play a role in regard to social support for Charles and Jack but not as
much as their peers. It was noticeable that David, Charles, and Jack were congruent with
their family support and sought out peer support more so than Madison. Charles is a first-
generation student and seeks out the advice of his peers because the experience of school
is something to which they can both relate.

I definitely feel that I seek the opinions of my peers more than family and
that just goes back to the fact that not many of my family members have
gone to college really. So, I don't think that they're — I don't want to say
not capable because that sounds rude, but I am going to say, I don't think
they're capable of giving me the advice that I need in order to pursue
something higher than my bachelor's degree, because they didn't even go
on to get a bachelor's degree. When I think about student affairs and what
I am going into they still aren't even fully comprehending and understand,
but my peers here, they understand it because they're on a college campus
and they see what student affairs professionals do on a college campus.

Finally, Jack did bring up that he includes his family in his plans, but not at much
as he does his peers. During our interview time together Jack brought up how he
sometimes needs to excite others about his plans so he can motivate himself.

I tend to have these big crazy thoughts and then promptly talk myself out
of them. So, I start telling all my friends so I can't talk myself out of it
since everyone knows. Which is a very strange logical loop to go through.
But I constantly second-guess myself, but if I can get other people to tell
me to do something it is more effective than me telling myself I have to do
it.

These four participants did utilize both family and peers for social support.
However, each participant had varying degrees of how often they included family in
making their postgraduate plans. If the social support from their family was inconsistent
they were more likely to seek the opinions of their peers.

Uncertain yet confident

The four participants in this study were asked about their feelings toward graduation and what has made them feel prepared for their new role in society. It was evident that they were experiencing transition anxiety in the first interview. Jack's comment about graduating captured the uncertainty.

> A lot of unsureness I guess. I felt like — I mean, I am excited to graduate
> and I am ready to move on to a new chapter of things. But I am not sure of
> what that chapter is going to look like, which is a little terrifying me since
> I am a very in-control person.

David felt unsure about his graduation plan only because he was in the middle of job interviews during the study. However, when he was offered a position it was noticeable that he was more at ease about his plan for after graduation. Charles was experiencing transition anxiety during the first interview because he was applying for graduate school. By the third interview he felt more confident that he would get into graduate school.

Madison shared that though she felt unsure about her future she was always excited for it.

> I think it's really cool that there are so many options that we just don't
> know that could be careers, and a lot of them you come up with yourself…
> There are quite a few opportunities all over the states… That's exciting. It
> is exciting. I think sometimes we get freaked out from it, too. But I like
> looking into the future and trying to see myself here or there or whatever.

Madison shared that she didn't know what she'll do but overall she knows she'll figure it out. She is very comfortable with the unknown. Jack's confidence in his future also emerged when he realized what type of company he wants to work for that matches his values.

> So I found out Oscar Mayer hires 12 people and they drive around the country in a WienerMobile, and it's like marketing and PR. So you do media relations on the front end, brand awareness when you are actually at the WienerMobile, and social media on the back end, and I want to work in a holistic PR agency that does all that stuff. And I also want to drive the WienerMobile, because that is just an [awesome] line a resume.

It was evident during the first set of interviews the participants were somewhat concerned about what life will look like after May. However, as the interviews progressed that anxiety eased and confidence set in.

Artifacts

The participants were asked to bring in an artifact that they felt represented their time at Heartland University. This technique of qualitative research allowed me as a researcher to observe and capture additional emotional meaning regarding their college journey. During the interview process the participants shared their artifacts. The artifacts ranged from writing utensils to a magazine. These artifacts represented their future careers, their hobbies, a time of growth, and personal accomplishment.

Madison and David both picked tools related to their majors and interests. David chose a calculator as his artifact. He chose this artifact because it has been a tool that helped him through his academic career at Heartland University. Madison chose a pencil because it was representative of her creative passions.

> I use it to draw and to write, and writing and drawing are really important to me, and just like a craft and making things is really important to me, and what I like to spend my time doing. So, that's why I brought a pencil. I mean, just art, in general, is something I like and value, so that's why I brought it.

Charles and Jack both picked artifacts that represented a time of growth and success. Charles shared a Heartland University admissions magazine that featured him on the front cover. This magazine cover represented his success.

> I was just grateful that I had the experiences that I had, and this is the culmination of everything that I've gone through here at Heartland University. And I was just — I thought this was great because it shows my involvement, things that I've been through, my trials and tribulations, and my successes as well as my failures and everything. But seeing this magazine and seeing that I was on the cover of it and then having a little bio on the inside, like I said, I'm just thankful for everything that I've gone through during my five years here. Who would have thought that I would've been on the cover of a magazine for the university? I just thought that that was amazing and this was a good representation of the five years that I've spent here.

Jack picked a white stone elephant that he brought back from his study abroad trip in India. As stated back in earlier themes it was this particular trip that helped him feel included in the campus community and find a home at Heartland University. The white stone elephant served as a reminder of feeling empowered and getting more involved on campus. However, this artifact also served as a reminder on a deeper level for Jack.

> He doesn't have tusks, because I'm sort of a sappy person, his tusks broke on the trip back, so I have the tusk pieces, but I don't want to assemble him, cause I think it is a good metaphor for how I felt a little broken, and not good about myself. And I still have doubts that Heartland University was the right place for me, it totally was, but I was a very 'what-if' type of person. What if I went to Northwestern, or what if I transferred? I think it's still a beautiful thing, even though he's not perfect, and that is something I struggle with. So he lives on my desk.

These artifacts serve as emotional tokens and mile markers for these participants. These particular artifacts connect to the participants' self-awareness as defined in theme two. These artifacts are representations of who they are and what they have achieved. David's calculator represents his commitments to obtain a career as an engineer;

Madison's pencil captures her desire to have a career that is representative of her values and interests; Charles's magazine cover highlights his achievements in his leadership on campus; Jack's stone elephant serves as a reminder of being lonely and feeling empowered to get involved and create meaningful relationships. It is also a testament to his self-awareness.

Another similarity among these artifacts is physical proximity of the artifact. Jack stated that he keeps the artifact on his desk. Charles keeps this artifact in his room. David and Madison use their artifact on a daily basis in their academic career and for personal enjoyment. The emotional and physical proximity of the artifacts are significant to the emotional and mental journey as these seniors near graduation. These artifacts are an extension of who these participants are

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

The research question for this study was: How do college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college? To explore the research question further sub-questions were formed to better capture participants' experiences and voices. The sub-questions were: (1) How do these students define readiness for success?; (2) What values and strengths have these students developed?; and (3) How do these students create a legacy in college? To extract the answers to these research questions, three one-on-one interviews were conducted with college seniors who are graduating the spring semester of 2014. Three-tiered coding identified pertinent themes. Transcripts from Timeframe One and Timeframe Three were used in identifying these themes. The three categorical developments (comparing T-One and T-Three) yielded meaning units (averaging one sentence to half a page) that were collapsed into three themes.

Thus, this chapter discusses results from this particular sample, implications applicable to administrators (particularly programming on the senior year experience), as well as limitations of the current study (e.g., sampling homogeneity, specificity in scope, lack of data triangulation/member checking, etc.). Finally, this chapter will also propose suggestions for future research endeavors oriented to the senior year transition.

Synthesis of Themes

Experience Types. Participants cited experiences such as on campus leadership opportunities, internships, Greek Life, Programming Board, and study abroad. Such experiences were a significant contributor to graduation preparedness and eased the

transition anxiety into post-graduate life. Jack was up front in stating he felt academics were only a small part of feeling prepared for life after graduation.

> Academics are great and awesome, and I really love learning, but they play such a small role in most people's everyday life. I feel like the real-world skill and real-world experiences I've had have been way more educational, in a way.

There is no previous literature that looks specifically on how seniors internalize their leadership roles or on how campus involvement contributes to their post graduate preparedness. In regard to providing well-rounded programming Wendlandt and Rochlen (2008) urge career counselors to consider utilizing focus and support groups for seniors to internalize and process their transition from student to future employee. College seniors experienced transition anxiety earlier in the year, but confidence emerged by the second semester. Over the course of data collection, participants expressed more-developed confidence about their lives post-graduation. Confidence about the future doesn't necessarily mean that all of the participants had a plan. Madison expressed that not having a plan isn't something that will discourage her;

> I don't know exactly where I'm going to go or end up or be. I'm not really worrying about it right now. Maybe I should be, and doing the whole job hunt thing. And I'm looking and thinking about where it is and where I want to be, but I don't know, I'm just enjoying this semester so far, so I'm going to take it as it comes.

The participants also brought up experiences and skills they have gained during their time as an undergraduate that contributed to their growth as their own person.

Self-Awareness/Preparedness. The literature on self-reflection and awareness on college seniors is very limited. Gardner (1999) addressed the need to allow opportunities for seniors to reflect:

> … the most basic need of seniors is for the opportunities for reflection on the meaning of the college experience, integration and closure, and holistic support during the transition to post-college life. The senior year experience provides a vehicle for raising campus consciousness about addressing these long neglected issues (p. 2).

As seniors prepare for graduation, a plethora of responsibilities ascend on them in uncertain territory: post-graduate life as emerging adults. Though there is anxiety about what life will be like after graduation my participants did not have a negative attitude toward graduation or life after graduation. The participants in this study only gained confidence during the progression of the study which was consistent with the literature from Yazedjian, Kielaszek, & Toews (2010). Charles felt confident that he would get into graduate school because of his campus leadership roles:"I usually have a Plan B and C, but I believe that I'm going to get into grad school and I haven't thought past if I don't."

David knew he was going to have a job after college because of his internship experience; Madison knew what she didn't want to do as a career but knew through her skills she would find a career that matched her values; Jack was able to become more involved on campus and create meaningful relationships with people. He realized that he wanted to work for an interactive and holistic public relations company such as Oscar Mayer by driving the WienerMobile.

Strengths and Outcomes. The data from this study suggests through experiences on campus and relating those experiences to self-awareness, the participants saw their strengths emerge. A college campus serves as a platform for students to grow in their

strengths and skill set. Among previous research, students feel that college helped them develop problem-solving skills and feel prepared for the college to work transition (Yazedjian et al., 2010).

Charles described his leadership skills a multitude of times because of the experiences he had on campus. From working for the orientation team to being a teaching assistant, he had the platform to develop those skills. David's ability to effectively manage his time was due to having to balance his schoolwork with his internship.

> I work 20 hours a week, and go to school, and am taking 15-plus hours every semester as an engineering student. So time management is really big. There usually isn't a moment of my week that isn't scheduled. It makes it kind of interesting.

Madison was involved with a student-run advertising organization, which made her realize that she didn't want to work behind a computer. Through an experience with studying abroad she came to the conclusion that she wanted a career that would allow her to connect and help people. Once she became comfortable with her leadership skills she wanted to extend those skills into mentorship. Jack also had a study abroad experience that helped him realize he wanted to get more involved, develop stronger connections with individuals, and consistently self-assess and reflect.

> I'm much more comfortable talking about real things now. I think that has helped me. I think I have definitely grown a lot professionally in college… I feel much more equipped to tackle challenges and face the unknown because a lot of times there were things that I didn't know how they were going to turn out, which was a new experience for me.

The strengths and competencies these participants gained through their involvement or responsibilities on campus were fundamental. Based on these results, they are likely to succeed in their new roles after graduation. Students who demonstrate that they are efficient with their communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and listening

skills tend to be successful in the work environment (Bulger, Lindauer, & Jacobson, 2007).

Other Findings

Aside from aforementioned themes, other important information was learned from this study. All participants expressed shades of transition anxiety. Though, this thread of transition anxiety was most evident at Timeframe One. At Timeframe Three the participants didn't experience transition anxiety as much as they did in Timeframe One; their confidence had started to develop. Charles described feeling nervous about graduating during our first interview:

> Excitement, and a little bit of nervous. Excitement because this is my fifth year, and I am finally out of here, and getting ready to go. Also I am a first-generation college student, I will the first of my dad's children and my mom's children to have graduated, and that will be a historic moment I guess. Then after that I'm a little bit nervous because of grad school, and I am not really sure what will happen next. So it is a little bit of both, but it is good excitement and nervousness.

However, by the third interview confidence had set in and his excitement outweighed his nervousness:

> I think it's just more so excitement now, now that I can actually see and I put in my application for graduation and know that it's real, it's really just excitement right now because it's close now. It's a lot closer than what it was the last time we talked. Day by day, I have a countdown on my phone, I have 113 days before I graduate.

Data analysis revealed that participants used social support systems through family and friends to help with their transition. If the participant demonstrated they were incongruent in their education level/experience with their family support system they would deem their social support system with their peers more important. Charles, as a first-generation student, sought out the advice and support of his peers over his parents.

Though his family was supportive of his choice to continue on to graduate school for

student affairs they couldn't offer effective advice because they did not experience

graduate school themselves. Also, the seniors in this study compared their undergraduate

experience to an artifact that had emotional and physical proximity to them. The artifact

also linked back to their experiences that led to their self-awareness. Major findings in

this study are interconnected and interrelated:

1. Hands on Experience - The participants in this study were highly involved on
   campus or held an internship. Through on- and off-campus involvements these
   students were able to create unique experiences, i.e. Study Abroad, Greek Life,
   etc.

2. Self-Awareness/Preparedness - Through developing their on- and off-campus
   experiences the students were able to gain self-awareness. They were able to
   reflect and connect what specific experiences led to their self-awareness.

3. Strengths and Competency - Once the students became self-aware they were able
   to identify their own strengths gained in their on- and off-campus experiences.
   They were able to use their strengths to help them feel prepared for graduation.

Participants' feelings of preparedness, due to hands-on experience, were seen

consistently across the three data collection points and participants. Wendlandt and

Rochlen (2008) discuss that having an internship allows students to connect theory they

learn in the classroom to a practical setting. Having that practical experience allows

seniors to feel prepared for their roles as new professionals. However, a concern for

employers about seniors going into the workforce is realizing the difference between

being a student and their role in the workplace (2008). Through the hands-on experience

of an internship students may the ease transition into the workforce. Tweed, Judson, and Simmons (2012) stress that having hands-on experience (through an internship) are key to the successful transition from student to new professional.

This also lays a solid foundation for individuals who wish to attend graduate school. For example, David was able to do so by interning with an engineering company that hired him for a full-time position. Madison was able to learn through her internships that she didn't want to sit behind a computer all day for her career. Jack knew that he wanted to work for a holistic public relations company and Charles felt prepared for the demands of graduate school. Keup (2012) described important workplace-readiness skills such as critical thinking skills, professional and interpersonal relationships, and taking initiative autonomously. These participants gained workplace readiness through their hands-on experience, whether it was through an internship or leadership roles on campus.

Implications of the Current Study for Student Affairs Practice

The themes that emerged from this study and the connections to the literature have specific implications for how higher education administrators can best assist college seniors. Gardner and Hunter (2012) urge institutions to consider how their senior programs and services allow their soon-to-be graduates to reflect, provide closure, integrate the academic experience to post-graduate life, and provide information on the transition out of college. This is essential to harness self-awareness. Student and academic affairs professionals need to understand and accept that both parties play a crucial role in creating supportive environments for students (Noldon, Kim, & Sedlacek, 2000). Below are recommendations from the themes that emerged during the data analysis process:

Reflection and Learning Opportunities

Establish programming for seniors that will promote reflection as part of a senior year experience program. Also, take any opportunity to provide learning opportunities that are not taught in the classroom. This should be utilized in the form of a seminar-style class that would meet for only 8 to 10 weeks of the 16-week long semester(s). David brought up that some topics are just not taught in college;

> There's a lot of things, I think the education system is a whole doesn't teach people. Like basic things, like how to do your taxes. Stuff like that, like things you don't think about it. Every person really needs to know how to do. But there's no real place to learn how to do it.

Topics covered in this seminar could include utilizing skills and strengths to be successful in a career, being a student vs. an employee, how to buy a car, how to write cover letters and a resume, and staying connected with Heartland University. If offering a seminar isn't feasible then creating separate events on specific topics related to seniors is another beneficial option. Charles described utilizing key people on campus and programming "to develop more as a person, and develop more as a professional, and ultimately, as a student while you're here at Heartland University."

Traditions and Camaraderie

Establish senior year traditions or "bucket list" event to create camaraderie among the senior class. Though seniors may already have traditions through their individual organizations, facilitating a connection to their graduating class can help facilitate closure. Seniors will soon become the alumni of their alma maters. Keeping them connected to their institutions as alumni starts before they graduate. Having traditions that tie a class together is an opportunity to promote reflection. When asked about reflection Jack said, "I don't think we are encouraged to reflect on where we've been."

Student affairs professionals need to consider and create opportunities for seniors to reflect. Facilitating any type of reflection will promote critical thinking about what they gained from specific experiences.

Alumni Directory

Creating a directory of alumni in specific fields who would be willing to mentor via email communication or phone calls would help seniors transition. Previous research delineates the challenges that students face as they transition into the workplace. Such challenges may include learning how to interact with coworkers, especially if they have cubicles that isolate them (Polach, 20014). Charles consistently brought up how mentorship is important. Having the opportunity to have a mentor who is already in the workforce could alleviate the anxiety of transitioning to the workforce. Also, it could give an accurate portrayal to seniors who are considering a specific field of work and help them gain a realistic outlook on the responsibilities in their chosen field.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are more opportunities to explore how college seniors experience their final year of college. This study had four participants. Having a larger participant pool may expand and validate current themes or even create new themes and sub-themes. These participants were also from the Midwest. A study that had wider geographic scope, larger cities on the East or West coast, could give insight regarding the similarity or differences of the senior year transition in multiple regions of the U.S.

The participants of this study were traditional-aged college students. The senior year experience for non-traditional students may differ significantly. Non-traditional students have already had life experience that the participants of this study are yet to

have. A case study approach using non-traditional students may provide insight on how higher education administrators could provide services for this population on campus.

This study was specifically a case study. Quantitative methods could be used to measure aspects such as well-being, GPA, and the relationship between confidence and leadership. A quantitative method could also be used to capture fall semester vs. spring semester attitudes. Using a mixed methods approach could capture statistical data to help support the participants' stories regarding how leadership opportunities and growing self-confidence shaped their attitudes toward post-graduate life.

A longitudinal study would allow the research to not only capture how seniors prepared for life after graduation but also how they experienced and settled into their new roles in their post-graduate life. This study would capture attitudes and thoughts of preparedness pre- and post-graduation. Having this data could give higher education administrators a better perspective regarding programming for their current seniors.

Conclusion

Overall, involved college seniors are able to draw upon experiences they have had on campus that influenced their growth and helped them identify their strengths. The current literature captures how high-impact practices such as capstone courses and internships help prepare seniors for careers after graduation. For this study I explored how college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college. During this process I also explored how seniors define their own readiness, what strengths they have developed, and how they created a legacy for themselves at Heartland University.

The results from this study can be used by higher education administrators and even faculty to further assist college seniors for life after graduation. The implications can help those individuals to help seniors facilitate reflection, instill confidence, and provide mentorship before they graduate from their institution. Students who may not be as involved on campus or have a mentor can be provided experiences to also feel prepared for their post-graduate life.

Future research is vital for this specific group of students. In order to provide better programming and services for seniors, higher education administrators need to understand how this group of students experiences their final year of college and how they transition and prepare for their post-graduate life. By creating opportunity for growth, seniors can explore and develop essential skills and strengths to be confident in their abilities to be successful after they graduate.

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Greetings < Student Affairs Peers >

I am currently looking for UNL seniors who will be graduating this spring to be a part of my case study for my thesis. I'm specifically looking for seniors that are involved on campus, well-versed, and whom you think would be interested in sharing their experiences for my study. They must also be graduating in the Spring of 2014.

I would like to meet you in person to discuss my research process and review my interview protocol. If you have any students that you would like to nominate you can do so at that time. I only need their email address to contact them.

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me.

Thank you,

Catherine Long

Greetings < Student >,

My name is Catherine Long and I'm currently a second year graduate student in the Higher Education Administration program. I am conducting a qualitative case study for my thesis in order to graduate this spring. I will be examining how college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year of college. I'm specifically looking for seniors graduating this upcoming spring semester. You have been nominated by one of my colleagues who thought you would qualify for my study.

The format of my study is a case study of the senior year transition. I will be interviewing you on three different occasions; once in October, December, and January. I want to follow your journey to have a good representation of what your process towards graduation looks like. Once the final interview is completed I will purchase a meal for you at any restaurant of your choosing in exchange for being a participant in my study.

If you wish to be a part of my study please review the consent documents and email me back a time and place to for us to meet in person. For our first meeting please bring an artifact that represents your time as an undergraduate.

If you have any further inquiries please feel free to contact me.

Thank you,

Catherine Long

Greetings _____,

This is a friendly reminder that we will be meeting on 00/00/0000 at 00:00AM/PM. I look forward to our next meeting.

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me.

Thank you,

Catherine

Informed Consent Form

Title: The Senior Year Experience   IRB#13797

Purpose:

As part of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration at UNL, I have to complete a thesis project. The study is concerned with understanding how college seniors emotionally and mentally experience their final year in college. You must be 19 years of age or older to participate. You are invited to participate in this study because your graduation status that fits my population focus of the study. You have also been nominated by one of my colleagues that thought you were a good candidate for my study.

Procedures:

The study will involve 3 one on one meetings. Once in October, December, and January. The meetings will take no longer than 40 to 60 minutes. You will also have the opportunity to pick our meeting location and date that best fits your schedule and comfort. I will also have you read over my transcription for you to confirm that you were portrayed accurately.

Benefits:

There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant.

Risks and/or Discomforts:

I do not envision any negative outcomes by volunteering for my study. We will be talking about your personal journey towards graduation which you may or may not have an emotional response to our conversation.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. You will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your identity. I will use direct quotations in my thesis but I will also make sure any identifying information will be kept anonymous. I will also be using an audio recorder during our conversations. Only I will have access to these files. Once the data is transcribed I will delete the audio file immediately afterwards. The results will be presented in my thesis and will be accessible in the UNL database. Any UNL staff, faculty, or students will have access to read my study. Once again, you will only be identified by your pseudonym and any identifiable information will be kept confidential.

Compensation:

If you so desire I will take you out to dinner to any restaurant after the third and final interview is completed.

Opportunity to Ask Questions:

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

Freedom to Withdraw:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:
You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature of Participant:

_____   _____
Signature of Research Participant   Date

Name and Phone number of investigator(s)

Catherine Long, Principal Investigator   Cell (XXX) XXX-XXXX

Debra Mullen, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator   Office (XXX) XXX-XXXX