

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: "FIGURING IT OUT": A GROUNDED THEORY OF COLLEGE TO POST-COLLEGE TRANSITION

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Before colleges and universities can be truly effective in preparing students for a post-college life, an understanding of the college to post-college transition process for recent college graduates is needed. Although there is extensive literature characterizing the college experience, little research exists surrounding the experiences of recent college graduates, especially during the transition out of college.

The purpose of this study was to understand the transition from college to post-college life for recent college graduates. Conducted from a constructivist epistemological paradigm, this study employed grounded theory methods to understand how participants interpreted their post-college transition experience. Specifically, this study aimed to understand the post-college transition process, the experiences most salient during the transition, and how recent graduates make meaning of post-college life. In-depth

interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of 13 recent graduates from a large, Mid-Atlantic research institution over 18 months. The result was the emergence of a theory of college to post-college transition grounded in the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

The grounded theory of college to post-college transition builds upon three findings: the process of post-college transition, the construct of transitioning adult, and how recent graduates approach the transition. The post-college transition process was characterized by navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters. This process of “figuring it out,” incorporated four active and overlapping characteristics germane to the transition: managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose. The transition process was also enhanced by participants’ ability to negotiate external influences and internal coping strategies. Through the stories of the participants, it also emerged that recent college graduates equate the post-college transition with the transition to adulthood. The “transitioning adults” navigated the post-college transition through one of five distinct approaches: Initiator, Instrumentalist, Observer, Adaptor, and Traditionalist.

The findings are relevant for recent college graduates and college students preparing to graduate, as well as for employers, parents, faculty, and college administrators. This research also has implications for student affairs practice and workforce preparedness. Finally, the findings inform both theory development and future research, particularly on lifespan development and transition theory.

“FIGURING IT OUT”: A GROUNDED THEORY  
OF COLLEGE TO POST-COLLEGE TRANSITION

by

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents.

Brian Arold Freeman, J.D.

1940 – 2002

&

Mabel Gilbert Freeman, Ph.D.

Thank you for instilling in me the value of education from an early age and providing unconditional love and support in all that I do.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES.....	x
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	4
Review of Relevant Literature .....	6
Purpose of the Study .....	10
Significance of the Study .....	11
Definition of Terms.....	12
Research Design.....	13
Summary.....	15
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	16
Transition Theory .....	18
Schlossberg’s Transition Theory .....	19
Role Exit Theory .....	22
Identity Formation/Crisis and Commitment .....	23
<i>Erikson</i> .....	23
<i>Marcia</i> .....	24
<i>Josselson</i> .....	25
Developmental Theories .....	26
Lifespan Development Theory .....	28
Erikson’s Young Adulthood Life Stage.....	29
Emerging Adulthood Theory .....	30
College Student Development Theory .....	32
Guiding Student Development Theories.....	33
<i>Psychosocial Theories</i> .....	33
<i>Social Identity Theories</i> .....	34
<i>Cognitive Development Theory</i> .....	35
<i>Self-Authorship</i> .....	36
Preparation for Life After College .....	39
Current Practice.....	40
Senior Year Experience Initiatives.....	41
Career Development Theory and Practice .....	42
<i>Structural Theories – Personality/Trait Theories</i> .....	42
<i>Developmental Lifespan Theories</i> .....	43
<i>Social Cognitive Career Theories</i> .....	44
Outcomes of College Attendance .....	46
Occupational Choice .....	47
Work-force Preparedness .....	48
Learning Outcomes .....	50
Summary of the Literature .....	51
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	54
Rationale for Qualitative Research Methods.....	54
Epistemological Approach and Theoretical Perspective.....	56
Constructivist Epistemological Approach .....	57



Interpretive Theoretical Perspective .....	58
Methodology .....	60
Purpose of Study .....	62
Methods .....	63
Sample and Participant Selection.....	64
Sampling Strategies and Criteria.....	64
<i>Theoretical Sampling</i> .....	64
<i>Intensity Sampling</i> .....	66
<i>Maximum Variation Sampling</i> .....	67
<i>Confirming and Disconfirming Cases</i> .....	68
<i>Convenience Sampling</i> .....	69
Identifying Participants.....	70
Sample .....	71
Research Site.....	73
Establishing Rapport.....	74
Data Collection .....	75
Data Analysis.....	80
Constant Comparative Method .....	81
Coding.....	82
<i>Initial Coding</i> .....	83
<i>Focused Coding</i> .....	85
<i>Axial Coding</i> .....	85
<i>Theoretical Coding</i> .....	86
Trustworthiness and Goodness .....	88
Credibility .....	89
Transferability.....	91
Dependability and Confirmability.....	92
Goodness.....	93
Ethics.....	94
Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity .....	97
Summary .....	101
<b>CHAPTER 4: RESULTS</b>	
<b>THE PROCESS OF COLLEGE TO POST-COLLEGE TRANSITION.....</b>	<b>103</b>
Participants .....	104
Anne .....	106
Bobby.....	106
Connor.....	106
Emily.....	107
Eric.....	107
Giselle .....	108
Karen .....	108
Nicole.....	108
Razac.....	109
Rocky .....	109
Sonia.....	110
Victoria.....	110
Winston .....	111
Emergence of a Grounded Theory of College to Post-College Transition.....	111
Understanding the College to Post-College Transition Process.....	113

Figuring it Out.....	115
Winston .....	116
Giselle .....	117
Karen .....	118
Connor .....	119
Nicole.....	121
Post-College Transition Characteristics - A Series of Realizations .....	122
Managing Loss .....	122
Experiencing an End to a Sequence of Expectations .....	124
Encountering Deteriorating Social Relationships .....	126
Assuming a Diminished Sense of Belonging.....	127
Losing a Sense of Identity.....	129
Facing Unanticipated Challenges .....	130
Establishing Place .....	134
Establishing Responsibility .....	135
Establishing Roles.....	137
Establishing Goals.....	139
Establishing Priorities .....	142
Focusing on Self .....	146
Prioritizing Self .....	147
Redefining Identity.....	149
Focusing on the Present Moment .....	153
Searching for Purpose .....	156
Exploring Passion .....	156
Contributing to Meaningful Work.....	159
Desiring to Make a Difference .....	163
Summary of Post-College Transition Characteristics.....	164
Negotiating Post-College Support Systems .....	166
Outside Influences .....	167
Financial Implications.....	167
Social Support Networks.....	169
<i>Family Support</i> .....	170
<i>Support of Peers</i> .....	171
<i>The Role of the Mentor</i> .....	172
Meaningful Prior Experiences .....	174
Internal Coping Strategies.....	178
Searching Out Shared Experiences .....	178
Surrounding Self with Stabilizing Forces .....	182
Focusing on Strengths as the Result of Reassurance and Recognition.....	186
Summary of the College to Post-College Transition Process.....	188
<b>CHAPTER 5:</b>	
<b>APPROACH TO POST-COLLEGE TRANSITION FOR TRANSITIONING ADULTS .....</b>	<b>192</b>
Transitioning Adult.....	193
Understanding the Transitioning Adult .....	195
Situation.....	199
Position.....	201
Focus.....	203
Purpose .....	204
Summary of Transitioning Adulthood .....	206

Approaches to Post-College Transition .....	207
Initiator .....	209
Instrumentalist.....	212
Observer.....	214
Adaptor.....	217
Traditionalist .....	219
Summary of Approaches to Post-College Transition.....	223
Summary of the Grounded Theory of College to Post-College Transition .....	224
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION .....	226
Discussion of Emerging Theory in Relation to Research Questions.....	226
What is the Post-College Transition Process Like? .....	227
What Experiences are the Most Salient During the Transition?.....	230
How Do Recent College Graduates Make Meaning of Their Post-College Life?.....	232
Discussion of Emerging Theory in Relation to Existing Literature .....	235
Post-College Transition and Transition Theory .....	235
Moving Out, Moving Through, Moving In.....	237
The Four S Model of Transition .....	239
Life Event Guided Transitions.....	243
Summary of Relationship to Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition.....	244
Developmental Approaches to Transition .....	245
Identity Development .....	247
Developmental Tasks.....	247
Transitioning Adult.....	248
<i>Transitioning Adults and Young Adults</i> .....	250
<i>Transitioning Adults and Emerging Adults</i> .....	251
Transitioning toward Self-Authorship .....	254
Summary of the Emergent Theory as a Developmental Approach .....	259
Implications .....	260
Implications for Theory Development.....	260
Implications for Practice.....	264
Implications for Future Research.....	271
Limitations of the Study.....	276
Strengths of the Study .....	279
Conclusion .....	281
APPENDIX A: ELECTRONIC LETTER TO NOMINATORS .....	284
APPENDIX B: ELECTRONIC LETTER TO NOMINATED PARTICIPANTS.....	285
APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INTEREST FORM .....	286
APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....	287
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....	290
APPENDIX F: KEY CATEGORIES GENERATED DURING CODING PROCESS .....	293
APPENDIX G: LETTER FROM INQUIRY AUDITOR .....	294
REFERENCES.....	295

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Participant Profiles.....	105
Table 2: Characteristics of Transitioning Adults .....	198
Table 3: Approaches to Post-College Transition .....	209

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The Process of College to Post-College Transition.....	115
Figure 2: Understanding the College to Post-College Transition.....	189
Figure 3: A Grounded Theory of College to Post-College Transition.....	225

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The bookends of the college experience are orientation and graduation, indicating the transition into college and the transition out of college. Graduation is a campus ritual marked by commencement ceremonies. Commencement, however, does not refer to an end, but rather a beginning. College graduates leave the ivory tower, diploma in hand, and set out to embark on this new beginning. Are college students adequately prepared for this new venture? Each year, over one million students graduate from American colleges and universities. According to the 2010 Almanac of Higher Education, 1,563,075 bachelor degrees were awarded in the United States during the 2007-2008 academic year (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010).

American higher education is facing declining public confidence and increased demands for accountability of student learning (American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASC&U], 2005; Association of American Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], 2002; Bresciani, Gardner & Hickmott, 2009; National Association of State and Land Grant College [NASULGC], 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). *Greater Expectations*, a national panel report published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2002) stated that “Public policies have focused on getting students into college, but not on what they are expected to accomplish once there” (p. vii). The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASC&U, 2005) stated that higher education within the United States is in midst of one of the most challenging times in history. As a result, the general public is more focused on higher education now than ever before. The policy report also stated, however, that there is an increased demand for a college degree. Increased demands for a college degree,

declining public confidence, rising tuition costs, and delayed graduation rates have brought the issue of accountability within higher education to the forefront. Following the release of *The Spellings Commission Report* regarding the future of American higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), colleges and universities felt pressure to prove themselves more than ever before. The report concluded that the United States' system of higher education needs drastic improvement, calling for greater accountability, efficiency, and cost controls at our nation's colleges. Additionally, the Spellings Report also questioned whether or not higher education was properly preparing students "to compete in the new global economy" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, p. 2).

With the increased emphasis placed on accountability, institutions of higher education must show how they are preparing students for post-college success. The success of higher education and student learning must be defined beyond college completion/graduation. College graduates are expected to have certain skills and competencies and American colleges and universities assume the responsibility of adequately preparing students to be successful post-college. Past research on college environments research has repeatedly shown that college attendance has a positive impact on student success (Astin, 1993; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pace, 1979; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991/2005). In addition to significant gains in cognitive ability, identity development, and moral development, college graduates earn more, exhibit better overall health, and enjoy a lower mortality rate than individuals with less education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

College graduates are expected to demonstrate increased knowledge acquisition, cognitive complexity, intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, practical

competence, and humanitarianism/civic engagement tendencies (Council for the Advancement of Standards [CAS], 2008). Graduates are also expected to live life as productive citizens after college (AAC&U, 2002). Previous expectations combined with the recent call for greater accountability has resulted in an increased attention on developing learning outcomes. Accordingly, it is important for higher education institutions and administrators to demonstrate the impact of their work through student learning outcomes. A focus on student learning outcomes allows faculty, student affairs educators, and administrators to improve practice and demonstrate transformative student learning experiences taking place on campus which will in turn benefit students beyond graduation. *Learning Reconsidered* (American College Personnel Association [ACPA]/National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2004), outlined the following as imperative student learning outcomes: cognitive complexity, knowledge acquisition, integration, and application, humanitarianism, civic engagement, interpersonal and intrapersonal competence, practical competence, and persistence and academic achievement. *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2007) and the Council on the Advancement of Standards (CAS, 2008), also focused attention on the need for institutions to develop learning outcomes in order to advance student learning in higher education. Higher education organizations like CAS, ACPA, and NASPA have drafted these learning outcomes in part as the result of the heightened public scrutiny surrounding higher education.

Even with the increased focus on accountability and learning outcomes, there has not been much of an effort to explore learning outcomes beyond the point of graduation. As Bresciani et al. (2009) asserted, learning outcomes are typically assessed while



students are still enrolled in college, and not after graduation. Learning outcomes research provides guidelines for certain competencies colleges should prepare students to achieve in post-college life (Bresciani et al., 2009), while environments research provides findings on the impact of college attendance on post-graduates typically at least five or 10 years out of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, little research exists looking at post-college outcomes and experiences from the perspective of college graduates, particularly during the college to post-college transition.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Before colleges and universities can be truly effective in preparing students for a post-college life, an understanding of the college to post-college transition process for recent college graduates is needed. Although higher education administrators spend a great deal of time focusing on how to help students successfully transition into college and stay in college once there, significantly less attention is paid to how to help students successfully transition out of college. Student affairs was founded to offer services that assist with the total development of students (American Council on Education, 1937/1949). As a result, student affairs educators strive to provide students with certain competencies and developmental capacities needed to live productive lives after college (ACPA & NASPA, 2004; CAS, 2008; Keeling, 2006; Kuh et al., 1994). However, little is known about what the transition process actually entails for college graduates, with no predictable understanding of life and experiences shortly after graduation.

One reason so little is known about recent college graduates, or the college to post-college transition process, is due to substantial gaps in literature and research that informs the college to post-college transition process. Even within the considerable

literature on both transition theory and lifespan development, there is no focus on either the transition from college or the developmental characteristics encountered by recent college graduates. Additionally, knowledge of student development theory has enabled student affairs educators to recognize the value in aiding students from orientation to graduation in their psychosocial, emotional, moral, and cognitive development.

However, there is no extensive body of literature that looks at individual development after college graduation, with even less literature focusing specifically on the transition process from college to post-college life. Although career services, young alumni programs, and senior year experience initiatives are present on many campuses (Gardner et al., 1998), little research has looked at the actual transition process and experience for college graduates as they move from college to life after college.

Research is needed to help understand the transition experience. It is important to grasp the characteristics of recent college graduates and the experiences encountered, particularly in relation to the college to post-college transition. By understanding the actual transition experience of recent college graduates, colleges and universities will be better suited to prepare students for life beyond college. In addition to college educators, college students and recent graduates, as well as employers and parents, will benefit from an awareness of common transition characteristics, experiences that influence the transition process, and the ways in which recent graduates make meaning of the transition from college. Such an awareness will help to better determine predictable post-college characteristics and experiences, as well as common themes that surround the college to post-college transition. However, this understanding must be constructed directly from

those who undergoing the transition, recent college graduates. This new knowledge will advance both theory and practice.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

Although the intent of this study is to generate a new theory, it is important to understand the pertinent literature and theories that provide context to the study. In order to understand the post-college transition process, it was necessary to be aware of existing transition theory and literature. This study on the college to post-college transition for recent graduates was informed by the literature on transition theory. Generally, *transition* can be defined as any event or nonevent that results in change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Schlossberg et al. stated that transitions include noticeable changes such as birth of a child or retirement (event), as well as more inconspicuous changes such as the nonoccurrence of an expected event or a change in career objective (nonevent). As students graduate from college, they experience a transition and likely leave behind relationships, routines, assumptions and/or roles from college. Although the literature on transition will be further explored in chapter two and chapter six, it is important to note that Schlossberg's work looks at variety of transition experiences including individual/intrapersonal transitions, work transitions/transition into retirement, and relationship transitions – including partnering, friendships, parenting, divorce, widowhood, remarriage, elder care, and death of a parent. However, no research, including the extensive work of Schlossberg, has specifically looked at the transition from college to post-college life.

In addition to literature on transition theory previously mentioned, this study also incorporates concepts related to transition theory including the processes of leaving roles

and forging identity, both of which happen during a transition. According to Schlossberg (2004), central to any transition is the issue of identity. Additionally, role exit theory (Breese & O'Toole, 1995; Ebaugh, 1998) assumes the process of disengaging from a role that was previously central to one's identity. Literature on identity formation, particularly in terms of crisis and commitment, (Erikson, 1950/1963, 1968, 1980; Josselson, 1987; Marcia, 1966/1980) also provided insight to this study in regards to identity formation for recent graduates during the post-college transition. This literature emphasizes that identity formation is based on making commitments to an identity as the result of experiencing a crisis. In this study, the transition from college to post-college life would be considered the crisis.

As recent graduates transition from the college experience to the post-college experience, it is important to understand the various developmental theories in which they are situated. Theories on lifespan development and college student development also helped to inform this study and the developmental elements of recent college graduates. As individuals in their early to mid-twenties, recent graduates could be considered to be situated in either young adulthood (Erikson, 1950/1963, 1968) or emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Both young adulthood and emerging adulthood provided a theoretical foundation for this study with relevance to the developmental stage of the participants. As part of his model on psychosocial development, Erikson's (1950/1963, 1968) life stage of young adulthood would be applicable to the traditional aged recent college graduates. Young adulthood is situated after adolescence and is the first of three stages of adulthood. Erikson found that young adults are attempting to advance both career and relationships.

Emerging adulthood is a relatively new stage within life-span development and is defined by a period of time that encompasses late teens through late twenties (Arnett, 2004). It is distinct from both adolescence and young adulthood. Arnett stated that there are five essential components that contribute to emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is the age of: identity exploration, instability, being self-focused, feeling in-between, and having possibilities. Specifically, emergent adults are in a developmental stage where they can experiment with different possibilities in love and work, constantly revise plans, focus on themselves more than any other stage of life, feel in-between adolescence and adulthood, and explore the multiple and varied opportunities that lie ahead.

Additionally, understanding the guiding theories of college student development was also important to the study as they helped to frame developmental aspects of the participants at the point of graduation. Even though I took a holistic approach to understanding the college to post-college transition for recent graduates, an awareness of psychosocial theories, social identity theories, and cognitive development theories provided context to this study. Additionally, several scholars asserted that the concept of self-authorship is a desired outcome of higher education (Baxter Magolda, 2001; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Pizzolato, 2005). A complex way of meaning making where an individual takes ownership of their internal voice to guide their life, self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2009; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Pizzolato, 2005) also informed this study. Concepts of self-authorship were relevant to this study because both Baxter Magolda and Kegan viewed the period of young adulthood as a journey towards self-authorship. Recognizing that the participants in this study are

situated within this age demographic, combined with the fact that self-authorship is a desired outcome according to college student development theorists, it was important to have an understanding and awareness of the journey towards self-authorship.

Finally, literature surrounding the impact of college and campus initiatives on post-graduates provided insight into this study. For example, the research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found significant benefits for individuals with a bachelor's degree when looking at the outcomes of college attendance. In addition to literature on the impact of higher education attendance, literature surrounding current student affairs practice and subsequent experiences of college students as a result of such practice also informed this study. Familiarization with theory and practice about both the senior year experience movement, as well as career development and workforce preparedness, guided this study unveiled a lack of research on the transition experience from college to post-college. However, the senior year experience (Gardner, Van der Veer, & Associates, 1998) literature did provide an understanding of resources pertinent to the senior year that aid in preparedness for life after college. Specifically, Gardner et al. found that students must achieve the following three competencies during the senior year: integration of what they have learned in college, reflection and meaning making of college experiences both in and out-of-the classroom, and preparation for life beyond college. This study explored how college graduates were prepared for life beyond college as understood through the transition experience of recent graduates.

Additionally, one area in which student affairs practice has prepared students for post-college life is through career development and counseling. A considerable number of theories relating to occupational choice and behavior emerged as the result of

extensive research regarding career development. Although most of the literature on career development does not focus specifically on college to work, an overview of career theory was still pertinent to this study. Unfortunately, most of the career development theories have traditionally focused on the age of adolescence (Mortimer, Zimmerman, & Holmes, 2002) and not the period of time following college graduation. Within the career literature, many different families of career development theory exist, including: personality trait theories, vocational interest typologies, values-based theories and lifespan developmental theories. Although each of these will be explored further in chapter two, this study concentrated on social cognitive career theory (SCCT) as the career development framework.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the transition experience from college to post-college life for recent college graduates. Specifically, the study was aimed at exploring the experiences affecting the post-college transition process and how recent graduates characterized and made meaning of the transition from college to post-college life. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the college to post-college transition process like for recent college graduates?
2. What experiences are most salient during the transition process for recent college graduates?
3. How do recent college graduates make meaning of their post-college situation?

## **Significance of the Study**

A substantive post-college transition theory could help prepare students for a successful transition out of college. This is particularly significant, as colleges must demonstrate that they are properly preparing students for life beyond college. Rising tuition costs, delayed graduation rates, and recent sentiments that graduates are not prepared to enter the workforce (Holton, 1998; Levine, 2005; Wood, 2004) have contributed to the decreased confidence in U.S. Higher Education. Recent times demand that colleges prove they are adequately preparing students to become responsible citizens and productive members of the workforce. Additionally, the call for accountability became increasingly more important following the release of U.S. Secretary of Education Spellings report regarding the future of American higher education (2006), which concluded our system of higher education needs drastic improvement. With the issue of accountability at the forefront of higher education, campuses must understand the successes and pitfalls of their graduates. By understanding the transition experience of recent college graduates, colleges and universities can gain new insight into students' post-college preparedness and in turn be better equipped to help them prepare for and transition into post-college life.

This study looked at the transition experience from college to post-college life from the perspective of recent graduates with the aim of understanding how college graduates make meaning of their transition experiences. The lack of research makes it difficult to understand how recent college graduates define their experiences, goals, and desires during the period of transition from college to post-college life. College educators and student affairs professionals spend great amounts of time trying to help



students evolve to understand whom they are during the point of college, yet educators are uninformed about how these same students continue to progress immediately after leaving college. Additionally, little is known about the experiences of college graduates in the years immediately following graduation. How recent graduates characterize their own post-college experiences, particularly in relation to the influence of college on their post-college experience, needs to be further understood. Through gaining insight into the transition experiences of recent college graduates and how recent graduates approach post-college transition, it was my intention to generate a transition theory that will equip college and universities with the knowledge and tools to best prepare students for life post-college.

### **Definition of Terms**

In order to develop a theory surrounding the transition experience from college to post-college life, it is important to first define some key terms that are meaningful to the study. First and foremost is the significance of understanding the perspective of *transition*. As mentioned earlier, and more fully discussed in chapter two, transition theory focuses on any life events involving change (Schlossberg et al., 1995). It is this outcome of change, according to Schlossberg et al., that is imperative for a transition to occur. To better understand a transition experience, it is important to first determine what type of transition is occurring. Schlossberg presents various types of transition including: *anticipated transition* and *unanticipated transition*. Anticipated transition refers to scheduled and expected life events that can be predicted by the individual; unanticipated events are unplanned life events that are not predictable by the individual. Significant to this study is the realization that the transition from college to post-college life is both

expected and unexpected. Although college students can anticipate the process of graduation and moving-on from college, the actual transition process and experience is full of unanticipated and unexpected events. In addition, nonevent transitions may also occur as students graduate from college. For instance, students may assume that a particular event will take place, such as admission to graduate school or attainment of a specific job, which ends up not occurring. The experience of moving from college to post-college life would be considered a transition because at least one event occurs that results in change.

For the purpose of this study, *college to post-college* transition assumes that a college student has attained a baccalaureate degree from a four-year institution. However, a student did not need to progress through a four-year college in four-years; graduates could have transferred from a two- or four-year institution, stopped out, and/or taken more than four years to matriculate to graduation. Since this study will specifically rely on the experiences of those undergoing the college to post-college transition process, only recent college graduates will be studied. By *recent college graduates*, I am referring to those alumni who are within three years of receiving their undergraduate degree at the start of the study.

### **Research Design**

I approached this study through a constructivist epistemological perspective (Charmaz, 2006) using grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To truly understand the process of college to post-college transition, it was important to understand the transition experience through the voices of recent college graduates.

Using a constructivist paradigm for this study, meaning is constructed and knowledge is mutually created from both the researcher and the participants (Charmaz, 2006).

Grounded theory provided the opportunity to develop a theory regarding the college to post-college transition process. Described in more detail in chapter three, grounded theory is the construction of a theory that is grounded in data (Charmaz, 2006). I followed Charmaz's (2006) approach to grounded theory methodology, which consisted of "systematic yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data" (p. 2).

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling techniques in order to contribute information-rich cases fundamental to the purpose of the study (Patton, 1990). Thirteen participants took part in this study. Because saturation was met, no new participants were selected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interviews were conducted as the primary source of data collection and each participant was interviewed two times with a third meeting serving as an additional member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to confirm the findings. After each of the interviews was transcribed, I employed the constant comparison method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following the constant comparison model consistent with grounded theory research, data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) described this process as one where "sampling, data collection, and data analysis occur continuously and in relation to one another" (p. 43). I simultaneously and continuously gathered data, analyzed data, went back into the field and gathered more data, analyzed additional data, and so forth.

Following the guidelines prescribed by Charmaz (2006), I initiated four phases of coding as part of the data analysis process. These phases: initial, focused, axial, and

theoretical will be described in more detail in chapter three. However, it is important to understand that through the coding process, data was continuously compared to emerging categories and concepts. Through a flexible yet guided coding process, memo-writing, intentional researcher reflexivity, and follow up conversations and member-checks with the participants, key categories emerged that formed the foundation for the constructed theory of college to post-college transition.

### **Summary**

Recent college graduates are undergoing a transition experience that has yet to be studied by higher education and student affairs professionals. This study was informed by the literature regarding transition theories, human and college student development theories, and current practices relevant to the experiences recent college graduates. The purpose of this study was to explore the transition experience from college to post-college life for recent college graduates to construct a theory of college to post-college transition. From the stories and experiences of recent graduates undergoing the transition process, a substantive theory of college to post-college transition emerged. The grounded theory that emerged as a result of this study has implications for future theory development, future research, and higher education and student affairs practice.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Grounded theorists have continually disputed how to approach the use of existing literature within the research study (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Glaser and Strauss (1967/2008) explicitly suggested writing the literature review after completing the analysis so not to contaminate findings. Similarly, Corbin and Strauss (2008) asserted that because “there is always something new to discover” (p. 36) there is no need to review all of the literature before engaging in the study. Other researchers have approached the review of literature as necessary in order to both “situate your work within the body of related literature” (Bryant & Charmaz, p. 123) and to “set the stage for what you do in subsequent sections or chapters (Charmaz, 2006, p. 166). Keeping with grounded theory tradition, I engaged in the literature as an ongoing practice throughout the entirety of the research process. I used existing literature to provide a framework situating the study as opposed to providing validation of the study. In this chapter, I provide an overview of relevant literature that influenced how I collected and analyzed data. I also reveal gaps that exist within earlier studies. It is important to note that the purpose of this study is not to either refute or authenticate existing research, but instead to show how this research enhances a relatively unknown area or topic, specifically the post-college transition. The relationship of the emerging theory to existing literature will be discussed in chapter six.

To guide this study, this literature review drew upon the disciplines of psychology, human development, and education. The chapter identifies and discusses relevant research to provide a framework and familiarity of both the phenomenon of transition and the population under investigation. Three overarching areas of literature

influenced the study and serve as the guiding sections of this chapter. In the first section, I focus on the concept of transition, specifically notions regarding transition and situations that impact transition. With the transition process from college to post-college life serving as an underlying condition of the population under investigation, it was important to have an understanding of literature that exists on the phenomenon of transition. I begin this chapter with a review of existing literature regarding transition theory using Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, 1984, 2004; Schlossberg, et al., 1995) as the guiding framework for the discussion on transition. In addition, as college graduates leave college behind to enter a new phase of exploration, I further examine relevant concepts surrounding role exit theory (Breese & O'Toole, 1995) and identity formation in terms of crisis and commitment (Erikson, 1950/1963, 1968; Josselson, 1987; Marcia, 1966/1980). Although I discuss the research conducted regarding transition and coping with transition, it is important to remember that little research exists regarding the actual transition from college to post-college life.

After a discussion of current theories related to the process of transition, I then discuss developmental theories that help to situate the population being studied. As part of the literature review process, I explored existing literature to best understand the experiences and situations of the participants. I provide an overview of lifespan development and further discuss young adulthood and emerging adulthood theory, relevant theories of college student development, and the journey towards self-authorship, as each of these theories are relevant to this specific developmental population. Both young adulthood (Erikson, 1950/1963, 1968, 1980) and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) theories position themselves as a developmental life stage

focusing on the period of life from the late teens throughout the 20s. In addition, the underpinnings of college student development theory provide more of a framework for understanding this population at the point of graduation. Due to the extensive body of literature that exists regarding college student development, this chapter provides only a brief overview in an attempt to have a comprehensive familiarity with influential student development theories. The final developmental theory that is incorporated into this chapter is that of self-authorship, specifically the longitudinal work of Baxter Magolda (1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2009) which depicts how adults navigate life's challenges throughout their twenties and thirties.

These theories are interrelated and foundational for understanding recent college graduates as they move from college to post-college life. However, none of these theoretical frames propose a theory of college to post-college transition. Additionally, current literature regarding college outcomes neglects to generate a theory on, or even examine the process of, post-college transition. I conclude the chapter by providing an overview of literature examining the outcomes of college attendance, specifically career development. This discussion helps to reveal gaps in the literature surrounding current theory and practice related to the college to post-college transition process.

### **Transition Theory**

An underlying phenomenon of this study is the process of transition. Because I studied the transition experience from college to post-college life, an awareness of current literature regarding transition is necessary. A transition theory perspective focuses on "life events entailing change" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 18). Assuming this definition, the process of graduating from college and encountering new and/or different

experiences is unequivocally a transition that needs to be understood. An understanding of transition theory will also help provide context to the other relevant theoretical aspects used to frame this study including identity development in terms of new roles and experiences. Schlossberg et al. found the issue of identity as central to understanding transition and that an awareness of one's identity is essential for negotiating the transition. She asserted that it is imperative to know the answers to the following two questions for anyone experiencing a transition: "Who am I" and "What gives meaning to my life?" These questions were vital to this study, and served as a guide for the participant interviews as a means to understand the individual and collective transition experiences of college graduates as they leave the familiar and move on to new experiences. Familiarity with the literature on transition theory helped to frame this study and provided a point of entry for the research design.

### **Schlossberg's Transition Theory**

In order to better understand the transition experience for recent college graduates, it was fundamental to the study to be aware of current transition theory. Schlossberg (1984) defined transition as "any event or nonevent that results in change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles within the settings of self, work, family, health, and/or economics" (p. 43). Graduating from college is a crucial transition point in adult life, and graduation, the event, is a transition that assumes most all of these status changes. Most likely, non-events are also occurring as students graduate from college. A non-event can be either an expected event that did not happen, such as not getting a job or not getting admitted to a desired graduate program, or a change in belief systems of any sort. More explicitly, transition happens when an existing condition is confronted by a



conflicting or opposite transition. Schlossberg mentioned, however, that transitions truly only occur if it is defined as such by the person experiencing it. More than likely, recent college graduates would define their experience of moving from college to life after college as a transition.

A central assumption of transition theory that informs this study is that the transition process has three distinct phases (Schlossberg et al., 1995; Schlossberg, 2004) defined by moving in, moving through, and moving out. However, the first step in any transition can be conceptualized as either moving in or moving out. Specifically, recent college graduates will first move through the *moving out* phase of college just as retirees are *moving out* of the workforce (Schlossberg, 2004). A letting go process characterizes this stage where one must disengage from a role. Often times, this role is central to one's identity. Moving in to a role assumes new roles, new relationships, new routines, and new assumptions (Schlossberg, 1984, 2004; Schlossberg et al., 1995). In this stage, one creates a new life and learns how to navigate new opportunities and experiences. The period in-between moving in and moving out is known as *moving through* and assumes a process of searching. This period of searching can have ups and downs. Schlossberg (2004) defines this stage as one in which a person is "relinquishing one set of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions, and struggling to figure out *what next*" (p. 19). This important exploration of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions before and after college graduation helped guide the interviews.

Schlossberg's theory of transition (Schlossberg, 1984, 2004; Schlossberg et al., 1995) found that people react to similar transitions in very different ways. Additionally, the context of the situation and the degree to which the transition alters one's daily life

will impact the transitional experience. It is the balance of these liabilities and assets that determines how individuals cope with transitions (Schlossberg, 1984). Schlossberg found four major factors (known as the four s's) that influence one's effectiveness in coping with transitions. The *four s's* that influence the ability to cope during transition are: situation, self, support, and strategies.

The *situation* variable combines what is happening, including the role change, the length of the transition, the timing, and whether or not there has been a previous experience with the transition. For instance, do the participants have a job lined up and a place to live? The *self* variable includes personal and demographic characteristics and the personal strength brought to a transition. In her work on retirement, Schlossberg (2004) looks at whether or not the new retirees set goals. The *support* variable refers to the external forces that provide support during the transition. These supports can include people (family and friends) as well as emotional, physical, and even financial support. Finally, the *strategies* variable incorporates various types of coping strategies. For the purpose of this study, recent college graduates were asked to share specific coping mechanisms that they used during the college to post-college transition. How these 4 s's assume positions as either liabilities or assets during the period of college to post-college transition will greatly impact how a person will cope with the transition. The influence of situation, self, support, and strategies helped to inform the interview questions.

Schlossberg's transition work has obvious implications for this study. Drawing upon Schlossberg's transition research, I approach this study in an attempt to understand and define recent college graduates in the years following graduation. More specifically, I hope to discover the process of post-college transition, whether or not it is identifiable,

and what college students preparing to graduate can expect as they negotiate post-college transition.

### **Role Exit Theory**

As college graduates transition into post-college life, they psychologically and physically leave behind the role of college student. In order to study the transition from college to post-college life, it is important to also understand the connected literature looking at role exit theory, particularly since college graduates, in theory, leave behind the role of college student. Ebaugh (1988), a sociologist who initially studied the process of changing and/or leaving religious orders, particularly exploring why ex-nuns left the order, expanded her study to look more broadly at the role exit process across a variety of social roles. Though Ebaugh looked primarily at professional roles (i.e., teachers, doctors, police officers), she looked at the role exit process as experienced by people exiting all kinds of roles including marriage, parenthood, and alcoholism. She focused on the point when a person disengages from a role central to one's identity and explored which experiences were most prevalent during the role exit process. It should be noted, however, that Ebaugh's study only incorporated voluntary role changes; her sample all voluntarily exited a role that was significant to their life and identity. In addition to looking at the reasons for choosing to leave a role, or as she called it, the turning point, Ebaugh also revealed an exit process with common stages that all "exes" go through after they disengage from a significant role. In addition, she asserted that any new identities forged must incorporate past history and social status.

Breese and O'Toole (1995) studied role exit theory by researching transition and crisis of adult college women. They defined role exit theory in adulthood as either

leaving behind a major role or incorporating a prior role into a new identity. More specifically, their role exit theory looked at the abandonment of roles, and commitment to new roles, during the transition into college for adult female students over the age of 28. Even though their theory looked specifically at non-traditional aged adult female students transitioning into college, useful information regarding transition and coping with crisis can be applied to recent college graduates. Specifically, Breese and O'Toole found that transitioning within one life status resulted in taking on an additional new or different role in an effort to better cope with the larger role exit process. They also found that women who were considered "external women," or those driven by forces outside of themselves such as job loss or divorce, had more doubts and a loss of self-confidence. Meanwhile, internally driven women, those women driven by internal forces such as personal growth, not only had a greater sense of self-control over their situation, but also were more likely to plan alternative commitments.

### **Identity Formation/Crisis and Commitment**

As mentioned earlier, Schlossberg (2004) asserted "the issue of identity is critical as you negotiate any transition" (p. 28). As recent college graduates transition out of college and explore new roles, they may face what Erikson (1950/1963, 1968, 1980) referred to as an "identity crisis." In order to truly understand transition theory and role exit theory, one must also have insight into the interconnected theory of identity development, particularly situated in the realm of crisis and commitment.

**Erikson.** Erikson (1950/1963, 1968, 1980) proclaimed eight stages of psychosocial human development. He looked at human growth (development) as a series of internal and external conflicts and stated that each stage of psychosocial human

development has a corresponding crisis, which he specifically called an “identity crisis.” Erikson asserted therefore that to forge an identity, one must first undergo a crisis. He focused on the need to master ego qualities and resolve conflicts in order to transition from one stage to the next. As people seek to understand one’s own identity, confusion over appropriate roles is common. Specific to participants in this study, Erikson’s psychosocial development stages pay attention to both adolescence as the period of identity versus role diffusion and young adulthood as the period of intimacy versus isolation. Erikson’s work served as a theoretical origin for many of the other theoretical frameworks incorporated within this study and will be further explored later on in this chapter when discussing developmental stages.

**Marcia.** Expanding upon the identity formation work of Erikson, prominent scholars of identity development Marcia (1966, 1980) and Josselson (1987) also looked at identity and identity crisis but discussed the importance of making a *commitment* to one’s identity. Marcia and Josselson looked specifically at the interacting variables of crisis and commitment and acknowledged that identity formation is based on the presence or absence of crisis and commitment. The crisis stage is often referred to as a period of exploration and in order to forge a new identity, one must make certain commitments to an identity. According to Marcia (1966), these commitments, based on the crisis (exploration), become the core of the newly forged identity. Pertinent to this study, it is imperative to be familiar with identity formation, specifically the work of Marcia and Josselson in terms of crisis and commitment, in hopes of better understanding how recent graduates negotiate the interacting variables of crisis (the period following graduation)

and commitment (how they commit to life situations) to forge their new post-college identity.

Marcia (1966), who looked only at men, determined four levels of identity formation: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and achievement. In identity foreclosure, people have made commitments in the absence of a crisis. Here, students carry forward prescribed expectations, perhaps those set by parents. Those in identity achievement have gone through a process of exploring various options and came to a sense of commitment themselves. Those who are actively undergoing a state of crisis, or in an exploratory stage, are said to be in moratorium. They may be struggling to make a commitment. Finally, those in identity diffusion are experiencing neither crisis nor commitment and may be avoiding this process. Often, they have abandoned childhood resolutions but are not seeking new ones.

**Josselson.** Identity integrates one's meaning to self and one's meaning to others. Josselson (1987) defined identity, as the result of the interaction of crisis and commitment, as a "stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world" (p. 10). She expanded upon the four identity states set forth by Marcia to generate her theory of identity development in women. In her longitudinal study, Josselson (1996) revealed a formation of identity for women by developing four "pathways to identity" based on the Marcia's four identity states. These four pathways included: Pathmakers, Guardians, Searchers, and Drifters. Pathmakers have experienced a process of exploration/crisis, which resulted in the ability to make identity commitments. Guardians, on the other hand, have made a commitment but did so without a sense of crisis. Often times, Guardians carry on plans that have already been

set out for them from childhood and/or by parents. Those who have undergone (or are in the process of undergoing) crisis and exploration but have not yet made a commitment are Searchers. Searchers are still in an active period of exploration; they do not yet know who they want to be but are in the process of trying to figure it out for themselves. Finally, Drifters are people who have not undergone exploration, nor made any type of identity commitment. Though Drifters do not know what they believe, they were not yet concerned with a need to know.

This transition study built upon the work of Erikson, Marcia, and Josselson and approach identity formation during transition by exploring the presence or absence of crisis and commitment during the post-college transition process. Drawing upon the identity development research, students who are leaving college would be considered to be in a heightened sense of crisis. In addition, transition theory and role exit theory assume that recent graduates encounter either a lack of or presence of commitments. As college graduates exit the role of college student and take on new roles, it is imperative to understanding identity, particularly in terms of crisis and commitment. The interrelated and overlapping concepts of transition, specifically Schlossberg's theory of transition, role exit theory, and identity formation through the simultaneous interaction of crisis and commitment, are all integral to understanding post-college transition.

### **Developmental Theories**

Throughout the life course, humans transition among various developmental stages. Human developmental theory (Baltes, 1978) looks at the study of individual development from conception to old age. However, movement from stage to stage is not based on age progression but rather on major developmental processes that occur

throughout the life time (Baltes, 1978). Individuals are both the products and producers of their own development, changing throughout the life span as mutually interacting functions contribute to the behavior change process (Baltes, 1978; Lerner, 1983; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981). Different developmental theorists would situate recent college graduates in different developmental life stages. Although this study looks specifically at the individual movement from college to post-college as a process of transition, it is important to be familiar with guiding developmental theories, both developmental processes and lifespan stages, in which the participants would be positioned.

Incorporating various theories of lifespan development spanning multiple disciplines, this chapter presents an overview of human development theories that provide a framework for understanding college graduates as they transition from college to life after college. This chapter begins by incorporating, and further exploring, Erikson's model of psychosocial human development (1950/1963, 1968, 1980). Particular attention is paid to his life stage focusing on young adulthood. More recently, Arnett (2000) proposed a new life stage, emerging adulthood, as the result of demographic changes over the past half-century making the transition from adolescence to young adulthood a much more in-depth process. *Emerging adulthood* focuses on the late teenage years through the twenties and is distinguished by a period of change and exploration of life direction. Based on Arnett's age classification, traditional aged college graduates would fall into the stage of emerging adulthood. In addition to young adulthood as determined by Erikson and emerging adulthood theory as established by Arnett, it is essential to have an understanding of college student development theory as



the participants are all recent college graduates. After presenting a brief overview of the various families of student development theory that framed this study, I will spend time detailing a more integrated developmental approach important to this study: self-authorship. Self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Pizzolato, 2005) refers to the ability to understand one's self in order to form judgments and make decisions.

### **Lifespan Development Theory**

Specific to stage theories and theorist, recent college graduates fall somewhere between adolescence and adulthood. Historically, the arrival to adulthood was the result of marriage, parenthood, and – for men – career attainment. As more people delay entrance into the above “adult” attributes (Arnett, 2011), the actual onset of “adulthood” is up for debate. In terms of traditional aged college students and recent graduates, Erikson (1968) referred to this age-specific group as *young adults*, while Arnett (2000) designated people ages 18 to 29 as *emergent adults*.

The study of the transition to adulthood, and the actual arrival of adulthood, has long been a predominant focus within the field of human/lifespan development. The period of transitioning to adulthood (and corresponding terms such as post-adolescence, young adulthood, and emerging adulthood) was a deliberate focus of this study, as opposed to the period of adulthood, because according to contemporary human development theorists (Arnett, 2011), traditional-aged recent college graduates have not yet achieved “adulthood” status. Instead, recent graduates are instead situated in the process of forging a commitment to adult roles (Erikson, 1980).

**Erikson's young adulthood life stage.** As mentioned earlier, Erikson (1950/1963, 1968) looked at psychosocial human development as a series of stages in which an individual progresses from birth through death. Though the specific ages vary, the order of the stages remains intact. The eight life stages through which a healthy and developing human should progress (1950/1963, 1968) include: infancy (oral sensory), toddler (muscular-anal), preschool (locomotor-genital), school age (latency), adolescence (puberty and adolescence), young adulthood (adulthood), middle adulthood (adulthood), and late adulthood (maturity). As mentioned earlier in the chapter, he cautions that each stage of development has a corresponding crisis and refers to this specifically as an identity crisis.

In trying to discover a theory of transition from college to post-college life, this study explored the development stage assumed by recent college graduates according to Erikson. Though the specific ages within each stage may vary, traditional-aged recent college graduates would fall within Erikson's sixth stage of human development, *young adulthood*. Erikson proclaimed three stages of *adulthood*, the earliest of which he named the earliest of which he named *young adulthood*, embarking on the crisis of intimacy versus isolation. This stage closely followed *adolescence*, or the period of identity versus role diffusion; the period in which young people are concerned with how they appear to others compared to how they feel about themselves (Erikson, 1950). According to Erikson, the period of young adulthood is the time where humans attempt to achieve advances in career and especially love while mastering the conflict of intimacy versus isolation. Friendships and romantic relationships, as well as the convergence of competition and cooperation, are particularly significant during this stage (Erikson,

1980). In addition to falling within the age frame of Erikson's young adults, recent college graduates are abandoning one situation and encountering another, likely significantly changing relationships. Also relevant to this study is Erikson's assertion that "it is primarily the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs young people" during the period of young adulthood (1950, p. 228). To best understand the transition process to post-college life, this study explored the manners in which graduates navigate independence and forge new relationships. Understanding the constructed identities of recent college graduates during the transition process helps with making meaning of the college to post-college transition.

**Emerging adulthood theory.** Marked by a period of life between adolescence and adulthood, emerging adulthood is a relatively new yet distinct life span development stage. Developed by Arnett in the late 1990s, the theory of emerging adulthood focuses on the period of life from the late teens throughout the twenties, specifically focusing on the ages of 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000). He purposefully uses the term "emerging adulthood" instead of other descriptors such as post-adolescence, young adulthood, and transition to adulthood in an effort to pronounce this period of time as a distinct stage. Emerging adulthood arose in response to the dramatic changes in the lives of people during their twenties (Arnett, 2004). Historically, adult status was reached immediately after adolescence. However, Arnett pointed out that transitions traditionally associated with adulthood, such as marriage and parenthood, are now happening within the United States at a later age than before. Arnett (2000, 2011) proclaimed that although both love and work related transitions historically took place during the late teens and early twenties, they are now taking place during the late twenties and early thirties. Another reason for

delayed adulthood, according to Arnett, is because of the increase in years devoted to pursuing higher education. Society today allows younger people the flexibility of taking on adult responsibilities at a slower self-determined pace. Arnett (2004) suggested that the period of emerging adulthood encompasses:

Having left the dependency of childhood and adolescence, and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work and worldviews. Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course. (p. 469)

Particular to this study, recent college graduates are exploring life's possibilities in a variety of life roles. Characterized by a change in the acquisition of a number of life roles, particularly surrounding finances, romance, and place of residence (Sneed, Hamagami, McArdle, Cohen & Chen, 2006), emergent adults – and recent college graduates – are forging new experiences. Little about the period of emerging adulthood is normative; although it asserts a transition to adulthood, emerging adulthood also assumes that many aspects of the transition are reversible such as leaving the home of origin only to return later (Shanahan, 2000).

Distinct from both adolescence and adulthood, emerging adults are particularly different in that they are “in transition, having moved out of one stage but not yet having entered the next” (Arnett, 1998, p. 313). Arnett (2004) proclaimed the following five characteristics as essential to the period of emerging adulthood: identity exploration,

feeling “in between,” instability, self-focus, and possibilities. In addition, he outlined certain criteria particularly important to the transition to adulthood for emerging adults including: accepting responsibility for one’s actions, making independent decisions, gaining financial independence, and deciding on one’s own beliefs and values (1998, 2001). As a period of time that bridges adolescence and young adulthood, emerging adults must develop skills, competencies, and qualities of character to help aid the transition from college. These criteria, along with the five central assumptions that emerging adulthood is a time of both *identity exploration* and *instability*, a time when young people are very *self-focused* while enduring a *feeling of in-between* (neither adolescents nor adults), and living in an age of *possibilities* serves as a theoretical foundation for this research study. These notions will be addressed and explored within this research study during the participant interviews.

### **College Student Development Theory**

Although the period of young adulthood and/or emerging adulthood comprises the age and stage in which the majority of college students and recent graduates are located, neither theory focuses directly on the development of college students. Emerging adulthood research that has looked specifically at college students primarily focused on the impact of college on delaying adulthood (Arnett, 2004). This study looks specifically at college graduates with an understanding that college student development theory is essential to frame the research. There is no one road map of college student development that fits all, or even most, college students. Approaching college student development as a process and not a stage, college students graduate at different points of their own development, specifically in terms of their personal, cognitive, racial/ethnic, social, and

psychosocial identity development. Taking a holistic approach to better understand the college to post-college transition, it is important to have familiarity with overarching student development theories, particularly the journey to self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001, 2009; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Pizzolato, 2005). The section concludes with an overview of self-authorship theory, paying particular attention to the framework set forth by Baxter Magolda as it serves as one of the only prominent theories within the discipline of college student development that specifically depicts students shortly after graduation is that of self-authorship.

**Guiding student development theories.** In order to understand the transition and development of recent college graduates college administrators need to have a deeper understanding of guiding student development theories. Development suggests becoming a more complex individual in terms of identity, cognition level, and/or values (McEwen, 2003b). Though this study took a holistic approach to understanding the transition from college to post-college life for recent college graduates, it was important to understand the various theories of college student development that influenced the participants at the point of graduation and during early post-college years. The following three families of student development theory contributed to the foundation of this study: psychosocial development, social identity development, and cognitive-structural development.

***Psychosocial theories.*** Psychosocial theories (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Josselson; 1987; Marcia, 1966/1980) incorporate the “what” of student development. They acknowledge that a person’s identity develops within the context of society and societal influences along with psychological changes, which result in how individuals develop. Psychosocial developmental theory within the field of college

development is concerned with the issues, major concerns, challenges, and preoccupations facing college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Josselson; 1987; Marcia, 1966/1980). Central to this study, college graduates encounter numerous societal influences that impact their identity after graduation.

Through the interview process, this study focused on the issues, major concerns, challenges, and preoccupations facing recent college graduates. It looked at both the psychological impact and social implications of transition. Though participants in this study were all experiencing the same life event (recent college graduation), it is important to note however that psychosocial development is not sequential. Understanding psychosocial development helped to provide insight into how recent college graduates understand the various situations and consequences they face. Psychosocial developmental theories were especially fundamental to this study as many of the foundational frameworks regarding identity development previously discussed (Erikson, Marcia, and Josselson) are all considered psychosocial developmental theories. In addition, most career development theories, which are discussed later in the chapter, are also considered to fall within the family of psychosocial development theories (McEwen 2003b).

***Social identity theories.*** Theories regarding the development of social identities incorporate such constructs as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, ability/disability, and religion (McEwen, 2003a). Many of the social identity theories found within higher education and student affairs research (e.g., Cass, 1979; Cross, 1995; Helms, 2000) focus on either racial/ethnic identity, Queer theory and GLBT identity, gender identity, religious identity, or ability/disability identity. More recently, theorists

have started to look at the intersecting and multiple identities of people (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Because the purpose of this study is to explore the transition process and experience for recent college graduates, this study did not focus on social identity development in terms of racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or ability. However, the social identity of the participants cannot be ignored; an understanding of social identity developmental theories is important, as the social identity development for each participant most definitely impacted their individual transition experience. Additionally, it should be noted that although an intentional effort was made to have participants from various and multiple social identities, this study did not attempt to look at transition experiences through a social identity lens.

*Cognitive development theory.* Another prominent family of theory within student development theory that must be understood to approach this study is that of cognitive development theories (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1975; Perry, 1968). Cognitive theories look at how a student thinks about issues and how they make meaning of their experiences. Although the purpose of this research was not to study the cognitive and reasoning abilities of recent college graduates per se, it did look at how recent graduates make meaning of the transition to post-college life. Although it was important to understand the role of cognitive development on college graduates, this particular study looked at a more holistic approach as to how students think about their own development and transition.

Expanding upon cognitive development, prominent college student development scholar Baxter Magolda (1992, 2001, 2009) approached her research by taking a multidimensional approach to development. Integrating three dimensions of overall



development in people, cognitive development, intrapersonal development, and interpersonal development, Baxter Magolda embarked on a longitudinal study exploring the development of her participants from ages 18 to 40. Building upon the work of Kegan (1982, 1994), Baxter Magolda's research addressing college student development and ensuing adult years advanced the scholarship on self-authorship. The self-authorship framework serves as a seminal basis for this research study for multiple reasons. In addition to exploring the various aspects of reaching adulthood and providing a foundation for research questions, Baxter Magolda's work is one of only a few studies within the field of college student personnel that explores the period of time shortly following college graduation.

***Self-authorship.*** Knowing what recent graduates think and how recent graduates think, along with how they make meaning of interactions with others is imperative to this study. It only makes sense, therefore, to embrace a more holistic approach to human development and be familiar with the scholarship on self-authorship to better frame an understanding of the development level of recent college graduates.

Self-authorship is a desired outcome of higher education (Baxter Magolda, 2001; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Pizzolato, 2005). Kegan (1982, 1994), the first theorist to use the term, defined self-authorship as the ability to write one's own life. Kegan's five orders of consciousness looked specifically at how one makes meaning and the evolution of consciousness. Specifically, he examined the concepts of subject and object, or the relationship of self to others. His five orders build upon each other and typically correlate with a specific period of the lifespan. His first order depicts someone who is not yet aware of self and tends to be impulsive. This usually encompasses children. His

second order of consciousness assumes an awareness of self but with an inability to understand others as independent selves. According to Kegan, the transition from late childhood to adolescence is typically accompanied, with a move to third order of consciousness. Here, individuals are aware of both self and others. Individuals in this order are consumed by the external influences that surround them but are guided by set values. A college student in this order makes meaning from realities shared with others.

The fourth order of consciousness assumes a strong sense of identity where individuals are able to make meaning of the relationships with others and the influences that surround them (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Adulthood, according to Kegan, is characterized by a transition from the third to the fourth order of consciousness. Self-authorship is achieved in the fourth order of consciousness and the internal self is the source of belief. Kegan asserts that few adults reach the fifth order of consciousness, a period marked by development beyond autonomy, until after the age of 40. According to Kegan, college students tend to be somewhere in-between the third and fourth order of consciousness.

Most prominent in the field of student development is Baxter Magolda's work on self-authorship (1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2009). Initially starting with 101 college student participants, Baxter Magolda's work evolved into a 22 year longitudinal study with over 1,000 interviews from 39 of the initial participants. As she followed the 39 participants (eventually 30) from the ages of 18 to 40, Baxter Magolda looked at how adults in their 20s, and eventually 30s develop their views, beliefs, knowledge, and a sense of themselves in relation to others. Like Kegan, Baxter Magolda viewed young adulthood as a journey towards self-authorship. Baxter Magolda (2003) stated that self-

authorship is a shift from accepting knowledge from others to constructing knowledge based on internally defined values. Self-authorship is the ability to collect, interpret, and analyze information and reflect on one's own beliefs in order to form judgments. It requires complex ways of making meaning from our experiences.

In a conceptual model of self-authorship, Baxter Magolda (2004) put self-authorship as the center of the overlapping circles of the following three dimensions of development: epistemological (cognitive) foundation, intrapersonal foundation, and interpersonal foundation. "How do I know?," "Who am I?," and "What relationships do I want with others?" are the driving questions behind self-authorship that correspond to these three dimensions (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 4). These important questions also helped to provide some guidance to the participant interviews for this study.

Three key assumptions of self-authorship, also framing the learning partnerships model set forth by Baxter Magolda and King (2004), are that (1) knowledge is complex and socially constructed; (2) self is central to knowledge construction; and (3) authority and expertise were shared in the mutual construction of knowledge among peers (Baxter Magolda, 2001). In terms of seniors and transitioning out of college, Baxter Magolda (2003) found that students who are able to define their own beliefs in the context of existing knowledge are more likely to be better prepared for life after college. Students who are self-authored are more likely to choose life after college plans that are consistent with their own values and not because of what someone else, parents, society, and/or peers, tell them.

Baxter Magolda (2001) believed that contemporary society demands self-authorship from college graduates and that colleges and universities must prepare

students to achieve self-authorship. However, Baxter Magolda (2001, 2002, 2003) found that students are unlikely to graduate having achieved self-authorship. Even though some aspects of knowing are constructed during college, most students are unable to develop the capacity to define and invent their own beliefs. Baxter Magolda (2002) asserted, “by the time they graduate from college, most students still have not achieved the kind of self-authorship that would allow them to think independently, make choices, and pursue their dreams” (p. 2). Understanding how recent college graduates make meaning of the transition process from college to post-college life provides insight into the continued research on the journey to achieving self-authorship.

### **Preparation for Life After College**

Colleges and universities are expected to show the public that they are “effective and active partners in developing the generic attributes that ground the effectiveness of their graduates” (Rogers & Mentkowski, 2004, p. 347). In an effort to help prepare students to lead a personally fulfilling and socially responsible life after college (AAC&U, 2002), college and universities, particularly student affairs practitioners, have instituted various initiatives and services to prepare student for life beyond graduation. Such initiatives include senior year experience initiatives, young alumni programs, and career services programs on many campuses. Though this study does not assess or explore current practice, it is important to better understand current initiatives and student services instituted by colleges in regards to preparation for life after college. Specifically, it is important to have an understanding of guiding career theory because according to both Erikson (1950/1963, 1980) and Arnett (2000), the intention of finding work and committing to a career path is of particular significance during this life stage.

In addition, there is increased attention being paid towards outcomes of college attendance, particularly in term of accountability of learning and development outcomes (Bresciani et al., 2009). In light of recent national reports regarding accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), it is also important to be aware of the literature regarding accountability and learning outcomes.

### **Current Practice**

Soon to be college graduates face anxiety as they approach the impending transition process according to Hartel, Schwartz, Blude, and Gardner, (1994). According to Walls (2002), seniors need to be prepared to learn about a wide range of life topics including figuring out where to live, how to buy or rent a home, information about insurance, opportunities for alumni involvement, how to adapt to the first year on the job, learning to manage wellness, and how best to accept new relationships and lifestyles (Walls, 2002). To best prepare seniors for life following college with reduced anxiety during the transition, Hartel et al. (1994) stressed the importance of helping seniors: make decisions, plan for a career, gain communication skills, understand the business world, prepare for graduate or professional school, build and maintain relationships and healthy lifestyles, learn financial implications of the real world, understand the skills needed for citizenship, become aware of contemporary social problems, and become aware of moral and ethical issues. Though institutions of higher education intrinsically exist to prepare students for life following college, the most prominent ways in which higher education institutions are preparing students for the technicalities of post-graduate life are through senior year experience programs and career development theory and practice.

**Senior year experience initiatives.** Although the research is limited, one of the major tenets asserted within the senior year experience literature is the need for colleges and universities to prepare students to transition out of college. The senior year of college marks the final opportunity for faculty and staff to prepare students for the transition to life beyond college and for students to develop the necessary skills and tools to aid in the transition out of college. Gardner et al. (1998) proclaimed that colleges and universities need to pay particular attention to the special needs of seniors and develop services for seniors and established a framework for the senior year experience movement. The senior year experience movement identified the following foci as major components that should be included during the senior year: (1) integrating and providing closure to the college experience, (2) giving seniors an opportunity to make meaning and reflect on their college experience, and (3) assisting seniors with their transition out of college (Cuseo, 1998; Gardner et al., 1998).

Although student affairs educators know that the senior year experience is particularly crucial to student development (Gardner, et al., 1998), not much attention is given to the actual transition out of college. As mentioned earlier, seniors typically are experiencing the *moving out* phase of Schlossberg's transition theory (1984) while concurrently *moving in* to the new context. Unfortunately, little research exists documenting what universities do to ease the transition process, especially in preparation for life as young alumni. The majority of the research that does exist regarding the preparation for life after college looks specifically at career choice and development for college students with career development offices prevalent in the realm of student service offerings. Although this study did not explore specific career development aspects for

recent college graduates, it was important to understand career choice and career development for this population. Not only is career choice and development prominent for the age group being studied, but understanding career choice and development was of particular importance due to the reality that the vast majority of students attend college to achieve economic stability through increased career prospects (Kuh et al., 1994).

**Career development theory and practice.** Career development theory is at the forefront of the literature regarding the preparation of college students for life after college. Many different theories exist in current literature surrounding career development. In an effort to understand the experiences and positions of the participants, this study explored the following leading career development theories: structural (personality/trait), developmental, and social-cognitive.

***Structural theories – personality/trait theories.*** One prominent approach has been on the focus of personality and individual traits on career choice and development. Seminal to the career development theory field is Holland's (1973) Six Vocational Interest Types. These six interest types, defined by specific interests, behaviors, and attitudes are commonly referred to as 'RIASEC' in the career development field. They include: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional interest themes. Holland's six vocational interest types come with particular values, interests, expectations, and skills that differ depending on the work environment. Holland's theory asserted that particular personality types enjoyed certain career options. For instance, social types enjoy working with people and prefer careers that solve problems. Holland's theory proposed an assumption that individuals make the choices they do regarding

careers based on four theoretical diagnostics: congruence, consistency, differentiation, and identity (Spokane & Cruza-Guet, 2005).

Many recent career theorists (Nauta, 2004; Schaub & Tokar, 2004; Wang, Jome, Hasse, & Bruch, 2006) build from Holland's work of vocational interests and bring in the "big five" personality dimensions (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) common to career development theory. Wang et al., (2006) stated that five traits are predictive of career exploration behaviors and career transition behaviors. These five personality traits show consistent relationships with career development variables such as vocational interests, career maturity, and career decision-making. Studies by both Nauta (2004) and Schaub and Tokar (2004) looked specifically at how career interests, using Holland's six types, were linked with various personality traits. Schaub and Tokar (2004) looked specifically at the relationships between the "big five" personality traits and Holland's six career interest themes; for example the relationship between extraversion and social, openness and investigative, and conscientiousness and conventional. Additionally, Brown's values-based model (1996), is a holistic model of career and life-role choices and satisfaction. The values-based model assumes that human functioning is greatly influenced by a person's value orientation. This model asserts that likes and dislikes grow out of values, so actually values are the basis for career choice.

***Developmental lifespan theories.*** A developmental approach to career development attempts to explain career-related behaviors and attitudes that develop over time and throughout life stages (Hackett & Lent, 1992). Super's (1957) developmental self-concept theory is at the forefront of the career counseling research and literature and



focused on the progression of career development across the life span (Hackett & Lent, 1992; Super, 1957, 1980). Super views career development as a sequential process that assumes growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement of specific career related tasks. As a result he established five distinct developmental stages that individuals should expect to reach throughout the life span: growth (birth to mid-teens), exploration (mid-teens through early-20s), establishment (mid-20s through mid-40s), maintenance (mid-40s through early-60s), and decline (mid-60s through retirement). Of particular value to this study on post-college transition is the developmental stages of exploration and establishment.

Though modified, Super (1957, 1980) contributed twelve propositions for career development. These included, but are not limited to, assumptions that individuals have different abilities, interests, and personalities, are qualified for multiple vocations that require specific abilities, and that career choices change over time throughout a series of life sages. Characterized by a stage of exploration, this theory focuses on the narrowing of career choices as a result of one's occupational self-concept (Rojewski, 2005).

Although this theory has been developed and revised numerous times (Super, 1957, 1980) critics believe that the idea of developmental stages is outdated and does not properly incorporate "biological, economic, and social factors" (Hackett & Lent, 1992).

***Social cognitive career theories.*** Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) is a more current approach to understanding career development and relevant for this study as a more comprehensive approach to career development. Emergent in the 1990s, SCCT complements all of the existing theories of career development, including values-based, personality trait,

vocational interest typology and lifespan development. Based on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, SCCT is interested in the complex ways in which people, their behavior, and their environments interact with one another to shape vocational choices and behavior (Lent, 2005). SCCT particularly shares certain aspects of both trait and lifespan developmental perspectives of career development and explains career interests by emphasizing career self-efficacy, common outcome expectations (such as satisfaction and stability) and personal interests/goal setting (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Zunker, 2002). It not only emphasizes the important role of interests, abilities, and values within career development (trait-factor) but it also focuses on how people navigate particular life situations and stages (developmental career theory).

However, social cognitive career theory (SCCT) assumes that neither people nor their environments remain the same and the continuously changing nature of both is important to understand. SCCT focuses on "how people are able to change, develop, and regulate their behavior over time and in different situations" (Lent, 2005, p.103). Unlike many career development theories that assume career interest is stable by late adolescence or early adulthood, the SCCT approach understands that people and environments change dramatically. As a result, career counseling in college is not easily able to predict the types of careers students would enjoy and do well in as previously believed. This is of particular importance to this study, as I look at the environments and decisions facing college graduates and how new situations and changes affect their transition in terms of choosing a job or career path. This theory also allows for career decision making to be influenced by other people and environments. This study looked

at how other people (family, old and new friends) and the post-college environment affects career choice.

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) assumes three interacting variables that would facilitate the career development process for recent college graduates: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals and how they interact with other person and environmental variables (Lent et al., 1994; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999; Lent, 2005). For this study, self-efficacy would refer to college graduates beliefs about personal capabilities related to a particular job performance. Outcome expectations “refer to beliefs about the consequences or outcomes of performing particular behaviors” (Lent, 2005, p.104). How recent college graduates imagine the possible outcomes as a result of performing specific actions would influence career choice. Finally, personal goals refer to individual choices regarding how much and how well one does a job. Setting personal goals results in specific means to accomplish the goals, including further education or certain occupational choices (Lent, 2005). Each of these three areas, self-efficacy, outcomes expectations, and personal goals were explored through participant interviews.

### **Outcomes of College Attendance**

Though this study did not attempt to assess college learning and/or student development outcomes, it is important to recognize that there has been increased attention placed on college student outcomes recently (Komives & Nuss, 2005). Therefore, it is necessary to possess a general understanding of the outcomes of college attendance, particularly given the participants have recently graduated and theoretically should be achieving stated institutional and higher educational outcomes. Mainly,

college environments research shows that college attendance has a positive impact on students (Astin, 1993; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991/2005) and that college graduates have been found to make significant gains in cognitive ability, identity development, and moral development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In addition, college graduates have a higher earning potential than non-college graduates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Occupational choice.** The majority of research looking at the outcomes of college attendance focuses on career/job choice and attainment and work-life readiness. In addition to career development theories examining occupational choice based on individual student characteristics and traits, life span developmental stages, and person-environment fit (Brown & Lent, 2005; Hackett & Lent, 1992), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) looked at workforce participation and career choice based on institution type and college major as well as the overall impact of college attendance on careers. Most significantly, Pascarella and Terenzini found that individuals who completed a bachelor's degree had significantly higher earning advantages compared to individuals who did not graduate from college. In addition, they found that degree aspirations are the biggest correlate with workforce participation. Looking at occupational choice, Astin (1993) found that a powerful predictor of choosing both a major and eventual career in a certain field was the major choice of peers at the college. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) echoed this finding stating that the most consistent finding about career choice was that of progressive conformity where student career choice is influenced by the dominant peer group at an institution. College graduates may have chosen an initial career path consistent with the most populous majors at their institution.

The research on the impact of college on career development shows that those with a college degree are more likely to participate in the workforce (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Through a synthesis of research, Pascarella and Terenzini establish that the relationship between the amount of formal post-secondary education and workforce participation is causal. Who seeks post-secondary degrees is not simply the result of individual characteristics. However, they did find that the strongest predictor of eventual occupational status is occupational aspirations and ambition when entering college. Although the findings on career choice, workforce participation, and occupational status are consistent, Pascarella and Terenzini discovered that obtainment of a college degree actually produces conflicting reports regarding job satisfaction. On one side, a college degree has a positive indirect effect on job satisfaction through factors such as prestige, income, and autonomy. However, having a college degree also has a negative direct effect on job satisfaction due to workers' expectations not being met as a result of education heightening job expectations. Overeducation, according to Pascarella and Terenzini, can cause college-educated employees to have higher expectations about the intrinsic rewards of a job, subsequently leading to job dissatisfaction. However, although there is significant emphasis on the effect of college attendance on career outcomes (e.g., workforce participation, occupational choice, career satisfaction), there is little research on the impact of college on job readiness.

**Work-force preparedness.** There have been growing concerns that college graduates are underprepared when it comes to entering the workforce (Holton, 1998; Lent & Worthington, 1999; Levine, 2005; Wood, 2004). Levine declares that the United States is in a "pandemic of worklife unreadiness" (2005, p. B11). In his research, he

finds that employers are unsatisfied with recent college graduates. He claims that there is unsuccessful crossover from college to the workplace. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) point out that employers have noted that college graduates tend to be well prepared in their academic and content areas but not well prepared in the areas related to the context of work, such as interpersonal skills and setting priorities, or being able to apply their knowledge to work environments.

Although colleges and universities are preparing students to have the adequate skills needed for a job, there appears to be a disconnect between student and employer expectations upon entering the workforce. Employers are expecting new employees to be willing to learn new skills and competencies, fit appropriately into the work place culture, become accepted as a member of the organization, build effective working relationships, understand the power and reward structure, earn respect and credibility, and learn how to effectively accomplish tasks within the organization (Holton, 1998). Levine (2005) believed, however, that today's graduates suffer as a result of over programming, over reliance on peer approval, and over involvement of parents. According to Levine, these factors make it hard for college graduates to work independently, have original thought, take initiative, or identify with older colleagues and supervisors.

Familiarity with the outcomes related to career choice, attainment and readiness is relevant to this study presuming recent college graduates take steps toward embarking upon a career. However, in addition to career related outcomes and job (under)preparedness, it was important to also understand other effects of college attendance on recent college graduates. In addition, it was also necessary to have

knowledge of specific learning outcomes that have been set forth by various higher education entities for college graduates.

**Learning outcomes.** As more emphasis is placed on meeting and assessing college student/higher educational learning outcomes (Bresciani et al., 2009; Komives & Nuss, 2005) it was important to have an awareness of identifiable learning outcomes. Relevant to this study were the specific learning outcomes set forth in *Learning Reconsidered* (ACPA & NASPA, 2004). *Learning Reconsidered* outlines the following as imperative student learning outcomes: cognitive complexity, knowledge acquisition, integration, and application, humanitarianism, civic engagement, interpersonal and intrapersonal competence, practical competence, and persistence and academic achievement. Even though this study did not explore how student learning outcomes are/are not met, when gaining insight into the experiences of recent college graduates undergoing the transition process, it was still important to have a basic understanding of established learning outcomes essential to the field of higher education and college student personnel.

Though the majority of current literature surrounding the experiences of college graduates focuses on workforce participation (mainly including career choice and career earnings), with the more recent addition of demonstrating and assessing learning outcomes, other effects of college attendance have been studied. Stolzenberg (1994) looked at graduate school attendance and found that the biggest determinant regarding whether or not college graduates continue their education is a students' attitude toward career advancement, financial earnings, and job security. Additionally, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) looked at the effect of college attendance on health and life satisfaction.

Although they found that attending college has a negative effect on alcohol and tobacco use and a positive effect on exercise and nutrition, they found that when it comes to quality of life issues, that college attendance had little or no effect on overall happiness and well-being. They actually found that formal education had a small and statistically non-significant effect on overall happiness, and in some cases a negative effect. Additionally, they found no significant long term effects of college attendance on overall happiness or community involvement.

Though the purpose of this research study is not to specifically explore, expand, or evaluate the effect of college attendance on recent college graduates, particularly current practice preparing students for post-college life, career development theory and/or occupational choice, status, or preparedness, or college student learning outcomes, it is still integral to the study as it helps to understand the positionality of the participants and recent college graduates. Additionally, an awareness of the literature that exists regarding preparation for life beyond college and recent college graduates brings an awareness to the lack of literature surrounding the post-college transition process.

### **Summary of the Literature**

Relevant literature provided a framework for this research study, influencing overarching research questions and more specifically the participant interviews as detailed in chapter three. Most prevalent to this research study is an understanding of transition theory. Transition theories, particularly Schlossberg work on transition, and correlating theories of the role-exit process and identity formation in terms of crisis and commitment provide context for what recent college graduates face during the process of the college to post-college transition. An understanding of developmental theories,



including life stage development (young adulthood and emerging adulthood), college student development, and self-authorship presents who recent college graduates are and where in their individual life they are presently situated. Finally, familiarity with current practices and research on the impact of college – both on preparedness for life after college and an understanding of established learning outcomes – offers a basis for the experiences recent college graduates might be expected to have assumed.

Existing literature allows college administrators to place recent college graduates experiencing post-college transition to be situated in various developmental stages and phases undergoing certain assumed experiences and outcomes. However, the field of higher education and college student personnel administration remains unaware of the actual post-college transition process, including the conditions faced and experiences undergone, as students transition out of college that shape their development as recent college graduates. The literature specifies current services and resources provided for students in an effort to help prepare them to leave college and there. Additionally, theories surrounding transition, human development, college student development, and even career development, provide context for the developmental stages and processes faced by recent college graduates. However, there is still a disconnect between the existing literature and the focus of this study.

Though an abundance of literature exists related to this study including research on transition, the role-exit process, human development and college student development, the journey toward self-authorship, higher education practice toward preparation for life after college and outcomes of college attendance including established desired learning outcomes, what is apparent is the absence of any specific theory that lends itself just to

looking at the transition from college to post-college life. To better provide opportunities for today's college students, it is imperative to understand the transition from college to post-college life. Although the literature frames the understanding of student transition out of college, it is important to integrate actual experiences of those undergoing the actual transition process. Further investigation of the transition experience through an analysis of interviews grounded in the experiences of recent college graduates undergoing the transition process lent itself to emergent themes regarding a transition theory.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the transition process for college graduates from college to post-college life. Because no theory exists regarding such a process, this study utilized grounded theory methodology to explore and understand the process of transitioning from college to life after college for recent graduates. The purpose of this study was to develop a post-college transition theory grounded in the experiences of the participants; therefore, I approached this study through a constructivist paradigm using grounded theory methodology.

In this chapter, I provide rationale for using qualitative methods, outline the epistemological perspective and theoretical perspective that inform the methodology, and present why a grounded theory approach guided this study. I also provide a detailed description of the methodological procedures followed, including participant selection and establishing rapport, data collection, and data analysis. This chapter also includes a discussion of how I established trustworthiness and goodness, as well as how I took into consideration both ethical concerns and limitations of the study. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on how my own personal experiences shaped the study through a discussion on researcher positionality and subjectivity.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Methods**

The intent of this research was to understand the experiences of recent college graduates undergoing the transition process with the goal of generating a theory of college to post-college transition. In this study, I explored the process by which students transition out of college with the aim of gaining an understanding of the experiences and conditions that influenced the college to post-college transition. Furthermore, a goal of

this study was to make meaning of the post-college transition process, a topic on which little previous research has been conducted. As a study that is descriptive and inductive in structure, qualitative research is the appropriate research tradition of choice. Creswell (2003) stated a research study merits a qualitative approach when “a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it” (p. 22).

I approached this study in an effort to explain the process of post-college transition by seeking to understand the transition process through recent college graduates currently experiencing the transition. Qualitative research methods allowed me to best understand the experiences of the participants and how they made meaning of their transition process. Additionally, recognizing that the transition is a fluid and evolving *process* made it important to utilize qualitative methods. To best accomplish this, the participants’ experiences were detailed in thick descriptions that allowed me to follow an inductive approach of data analysis. By following a qualitative approach, I was then able to employ “a process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1), eventually constructing a theory of college to post-college transition.

Qualitative research allows for a fluid and evolving process in which the researcher can use “creativity and imagination” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 13) in an often socially constructed and interpretive nature. However, important foundational principles that guide qualitative research do exist and framed the research design of this study. In presenting my own approach to this qualitative study, I followed the following four guiding questions that Crotty (1998) defined as be critical to a qualitative research design:

1. What *epistemology* (e.g., objectivism, constructivism, subjectivism, etc.) informs the research?
2. What is the underlying *theoretical perspective* (e.g., positivism, interpretivism, critical inquiry, feminism, postmodernism, etc.) behind the methodology?
3. What is the chosen *methodology* or strategy of inquiry (e.g., ethnography, phenomenological research, grounded theory, experimental research, etc.) that guides the choice of methods and links to particular outcomes?
4. What *methods* (e.g., questionnaire, interviews, observation, statistical analysis, constant comparative, etc.) are used to collect and analyze the data?

I was mindful of constructing this study in a way that followed these four questions.

Furthermore, as the purpose of this study was to understand and illustrate the transition experience for recent college graduates, I intentionally followed a constructivist grounded theory methodology, as discussed below, in an effort to co-construct a theory of the process of post-college transition with the participants.

### **Epistemological Approach and Theoretical Perspective**

As a researcher, I cannot disregard what constitutes my way of knowing, or my epistemological approach. Epistemology refers to “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (Crotty, 1998, p.3).

According to Crotty, epistemology signifies how knowledge is acquired and informs the theoretical perspective, which in turn informs the methodological approach and subsequent research methods and protocol. As I seek to understand the transition process for, and from the experiences of, recent college graduates, my focus for this study lent

lend itself to a constructivist approach. Accordingly, I approached all aspects of this study, including the research design, interview questions, data collection and analysis, and generated meaning making through a constructivist epistemological lens.

### **Constructivist Epistemological Approach**

A constructivist epistemological approach “places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130). My desire to understand the college to post-college transition process and co-construct a theory of college to post-college transition based on the experiences of recent college graduates resulted in following a constructivist approach. A constructivist approach “necessitates a relationship with respondents in which they can cast their stories in their terms. It means listening to their stories with openness to feeling and experience” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 525). This study places value in each individual story and attempts to make meaning of individual experiences through an understanding of how participants construct their own meaning.

In this study, I wanted to understand how and why recent college graduates make sense of their post-college transition experiences and actions (Charmaz, 2006). A constructivist epistemology “seeks to understand individual social action through interpretation or translation” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 18). I chose to follow a constructivist paradigm in an attempt to understand how and why participants construct and interpret the reality of their transition process. As the researcher, I listened with an openness that allowed me to partake in and interpret their transition experience. Accordingly, the role of the researcher is important in a constructivist approach. As the researcher, I

constructed meaning from the data that emerged as a result of an interactive process with participants; meaning was mutually (and socially) constructed based on the interpretations of both the participants and me as the researcher (Charmaz, 2006; Crotty, 1998). In a constructivist paradigm, the researcher and the participants mutually created knowledge through constructing “the realities in which they participate” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 187). As I engaged in the research from a constructivist approach, I not only aimed to have an awareness of how the participants constructed meaning, but through researcher reflexivity I remained aware of my own interpretations. In the tradition of a constructivist epistemological paradigm, it was important to follow certain characteristics of a constructivist approach including the following assumptions:

1. The researcher-respondent relationship is subjective, interactive, and interdependent.
2. Reality is multiple, complex, and not easily quantifiable.
3. The values of the researcher, respondents, research site, and underlying theory cannot help but undergrid all aspects of the research.
4. The research product (e.g., interpretations) is context specific. (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 436)

### **Interpretive Theoretical Perspective**

Qualitative researchers use a theoretical perspective (or lens) to guide the research study (Creswell, 2003). A theoretical perspective is the “philosophical stance lying behind a methodology” (Crotty, 1998, p. 66). The epistemological assumption of the researcher (constructivism in this study) informs the theoretical perspective (e.g., postmodernism, feminism, critical theory, interpretivism) and in turn informs the chosen

methodology (Crotty, 1998). Theoretical perspectives are essential to the process of conducting research and “inform methodology, guiding theory, questions pursued, and conclusions drawn” (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 434). The theoretical perspective in which I approached this study was an interpretive perspective (Crotty, 1998).

An interpretive theoretical perspective places an importance on understanding rather than explanation of a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006). An interpretive qualitative approach was appropriate because the focus of my study was to understand the meaning constructed by the participants based on their transition experiences and how they interacted within their social world; I wished to understand the transition process and corresponding experiences for recent college graduates. In order to study the phenomenon of post-college transition, it was therefore essential to interpret the stories, interactions, and experiences of the individual participants.

Crotty (1998) stated, “the interpretivist approach looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (p. 67). In taking an interpretive perspective in this constructivist approach, not only was it important for me to construct the reality of the participants’ post-college transition experience, but I also needed to interpret the meaning constructed surrounding the transition process (Schwandt, 2000). This interpretive theoretical perspective draws attention to the importance of “entering research participants’ worlds” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 19). I sought to make sense of the participants’ experiences and the meaning the transition to post-college life holds for them. As a result, the theory generated about the college to post-college transition was the result of a mutually constructed understanding of the post-college transition process based on the interpretations of the stories, experiences, and



interactions with participants. Specifically, meaning surrounding the college to post-college transition process was co-constructed through participant and researcher interactions that abided to specific qualitative research methods, particularly grounded theory methodology.

### **Methodology**

I employed a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to guide this research study. In grounded theory, “the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). I chose grounded theory as my methodological inquiry of choice because I wanted to develop a substantive theory of college to post-college transition based on the experiences of the participants. Since there were no existing studies looking at the college to post-college transition process, grounded theory allowed me to construct a theory of college to post-college transition grounded in data.

Grounded theory is “a method of conducting qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 187). Founded by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory assumed a discovery of theory from data that was systematically collected and analyzed. Later advanced by Strauss and Corbin (1990/1998) and Charmaz (2000, 2006), grounded theory continues to evolve. A basic assumption of grounded theory research asserted by Strauss and Corbin is that grounded theory derives concepts, properties, and dimensions from data. More recently, however, grounded theory research has acknowledged a constructivist approach in which a theory is *constructed* (Charmaz, 2000, 2006). Despite

the variations in grounded theory as a methodology, grounded theory research assumes the development or generation of a theory grounded in data. A major tenet of a constructivist approach to grounded theory is the *construction* of a theory and not the *discovery* of a theory. Consequently, I situated this grounded theory study using a constructivist approach for the purpose of generating a theory incorporating the interpretations and interactions of the participants (Charmaz, 2000, 2006).

For this study, I looked at a phenomenon that has not yet been studied in much detail, the college to post-college transition. As institutions of higher education strive to prepare students for success in life after college, it is imperative to understand the transition process. I chose grounded theory for the purpose of studying this transition phenomenon and to construct a theory of college to post-college transition that is grounded in data. Grounded theory was therefore the appropriate methodology given “the centerpiece of grounded theory research is the development or generation of a theory closely related to the context of the phenomenon being studied” (Creswell, 1998, p. 56). Developing a theory grounded in data is important in order to provide insight and an understanding of the post-college transition.

Finally, this study lends to grounded theory methodology because it looked at the *process* of post-college transition. Understanding and analyzing a process is itself a characteristic of grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008; Glaser, 1978). According to Charmaz (2006), grounded theory methodology pays attention to a phenomenon or process instead of a particular setting. She stated, “studying a process fosters your efforts to construct theory because you define and conceptualize relationships between experiences and events” (p. 136). This study looked

at the process of college to post-college transition through an analysis of the interpretations of the experiences of recent college graduates. Fundamental to the study was my ability as the researcher to interact with participants to best study the transition experience “from the standpoint of those who live it” and allow me the opportunity to “tell a story about people, social process, and situations” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 522). Through grounded theory methodology, applying the guidelines of grounded theory research methods, I looked at my interactions with the participants and studied how and why they made meaning of their experiences during the post-college transition. As a result of these interactions and interpretations, meaning was constructed and a theory of college to post-college transition was developed.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to understand the process for recent college graduates undergoing the phenomenon of transitioning from college to post-college life. Using grounded theory methodology, I explored the experiences and conditions that influence the post-college transition process and how recent college graduates make meaning of post-college life. As a result, the data collected and analyzed helped generate a theory of college to post-college transition. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the college to post-college transition process like for recent college graduates?
2. What experiences are most salient during the transition process for recent college graduates?
3. How do recent college graduates make meaning of their post-college life?

Although this purpose and corresponding research questions guided this study, qualitative inquiry assumes an evolving design and therefore I remained open to new ideas, questions, and areas of significance (Creswell, 1998).

### **Methods**

Grounded theory is a qualitative research process in which data are collected and analyzed, resulting in the development of a theory that is informed from the data. Different approaches to grounded theory provide variations to the research methods, particularly how data is collected and analyzed. Glaser and Strauss (1967/2008) and Strauss and Corbin (1990/1998) emphasized a very systematic approach while Charmaz (2006) suggested a “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (p. 2). In collecting data, I followed a constructivist grounded theory approach and corresponding procedures as described by Charmaz. However, I also incorporated elements of grounded theory procedures and guidelines as set forth by Glaser and Strauss, and Strauss and Corbin.

In this section, I discuss the chosen methods and procedures that were followed in this study. I outline the procedures and strategies followed regarding participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and the eventual emergence of themes. However, it is important to note that grounded theory is an ongoing and cyclical process; it is nearly impossible to separate out sampling procedures from data collection procedures from data analysis procedures because “sampling, data collection, and data analysis occur continuously and in relation to one another” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 43).

## **Sample and Participant Selection**

To best construct a theory surrounding the transition from college to post-college life, I studied individuals who were in the process of undergoing the transition process. I use the term *recent college graduate* to refer to those undergoing the transition process. Specifically, by recent college graduate, I am referring to any college graduate who has graduated from college within the past three years. Selecting college graduates within three years of graduation ensured that all of the participants were in the process of transitioning out of college and therefore able to contribute to the central issues of the study.

**Sampling strategies and criteria.** To select participants, I used a combination of purposeful sampling strategies and participant selection techniques (Patton, 1990). Consistent with qualitative inquiry, using purposeful sampling allowed me the opportunity to select information-rich cases to facilitate a better understanding of the research questions at hand. Information-rich cases are “those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Rationale for each of the purposeful sampling strategies used in this study is discussed below.

**Theoretical sampling.** Most prevalent to this study, I used theoretical, or theory based sampling, to select participants. Theoretical sampling was appropriate in order to choose “participants based on their ability to contribute to an evolving theory” (Creswell, 1998, p. 118). In grounded theory, participants are selected to help the researcher best develop the theory, and therefore, all of my participants were experiencing college to post-college transition. I started the research process with the intent to study the meaning

of the theoretical construct of “transition,” specifically from college to post-college life for recent college graduates (Mertens, 2005). My initial sample was chosen by its relevance to the research problem, recent college graduates undergoing the transition process. Theory based sampling was appropriate because it looks specifically at “incidents, slices of life, time periods, or people on the basis of their potential manifestation or representation of important theoretical constructs” (Patton, 1990, p. 177). This sampling technique was the best way for me, as the researcher, to form a theory of transition because the entire sample was experiencing the transition process and, therefore, able to contribute to the evolving theory.

As a grounded theorist, I constantly refined the theoretical constructs that developed during the data collection and data analysis process. Given the reliance on the constant comparative method of data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling is a defining characteristic of grounded theory methods where the intent of sample selection is not to increase the size of the sample but instead to identify concepts and refine ideas (Charmaz, 2000). Theoretical sampling allowed me to collect pertinent data to elaborate and refine emergent categories throughout the study (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz asserted that theoretical sampling is conducted by “sampling to develop the properties of your category(ies) until no new properties emerge” (p. 96). By conducting a theory based sampling strategy, I had the opportunity to go back into the field and collect additional data with the purpose of filling the gaps that had emerged during the data analysis process.

Given the exorbitant number of recent college graduates within three years of college graduation, I also employed other sampling strategies in addition to theoretical

sampling. Although theoretical sampling was the most predominant sampling technique used, I also borrowed sampling procedures from other strategies including intensity sampling, maximum variation sampling, convenience sampling, and confirming and disconfirming cases.

***Intensity sampling.*** As the result of studying individuals undergoing the transition process, I employed an intensity sampling strategy. Intensity sampling allowed me to purposefully select participants who could provide a depth of information on the phenomenon being studied. To gather insight about the college to post-college transition, I purposefully sought participants who could provide information-rich cases in regards to their own transition experience (Jones et al., 2006).

To determine whether or not participants would be able to provide rich examples of their transition experience, I did some exploratory work prior to the final selection of participants asking them to briefly describe their college to post-college transition experience (Patton, 1990). It should be noted, however, that I did not select unusual cases as used in extreme or deviant case sampling. For the purpose of this study, I focused on the intensity of the experience and therefore selected participants who were all undergoing the transition from college to post-college life to sufficiently illustrate the transition experience. It was imperative to this study to gather rich data in order to construct a theory about the college to post-college transition. For this reason, I used theoretical sampling and intensity sampling as my two primary sampling strategies. However, I also borrowed from other sampling strategies including maximum variation sampling, confirming and disconfirming case sampling, and convenience sampling.

*Maximum variation sampling.* To ensure that I had a variety of transition experiences and interpretations represented, I specifically borrowed techniques used in maximum variation sampling. Maximum variation sampling aims to capture common themes amongst a wide variation in cases (Patton, 1990). It was important to have participants from various backgrounds and current life situations who experienced both commonalities and differences in the transition process.

Specifically, I wanted to make sure I had a variety of both college and post-college situations and conditions represented within the participant pool with the hopes of finding commonalities with regards to the post-college transition process. I did not seek to explain the transition experience for any particular racial, ethnic, gender, or socio-economic group. Furthermore, it was not my intention with this study to explore and/or discuss distinctions in the transition experience based on demographic differences, but rather to understand commonalities of the college to post-college transition across social identities.

According to Patton (1990), “any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value” (p. 172). In an effort to construct a theory on college to post-college transition, I sought to find commonality amongst the stories and interpretations of a diverse population. As a result, I chose participants in an attempt to both document maximum variation within the sample while also identifying common ideas. This included seeking a participant pool that represented variation in the following characteristics: college major, undergraduate experiences, graduation year, social demographics (e.g., race, gender, socio-economic status), current location (city, state) of residence, and current professional and personal situations. When determining



professional situations, I looked primarily at job status (employed, unemployed, or graduate school) as well as type of career. When taking into account differences in personal situations, I looked at variety of life situations including, but not limited to, marriage, living back “home” with parents, and being a parent themselves.

*Confirming and disconfirming cases.* Consistent with grounded theory methodology and constant comparison, I continued to explore emergent themes throughout the data collection and analysis process. I delved back into the data collection process until no categories or concepts emerged and saturation was met (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As a grounded theory researcher, I was prepared, throughout the data collection and data analysis process, to continue to locate new participants based on construction of emergent themes. In grounded theory research, it is important to continue with data collection and analysis until saturation, or when no new categories emerge (Creswell, 1998). As a result, sampling does not stop until themes and/or categories are saturated (Jones et al., 2006). As detailed later in this chapter, I started the data collection process with 13 participants. Data from these 13 participants provided saturation of categories and themes to the point of redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); as a result, no additional cases were necessary.

However, though I did not continue to seek new participants throughout the research process, I still borrowed techniques from confirming and disconfirming case sampling. Specifically, varying experiences from the participants surrounding the phenomenon of post-college transition were continually sought, enabling me to either confirm or disconfirm categories and themes and eventually the developed theory (Patton, 1990). Additionally, as part of the constant comparative method I was able to

elaborate on initial analysis through subsequent interviews with participants. As patterns began to transpire during data analysis, I looked for cases that both confirmed and disconfirmed the emergent findings. Specifically, I looked for exceptions and variation within post-college transition experiences to both confirm and/or disconfirm evolving patterns and themes to help bind the study (Creswell, 1998). Incorporating aspect of confirming and disconfirming cases, I constantly explored the common threads and gaps within the data and consciously sought additional information from participants that fit (confirmed) and do not fit (disconfirmed) the theory that emerged (Mertens, 2005).

***Convenience sampling.*** Even with theoretical sampling, intensity sampling, maximum variation sampling, and confirming and disconfirming cases, the number of people who would qualify as potential participants would be prohibitive to this study. For that reason, I also borrowed techniques from convenience sampling (Patton, 1990). For convenience purposes, I only used recent college graduates from a large research institution in the Mid-Atlantic. My familiarity with this institution not only heightened my access to participants, but my understanding of the campus culture allowed me to establish rapport with the participants. However, to achieve maximum variation, it was also important to select participants living in a variety of post-college settings. As a result, I selected participants initially living in a variety of locations including: Virginia, Maryland, Washington D.C., Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and Tennessee. Though the research garnered interest from possible participants living in eleven states and one foreign country, for convenience purposes, mainly the associated costs of travel, I selected participants living within the northeastern quadrant of the United States.

Though convenient, because I also conducted other purposeful sampling strategies (theoretical, intensity, maximum variation and confirming/disconfirming cases), the sample selected was not at the expense of information. Furthermore, the careful and purposeful thought surrounding the use of other sampling strategies allowed for the selection of participants providing information-rich cases. Though convenience sampling was applied, to an extent, the consideration that required convenience sampling (selecting participants from the same institution) was the last factor to be taken into account.

**Identifying participants.** To gain access to such a purposeful sample, I sought participant nominations from key informants (Appendix A). My previous experience working with college seniors at the university from which the sample was selected provided me the access necessary to identify key informants essential for identifying possible participants. As a result of their insider status, key informants help identify the most suitable participants for a study (Jones et al., 2006). Through a nomination process, university faculty and staff serving as key informants helped me identify recent college graduates who would be likely to reflect on the process of the college to post-college transition.

Key informants included a variety of faculty members as well as various administrators from the alumni association, the division of student affairs, and academic units that have experience with and access to recent college graduates. Through an electronic letter, I specifically asked key informants to nominate recent college graduates who would likely provide thoughtful insight into the college to post-college transition process. In order to achieve maximum variation sampling, I asked nominators to identify possible participants from a variety of demographics and experiences. Just over 100

faculty and staff received the request for nominations. The email sent to key informants can be found in Appendix A.

As a result of this process, key informants identified 93 potential participants. Having served as an advisor to four of the nominated students in my previous job working with seniors; I chose not to proceed with them as part of the study. An email explaining the research project was then sent to the remaining 89 recent graduates notifying them of their nomination and seeking participation (Appendix B). As part of the purposeful sampling process, I asked interested participants to complete and return a participant interest information sheet with contact information, demographic information, college experiences, current circumstances, and a brief explanation of their transition process at the point of nomination (Appendix C). Additionally, as an incentive the potential participants were informed that if selected they would receive a gift card to a popular department store.

**Sample.** From the 89 emails sent to nominated participants, 39 recent college graduates expressed interest in participating in the study and returned the participant information sheet. Participants were selected through a careful review of each of the participant interest forms. In an effort to have a purposeful sample providing information-rich cases on the phenomenon of transitioning from college to post-college life, I looked for demographic variety and differences in college and post-college experiences, as well as thoughtful descriptions about the transition process. Keeping with the tradition of grounded theory, and theoretical sampling, the sample size was not predetermined. Instead, the sample was selected until the point of theoretical saturation

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After purposeful consideration, 13 initial participants were selected in an attempt to construct a theory of college to post-college transition. These 13 participants were selected due to their thoughtful description about the transition process, differences in demographic characteristics, and variation in both college and post-college experiences. Although I had originally assumed the initial sample would be comprised of between eight to 10 recent college graduates, upon receipt of the participant interest/information forms I decided to bring in 13 participants to achieve maximum variation within the sample. As the result of continuously collecting and analyzing data at each stage of the research process through the constant comparative approach, along with performing an exhaustive coding process, it was determined that saturation and redundancy had been reached from the 13 initial participants. Additionally, conducting subsequent interviews after initial analysis allowed me the opportunity to engage the participants to confirm and/or disconfirm emergent categories and themes.

Of the 13 participants, seven were female and six male; five graduated in 2006, four in 2007, and four in 2008. Eleven undergraduate majors were represented amongst the 13 participants including: theater, aerospace engineering, African-American studies, journalism, finance, communication, history, psychology, government and politics, cell biology and molecular genetics, and marketing. Though a few majors were represented more than once, in each of these cases it was as part of a double major, and therefore no two participants graduated with the same degree. The 13 participants also represented a diversity of social identities presenting variation amongst the sample in the constructs of

gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (Table 1). Additionally, at the time of initial case selection, the participants were living in six different states experiencing a variety of post-college living experiences. Specifically, two participants were full-time graduate students, two were unemployed, and two were working in temporary and/or part-time roles. In addition, one participant was married, two were parents, and one was living at home with his parents.

**Research site.** As referenced earlier, all of the participants for this research inquiry were selected from one institution but were living in various cities and states. The institution selected was a large research institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This selection was appropriate for numerous reasons including my familiarity with the institution both as an employee and a graduate student. As of a result of this understanding, it was imperative for me to constantly reflect on my own experiences and familiarity throughout the research process. The institution provided additional, and appropriate, benefits for selection however, including the relatively diverse population of undergraduate students and large number of graduates produced each year. The university was the flagship institution for the state system and was classified as a Carnegie Doctoral/Research Extensive institution. In 2009-2010, just over 26,000 undergraduates attended the university; approximately 24% of undergraduate students attended from out-of-state and 34% of undergraduate students identified as a person of color. In 2009-2010, close to 7,000 undergraduates received a bachelor's degree from the university. Though all 13 participants were alumni from one singular institution, for purposeful sampling strategies, particularly maximum variation, I selected recent graduates living in a variety of cities and states. As a result, the actual research

was conducted with participants living in various locations throughout the northeast quadrant of the United States. Additionally, though many of the participants moved during the research process they remained in the study as geographic location emerged as a category within the findings.

**Establishing rapport.** Upon initial selection of the sample, it was important for me to establish and maintain rapport and trust with participants (Glesne, 2006). This study was built on the interactions and conversations with the 13 participants. Because I conducted multiple interviews with each of the participants, it was imperative for me to establish a strong rapport with the participants in order to maintain participation. Developing rapport assumes an awareness of participants' time, attention, and social interactions (Glesne, 2006). In taking a constructivist approach to grounded theory, it was a necessity to establish, and maintain, a relationship with each of the participants in order to co-construct meaning surrounding the process of transitioning from college to post-college life.

Establishing and maintaining rapport to forge relationships was a constant process that I continually negotiated with participants as the study progressed. From the onset, I disclosed my intentions for the study with the participants and made them aware of the purpose of the research project. Prior to the initial interview, I obtained an informed consent form (Appendix D) with a promise of anonymity for each participant. Through the use of pseudonyms and other safeguards (personal data secured and concealed), personal information was kept confidential and only presented under the assurance of anonymity. In addition to the two formal interviews conducted with each participant, I maintained contact and provided updates with each of the participants throughout the 18-

month research period. Consistent with a constructivist approach to grounded theory using the constant comparative method, each of the participants reviewed, commented, and expanded upon emergent categories and themes. Additionally, towards the end of the research process, I conducted a member-check with each of the participants to authenticate findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The member-check served as an “opportunity for the participants to react to the findings and interpretations that emerged as a result of his or her participation (Jones et al., 2006, p. 99).

### **Data Collection**

Data formed the foundation of the emergent grounded theory. Data collection, in grounded theory research, can take on a variety of approaches including interviews, observations, documents, records, and films (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I conducted interviews as my primary method of collecting data. Not only are interviews the most frequently employed data collection technique employed in grounded theory, (Creswell, 1998), but interviews serve as a common and effective way of understanding individuals (Fontana & Frey, 2000). I interviewed each participant two times with a third meeting serving as a member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In accordance with an interpretive perspective, I conducted intensive interviews in order to provide for an in-depth exploration of the college to post-college transition experience from the perspective of the participants (Charmaz, 2006).

Intensive interviews assume a more conversational approach to interviewing. According to Charmaz (2006), by employing such a technique, this allowed me as the researcher/interviewer to:

- Go beneath the surface of the described experience(s);



- Stop to explore a statement or topic;
- Request more detail or explanation;
- Ask about participant's thoughts, feelings, and actions;
- Keep the participant on the subject;
- Come back to an earlier point;
- Restate the participant's point to check for accuracy;
- Slow or quicken the pace;
- Shift the immediate topic;
- Validate the participant's humanity, perspective, or action;
- Use observational and social skills to further the discussion; and
- Respect the participant and express appreciation for participating. (p. 26)

Intensive interviewing also allowed the participants the ability to approach the interview through a conversational perspective. As the expert on the process of transition, each participant was able to tell stories about his or her transition experience. Though intensive, I followed an open-ended semi-structured interview protocol (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The open-ended aspect provided the flexibility for a more conversational and informal interview process (Patton, 1990) creating an in-depth exploration of the transition process. I entered the interviews with no predetermined notion of what would develop; however, I still needed to ask questions to help me better understand the transition phenomenon. The semi-structured aspect provided me with the necessary direction to ensure exploration of certain aspects surrounding the post-college transition.

The stated research questions served as the foundation for the interviews. In addition to the research questions, the following related questions were developed to help

to guide the initial interview: (a) How do recent college graduates make meaning of their involvement within the post-college environments in which they are engaged (e.g., family, peers, work, civic life); (b) How do college experiences influence the transition process; and (c) How was the transition experience similar or different to what was expected? Although certain interview questions were predetermined (Appendix E) allowing for a direction to be established, the open-ended semi-structured approach allowed for each interview to build upon previous interviews. As I continuously collected and analyzed data, interviews were used to fill in gaps and confirm and disconfirm emergent categories and concepts.

I had three formal meetings with each of the participants, two interviews and one member check. I conducted the first round of interviews in spring 2009, between late April and early June. Before the first interview, I explained both the purpose of the study and the research protocol to each of the participants. In order for information to remain anonymous, each participant first selected a pseudonym to be used. With permission obtained from each participant through the informed consent, each interview was audio-recorded using digital recording devices. I also took notes during each interview in an effort to capture the tone of the interview as well as non-verbal communications and significant experiences and emotions. Due to the semi-structured aspect of the interview, the note taking process also helped guide the remainder of the interview.

During the first round of interviews, I realized that for many of the participants, their current situation and experience (in terms of employment status, relationship status, and/or living experience) would change significantly within the upcoming months. For instance, within four months after the first round of interviews, two participants moved to

different parts of the country, another participant got married, and one started graduate school. In an attempt to better capture and understand the complete transition experience, I purposefully waited to conduct the second round of follow up interviews until six months following the first round. My second round of interviews all took place during November and December of 2009 with the final member checks occurring from November 2010 through early January 2011.

Each of the 13 interviews during the first-round took place in person; I traveled to the location of the participant. However, the second round of interviews was conducted using either telephone or video-conferencing technology. Both telephone and video-conferencing were appropriate means of interviewing for the second round because rapport with the participants had previously been established through the initial interview and subsequent email and telephone exchanges. Video-conferencing also allowed for the ability to still view non-verbal communications during the interview. Each interview conducted through either telephone or video-conference was also audio recorded using digital recording devices.

The average interview length during both rounds of interviews was between an hour and an hour and a half. Although some interviews were as short as 50 minutes, others lasted close to two hours. Each interview was transcribed verbatim at the conclusion of the corresponding round of interviews. I coded the data and compared similarities and differences among the interviews. Though the data analysis process is discussed in more detail below, it is important to remember that in grounded theory, data collection and data analysis occur in a continual cycle. Upon initial analysis of each interview round, I employed memo-writing to categorize and summarize emergent

concepts (Charmaz, 2006). I shared my interpretations of the initial findings with each of the participants prior to the second round of interviews.

As a result, the objective of the second interview was to review and reflect on the summaries constructed from the first round of interviews, confirm and disconfirm emergent categories and concepts, and gather additional data to further explore the process of post-college transition. Based on initial interpretations from the first round of interviews, I developed new semi-structured open-ended questions based on emerging themes constructed from the data analysis process. In keeping with constant comparative methods, the process of transcribing, coding, analyzing, and memo-writing was recurrent during the second round of interviews and until the completion of the member checks. Though member checks occurred continuously throughout the process, the third and final meeting specifically served the purpose of a member check.

The final member check process happened through an exchange of electronic mail and follow-up phone calls. Each participant received an in-depth summary of the findings and initial constructed theory of college to post-college transition. Each participant was also provided with a summary of his or her experiences in relation to the emergent theory, including the participant description and interpretations of significant experiences and stories told by the participant. Each participant was given time to review and reflect on the earlier interviews and emergent findings. I asked each participant to provide me with comments about the emergent theory, their interpreted position within the theory, and the research process itself. The goal of this final member check was to seek confirmation that the analyzed data is accurate as constructed by the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Through the constant comparative process, I determined that theoretical saturation was reached to the point of redundancy before I engaged in the final member checks. The multiple interviews, member checks, periodic informational updates, and continual request for reflection and feedback resulted in the participants' ability to not only co-construct meaning but to also stay involved with the process. Though no new participants were selected after the initial sample selection, it should be noted that as the result of establishing and maintaining rapport throughout the process, each of the 13 initial participants remained in the study throughout the entirety of the research study.

### **Data Analysis**

Grounded theory research follows the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Like the name implies, the constant comparative method assumes that the researcher is analyzing data to develop categories, themes, and eventually grounded theory, from the very start of the data collection process (Krathwohl, 1998). Sampling, data collection, and data analysis are all taking place continually and concurrently through the research process. Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed that grounded theory research must include "simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis" (p. 5); specifically, the analysis incorporates the construction of codes and categories from data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued that data analysis within grounded theory is a systematic and structured process; through a method of simultaneous, but ordered, coding and analysis, a theory is systematically discovered. Although this study inevitably builds upon the guidelines for data analysis prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), I followed a constructivist approach and

allowed for a more flexible approach, particularly in terms of implementing a constant comparative method and corresponding coding process as developed by Charmaz (2006).

**Constant comparative method.** Using the constant comparative method, grounded theory researchers simultaneously select participants, gather data, interpret the data, go back into the field to gather more data (often with new participants), interpret additional data, and so forth until saturation is met. The comparative method of analysis implies comparing data to data searching for both similarities and differences. Charmaz (2000) emphasized that the constant comparative method involves the following:

- Comparing different people (such as their views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences)
- Comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points of time
- Comparing incident with incident
- Comparing data with category
- Comparing a category with other categories. (p. 515)

In this study, I implemented the constant comparison method of data analysis.

Following this method, every statement and event within each interview was noted and identified as a concept. These concepts were compared and new concepts sought through additional data collection and analysis until no new concepts were indicated.

Specifically, I looked at the information from each of the rounds of 13 interviews; I compared statements and events within an interview, as well as statements and events between participant interviews. I also compared earlier participant interviews to later participant interviews. During this process, concepts were linked with other concepts.

Through a process of coding, the linked concepts turned into categories and eventually key categories. As I compared interpreted statements, events, and ideas from participant interviews, new indicators of concepts were generated until no new concepts were found. Following confirming and disconfirming sampling strategies, new information from participants helped eliminate, and illuminate, the emergent themes. After a purposeful and extensive coding process resulted in saturation with no additional concepts or themes being identified or excluded, participants were engaged in a member check process to confirm – or disconfirm – themes and interpretations surrounding the college to post-college transition process. As a result of this final meaning-making collaboration with participants, the theory of college to post-college transition was constructed.

**Coding.** Following the constant comparative method of simultaneous data collection and data analysis, 26 total interviews were conducted throughout the research process. As mentioned earlier, the constant comparative method involves the careful notation of each item within data through a process of coding. Coding is the link between the collected data and the emergent theory explaining the data; it defines and makes meaning of the data (Charmaz, 2006). The process of coding involves, “categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data. Your codes show how you select, separate, and sort data to begin an analytic accounting of them” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43).

Looking at the data from a constructivist perspective, I created codes in order to interpret and define what I saw within the data; I did not attempt to force codes to fit within preconceived ideas. The codes that I created included words and phrases that named the ideas, events, and experiences within the participant stories. Additionally, I

engaged with the participants throughout the coding process in order to refine and eventually generate a co-constructed interpretation of the data. In this study, I followed the coding guidelines outlined by Charmaz (2006) and conducted four phases of coding: initial, focused, axial, and theoretical. Initial coding looks closely at the data and specifically attributes names to each word, line, or segment of data.

***Initial coding.*** During the initial coding phase, I remained open to the interpretations of the participants' stories and made sure the named codes fit the data rather than having the data fit the codes (Charmaz, 2006). To best do this, I conducted line-by-line coding. After each round of interviews, I implemented a line-by-line analysis of each transcribed interview where I closely examined the data word-by-word, line-by-line (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this process I coded words, phrases, and sentences and named them as concepts.

When naming the concepts, I not only incorporated my perception of meaning, but also went line-by-line in order to accurately describe the concepts to reflect what the participants said. In order to best capture the perspectives of the participants within the codes, I used "in vivo" codes (Charmaz, 2006). According to Charmaz, *in vivo* codes can be general but familiar terms that signify a specific meaning, a participant's' inventive term that captures an idea or experience, or insider short-hand that reflects a particular groups perspective. As I coded words, phrases and concepts during the initial coding phase, I attempted to preserve participant meaning through the use of in vivo codes when possible.

The use of in vivo codes helped me to focus further interviews and analysis, as well as emergent categories and themes. One participant talked about being part of the



“selfish generation.” As a result, this concept was then explored with each participant during the second round of interviews. Other *in vivo* terms evolved into key categories or theoretical constructs. Another participant talked about her simultaneous desire and struggle to “close one chapter” before “starting a new chapter” of her life during her second interview. The *in vivo* coding on “chapters of life” provided insight into the varying approaches to transition that emerged as part of the theory of college to post-college transition. Furthermore, another participant coined the phrase, “a series of realizations” in his initial interview while talking about his experience post-graduation. “A series of realizations” became part of the core concept within the theory of college to post-college transition.

In addition to line-by-line coding, I also instituted incident-by-incident coding (Charmaz, 2006). Here, I compared similar, and dissimilar, incidents within interviews, setting up further areas to explore during later interviews and analysis. As a result of both line-by-line and incident-by-incident coding during the initial coding phase, 1195 distinct concepts emerged from the 26 interviews and 1100 pages of transcriptions. Initial codes varied significantly, however some examples included, “feeling disrespected,” “plans changed,” “loss of freedom,” “friends change,” “have to figure out where to focus,” “want to make a difference,” and “always expected to go to college.” To manage this process, I entered the coded phrase or word into an excel spreadsheet. Each interview had a separate excel spreadsheet allowing me to better compare concepts within each interview as well as between all interviews. Throughout the initial coding process, I looked carefully at the initial codes and compared within interviews and incidents in order to become aware of emerging concepts (Charmaz, 2006). Initial

coding allowed me the opportunity to constantly make meaning of my data and become aware of gaps that better prepared me for subsequent data collection and analysis.

***Focused coding.*** The initial coding process resulted in 1195 distinct concepts. After these concepts accumulated, I grouped them into categories and subcategories by implementing focused coding. Through continued coding and analysis, comparing data from all 26 interviews, the initial concepts were grouped into 24 major categories (Appendix F). I then examined the relationships of these 24 categories, particularly the interactions among the categories, to make further sense of the data.

This more directed phase of coding allowed me to sort through my extensive amount of data in an effort to explain significant and frequent initial codes and concepts (Charmaz, 2006). I conducted a focused coding approach after each round of interviews were transcribed and initially coded. During this phase, I carefully looked across interviews to specifically compare the transition experiences, events, stories, and ideas from one participant to another. During this process, I compared data to data, as well as data to the emergent codes, in an attempt to refine and focus the codes into categories. Through focused coding, the concepts that emerged during the initial coding phase developed into categories. Charmaz (2006) asserted that focused coding “requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (pp. 57-58). As a result of employing focused coding, I organized the 1195 initial codes into 24 categories that can be found in Appendix F.

***Axial coding.*** After I identified the focused categories, I took a flexible approach to axial coding as suggested by Charmaz (2006). In this phase, I looked at relationships between the categories and subcategories (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

During the axial coding phase, I examined all of the codes and concepts that emerged during focused coding to better determine relationships that existed among the concepts. To explore the relationships, I first tested out different connections and larger themes by grouping categories and subcategories on an excel document. I then implemented memo-writing to map out connections, gaps, and contradictions between the categories and subcategories.

Through the process of memo-writing, I explored the concepts in the data by documenting various groupings, topics, directions, and themes. Memo-writing allowed me to explore various ideas about the categories in a free and unconstrained format (Charmaz, 2006). During this process I identified conditions and ideas that influenced situations related to the post-college transition experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I engaged in free writing to cluster the established categories to better explore properties and dimensions. I tested connections and analytic frames about the process of post-college transition through the creation of tables and visual depictions. This document became the initial framework for the eventual theory. I also used the memo to reflect on what might be missing from the data and posed questions resulting in further exploration and analysis of the data. This document was shared with the peer debriefer for feedback and a summary version of the memo was shared with participants during the member-check process. As a result of the large amount of data and initial concepts, this was a significant step in order to explore the ways that the categories related to each other to form the initial frame of the emergent theory.

***Theoretical coding.*** At this point of the coding process, theoretical coding was used to “clarify and sharpen the analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 66). Theoretical coding

helps to pull the stories of the participants together while adding clarity in order to move the analysis toward a theory. During axial coding, and through the use of memo-writing, a story line surrounding the transition from college to post-college life emerged.

Theoretical coding, then, took the emerging stories from the recent graduates and added precision to both experiences of the transition and approaches to post-college transition.

After taking a more concentrated approach looking at the key categories and grouped themes, the 24 major categories and corresponding properties were shared with participants to gather input and feedback. With the participants, I explored relationships, grouped the categories, and tried out different emergent themes and theories through written notes, charts, sketches, outlines, and tables. Involving the participants in this flexible yet systematic approach of data collection and analysis resulted in themes emerging from the major categories. This process shaped the earliest iteration of the transition theory from college to post-college life. Not only did a theory of college to post-college transition emerge after the theoretical coding phase, but this phase was also important to ensure the analysis, and generated theory, was not only comprehensible but constructed from the perspective of the participants (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Though the coding process followed four flexible yet distinct phases of coding (Charmaz, 2006), the process was not linear. Following the constant comparative approach to qualitative inquiry, I concurrently and repeatedly collected and analyzed data. I delved back into the data, sorting and re-sorting, throughout the process of coding while also collecting additional data through participant interviews. When it appeared I had reached saturation with no new information being revealed, I engaged the

participants and the peer debriefer with my preliminary interpretations to gain feedback and confirm findings. Additionally, I reflected on my own positionality as the researcher and followed guidelines to ensure trustworthiness and goodness in the research. Once each of these steps was accomplished, a grounded theory of college to post-college transition emerged.

### **Trustworthiness and Goodness**

In qualitative research, it is very important to establish trustworthiness and goodness. The constructivist paradigm assumes that qualitative interpretations are constructed and that there is no one single interpretive truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As a result, concepts such as trustworthiness and authenticity are important to reflect goodness or quality criteria within the research (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). In order to establish goodness, I followed many of the recommendations outlined by Creswell (1998). Specifically, he outlined the following eight verification procedures that can be used in qualitative research:

1. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation
2. Triangulation
3. Peer review or debriefing
4. Negative case analysis
5. Clarifying researcher bias
6. Member checks
7. Rich, thick description
8. External audits.

Glesne (2006) stated that though it is not necessary to attend to each of the measures, it is still crucial to the study to incorporate various aspects of verification in order to establish trustworthiness and confidence in the findings.

I approached this study through a constructivist paradigm with an interpretive lens resulting in a co-constructed theory of college to post-college transition based on the shared knowledge and interpretations between the participants and me as the researcher. It was essential for me to establish trustworthiness given my desire to accurately, and with authenticity, represent the stories of the recent college graduates surrounding the experiences and events of the college to post-college transition. In order to ensure conceptual soundness in this research, I specifically followed the four elements of trustworthiness as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Credibility**

Establishing credibility assumes that data was collected in a means to accurately reflect the phenomenon being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish credibility, I was intentional about specific aspects of the research design, utilized a peer debriefer, and engaged the participants in member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, purposeful sampling techniques were incorporated throughout the research process, employing aspects of maximum variation sampling and intensity sampling, in order to truthfully tell the story of college to post-college transition. Though constant comparative methods of data collection and analysis, I looked for confirming and disconfirming cases to ensure the findings accurately represented the phenomenon of post-college transition. Once the sample was selected, two interviews and one member

check were conducted with each participant. I conducted each round of interviews six months apart to fully capture the experiences of the college to post-college transition process for recent college graduates. Throughout the 18 months of the study, the participants were continually updated and contact was maintained. This period of prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) allowed me to not only understand the experiences of the participants throughout various points of time, but to also build trust with the participants.

Additionally, I utilized the technique of peer debriefing to establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used a recent graduate of the same doctoral program to serve as my peer debriefer since she had an understanding of both college student development and qualitative research methods. The peer debriefer provided external reflection and input about the study (Glesne, 2006). The peer debriefer read drafts of the dissertation and paid particular attention to my interpretations and the concepts that emerged as a result of the analysis. We met to review my findings, which allowed her the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarity of my interpretations and conclusions.

Finally, in accordance with a constructivist study, it was important to allow the participants the chance to check findings and interpretations. I conducted member checks to allow the participants a chance to react to “data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 315). Member checking occurred continuously throughout the study. The second formal interview also served as the first round of member checks. During this time, I provided each of the participants with the initial concepts that were generated from their interview as well as emergent themes that spanned across the interviews. In the second member check, I again presented the

participants with concepts specific to their interview and themes that transversed participant stories. I asked each of the participants to provide feedback; particularly gauging whether or not they agreed with the concepts, categories, and themes that emerged as a result of my analysis. The participants had few suggestions and generally agreed with my interpretations of their experiences.

Once I felt that saturation was met, I engaged with each of the participants in a final member check. I first provided each participant with a written memo that presented a more thorough interpretation of findings. I provided a summary of their individual experience as well as a summary of the findings that led to the eventual theory. Few modifications resulted from the final 13 member checks. All 13 of the participants agreed with the way they were represented in the study, confirming aspects that could be considered critical. Many of the participants commented on how this study helped them “to not feel so alone” in regards to their transition; they were pleased to learn that others were experiencing similar aspects. At the end of the study, many of the participants referenced fact that they had previously not thought much about their transition and this study provided them with personal insight to take a more thoughtful approach to their continuing transition. The process of member checking was not only important for establishing credibility and building trust with the participants, but the process ensured that interpretations and conclusions on the post-college transition were co-constructed from the viewpoint of the participants.

### **Transferability**

Even though the sample was selected from a lone institution, it was important to ensure the theory was transferable, or able to be applied in other settings (Lincoln &



Guba, 1985). As a result, it was important for me to provide a thorough description of each aspect of the research study by using thick description. Not only did I take thorough notes during each interview and subsequent analysis, but thick description required me to present detailed written narratives capturing the place, context, culture, feelings, and emotions of that point of time. Denzin (1989) suggested that thick description “establishes the significance of an experience, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard” (p. 83). Understanding, however, that the analysis of thick description leads to interpretation (Patton, 1990), it was important to find a balance between description and interpretation. Using thick description as part of the member check process lent to participants’ constructing their own interpretations of the data. Additionally, the incorporation of a varied and purposeful sample featuring maximum variation sampling, negative cases, and confirming and disconfirming cases helped to establish transferability.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

To best establish both dependability and confirmability of the study, I utilized an inquiry auditor to examine the process and product of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability assumes that proper procedures are met and that the data represent changing conditions of the phenomenon being studied; in this study the college to post-college transition (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The inquiry auditor examined the research process (data collection, coding, analysis) and the emergent categories and theory to determine that the study was not only accurate but in accordance to a constructivist approach to grounded theory. The inquiry auditor had extensive knowledge of qualitative methods, as well as grounded theory methodology, in order to “audit” the study to make

sure that proper procedures were used from data collection to data analysis to coding (Lincoln & Guba).

The inquiry auditor confirmed that when presented with such data the same core categories and theory would again emerge. To do this, the inquiry auditor reviewed my codes and subsequent interpretive findings, as well as my detailed notes and memos where I documented assumptions and interpretations throughout the process. Though the inquiry auditor did not help to interpret the findings or make meaning of the study like the participants or peer reviewer, she did “audit” the study to confirm the theory of college to post-college transition was the result of a dependable research process. The auditor’s letter of attestation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) appears in Appendix G.

### **Goodness**

More recently, the term “goodness” has been used as a means to evaluate the quality of qualitative research (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Jones et al., 2006). The element of goodness assumes that “meaning making process are illustrated; epistemological and theoretical foundations are linked to the selective methodology; and that the method of data collection and its analysis are clear, offering new understanding that leads to improved practice” (Arminio & Hultgren, p. 446). The element of goodness provides criteria to specifically judge the quality of qualitative research. To make sure that as a researcher I “got it right” (Creswell, 1998) I provided rationale and justification during each step of the process. Specifically, I addressed each of the following components outlined by Arminio and Hultgren throughout the final dissertation:

1. Epistemology and Theory: The Foundation.
2. Methodology: The Approach.

3. Method: The Collection of Data.
4. Researcher and Participants as Multicultural Subjects: The Representation of Voice.
5. Interpretation and Presentation: The Art of Meaning Making.
6. Recommendations: The Implications for Professional Practice. (p. 450)

### **Ethics**

The process of establishing trustworthiness and goodness was also beneficial to help address any unanticipated ethical issues that may have otherwise arisen during the research process. Ethical considerations have always been important to the research process, and particularly for this study given the close interaction between researcher and participant (Glesne, 2006). In an effort to minimize harm to participants (Magolda & Weems, 2002), I followed a number of appropriate ethical research standards. Upon from obtaining approval from the university's Internal Review Board (IRB), I began the research process by making a concerted effort to develop a good rapport with both key informants and potential participants. According to Magolda and Weems (2002), the first ethical consideration to minimize harm is for participants "to understand the research process and get to know the researcher" (p. 499). Without participants, or the key informants who nominated potential participants, this study would not have taken place. During conversations with both gatekeepers and participants, I was open and honest about the purpose of the study; I discussed possible risks and continuously sought expectations from participants in regards to the study.

To ensure an ethic of do no harm, I specifically took the following four common dilemmas stressed by Haverkamp (2005) into consideration: competence, informed

consent, confidentiality, and boundaries and multiple relationships. First and foremost, by achieving trustworthiness and goodness, I was able to show competency in the research process by establishing this as a quality study. The thorough literature review demonstrated knowledge of both the subject matter, college to post-college transition, and the population, recent college graduates, being researched. From the onset of participant selection, I discussed the research process and potential (limited) risks with the participants. In our initial meeting, I discussed approaching this study from a constructivist approach and described the process of the constant comparison method. This conversation enabled participants to become aware of the data collection and interview process, and corresponding uncertainty, as well as the integration of member checks and participant interpretations.

Through the process of the informed consent (Appendix D) I made certain the participants were aware of all factors that might occur during the research process. I talked with the participants about confidentiality, including securing recordings, notes, and transcripts, and promised information would remain anonymous. Given the nature of the study and the use of long narratives with thick description, it could be possible that participants could be recognized. To help assure anonymity, each participant selected a pseudonym. To reduce the risk of identifiable information being presented, I then used the member check process as a time for participants to react to their descriptions and corresponding narratives. I also used the member check as an opportunity for the participants to provide approval of their descriptions and narratives for use within this study. The participants were aware that they could voluntarily leave the research process at any point (Magolda & Weems, 2002).

Throughout the research process, my greatest ethical concern surrounded my role, or positionality, with my participants. Haverkamp (2005) indicated that the ethical focus in qualitative research must be on the relationship between the researcher and participants. This study resulted in extended contact and rich conversations; participants shared private and intimate details of their lives and experiences. As a result, there was a heightened potential to harm my participants. In addition to protecting the privacy of participants, Glesne (2006) argued the importance of establishing rapport and trust with participants, specifically providing an occasion for reciprocity. It was important for me to maintain their trust by listening and demonstrating understanding and working with them to avoid misinterpreting their experience and stories. Additionally, given the prolonged engagement and conversational approach to the interviews, I also contributed to the conversation sharing information and disclosing information about myself.

However, although I took a concerted effort to establish rapport and trust with the participants, the reciprocity that was established, if not negotiated properly, could also lead to increased harm. One of the greatest ethical risks surrounds the relationship between researcher and participants as researchers often take on multiple and overlapping roles during the research process (Haverkamp, 2005). The rapport that is established over time often leads to the emergence of personal relationships over time; and in some instances close personal relationships develop between the researcher and the participant. In addition to negotiating relationships with participants on personal levels, it was also important to take into account any power dynamics that might exist (Haverkamp). In many instances, a system of power and influence is created because the main function of the interviews is to serve the needs of the researcher. My researcher positionality is

explored more in the ensuing section. However, ethical considerations extend beyond the participants. When presenting my findings in this dissertation, it was also necessary for me to keep in mind the audience reading this research in an effort to do no harm to the community (Magolda & Weems, 2002). Specifically, I took into consideration how the findings surrounding college to post-college transition might impact administrators and recent college graduates in a larger sense.

### **Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity**

Negotiating the relationship between the researcher and the participants is of particular importance in qualitative research, particularly a constructivist approach. As the researcher, it was important for me to recognize that I was the primary instrument for the data collection (Merriam & Associates, 2002). As a result, it was critical to this study for me to be aware of my researcher positionality, including my insider and outsider status (Jones et al., 2006). I explored my *insider* familiarity with students preparing to embark on the transition process in relationship to my *outsider* status as a staff member undergoing very different life situations.

Having worked specifically with seniors and senior year initiatives at the University from which participants were selected provided me with both familiarity of the context of the institution, as well as a means of access to participants through key informants and gatekeepers with a connection to recent graduates. Throughout the process, I also remained aware of any preconceived notions that I had given my previous work or as the result of relationships maintained with former students, many of whom fall into the “recent college graduate” category. However, I also had to explore my outsider status, particularly that I was exploring and interpreting the college post-college transition

process even though I was not going through such a transition myself. I also frequently reflected on my position in relation to the participants' experiences, particularly being personally far removed from the post-college transition process.

Fine (1994) suggested researchers must explore both their own relationship to those being studied, as well as the context in which the study occurs. Fine referred to this relationship as the “self-other hyphen” and the process as “working the hyphen.” The self-other hyphen implies that “researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations” (p. 72). She pointed out that as a researcher, it is important to not write *about* our subjects but *with* those subjects with whom we engage. As referenced earlier, meaning was co-constructed as a result of the interpretations of both me as the researcher and the participants. This process helped generate a constructivist grounded theory of college to post-college transition.

Assuming that reality is mutually constructed, I remained open and forthright in my own interpretations and assumptions as to how I came to make meaning. This self-awareness, or researcher reflexivity, (Creswell, 2003; Glesne, 2006; Jones et al., 2006) is a key aspect of qualitative research. Reflexivity suggests, “that you are as concerned with the research process as you are with the data you are obtaining” (Glesne, 2006, p. 125). I made sure to disclose, both to the participants and in the written product, my assumptions and how I situated myself within and throughout the study. I continuously drew upon my own experiences, knowledge, and history and made mention of my biases, values, and experiences. It was important throughout the study to not separate my personal-self from my researcher-self (Creswell, 2003).

Through the process of reflexivity, I continually acknowledged and monitored my researcher positionality. Reflexivity assumes more than being reflective; it required asking questions throughout each stage of the research process and making sure others (participants, peer reviewer, audience) were constantly aware of my positionality, perspectives, and thought process surrounding how I reached certain assertions. Specifically, to adequately ensure reflexivity, I followed the suggestion set forth by Jones et al., (2006) and asked myself the following three questions: why am I engaged and interested in this study; what personal biases and assumptions did I bring to the study; and what are my personal relationships to those in the study?

When I began this project, I was working with college seniors who were preparing to graduate from college and move into the next phase of their life. I saw a variety of emotions as students finished college: excited, nervous, anxious, scared, confident, confused, and insecure. Working with seniors, I had an insiders ability to gain an understanding of those feelings pre-graduation, however I could only imagine what the actual transition process was like once they received their diploma. Questions about whether or not new graduates were equipped with the necessary competencies to transition out of college consumed my thoughts over the past few years. I questioned whether or not we, as university administrators, have properly prepared students to leave college. In addition, the recent focus on accountability within higher education only heightened my curiosity. I was inspired to better understand what situations post college were the most challenging and which were the most rewarding.

It has been over a decade since I graduated from college with my other “Generation X” friends. The college graduates in this study are of the millennial



generation and had very different college experiences (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Immediately following graduation, like most of my friends, I moved into an apartment and paid my own bills for the first time. With no cell phones and limited Internet connectivity, I was thrust on my own with little contact to college friends and family. Eight-hundred miles from home and my undergraduate institution, I was surrounded by an unfamiliar city with unfamiliar people. For the first time, I was living alone with no roommates or family members; I was paying bills, learning how to cook, and trying to find my way in a new environment. In my opinion, I was successful during this transitional period because my father told me I was. He said I “blossomed” during this time, though I never really knew what this meant. Perhaps my college courses, jobs, and involvement experiences prepared me for this supposed success, but I never thought about it during those years immediately following graduation. Additionally, I remember having strong feelings of insecurity, doubt, and anxiety looming over me during this time.

My own transition experience, coupled with my professional experience working with college seniors inspired my interest in this research topic. As a qualitative researcher, I recognize that I can not leave my history behind. As I constructed meaning with my participants, I made mention of my past experiences and assumptions. Furthermore, I continued throughout the process to reflect on my own positionality and paid particular attention to my thoughts, values, and decisions. In addition to openly reflecting on past experiences, I also disclosed personal information to my participants about my current situation. During the course of the study, I too underwent transitions including a move and a new job. I made sure to reflect on how my transition experiences, both the college to post-college transition as well as other life transitions,

shaped my perspective. I continuously asked myself questions about both the study and my positionality. I noted my reflections in notes and memos, and recorded my thoughts in a researcher's journal that were then incorporated throughout this dissertation. In keeping with the expectation to achieve trustworthiness in this study, I attempted to make this process as transparent as possible.

### **Summary**

For this study, I conducted a constructivist grounded study to develop a theory of the transition process from college to post-college life. Recent college graduates, within three years post-graduation, were identified as possible participants through the use of key informants; they were ultimately selected by employing purposeful sampling strategies, primarily theoretical and intensity sampling strategies with elements of maximum variation sampling. Open-ended semi-structured interviews served as the primary means of data collection. Following the constant comparison method of data collection and data analysis, data was coded in initial, focused, axial, and theoretical coding phases. Data was collected until saturation was met. The constant comparative method of simultaneous data collection and analysis, particularly the process of coding resulted in the emergence of core categories and themes surrounding post-college transition. Additional interactions with the participants, particularly member checks, provided an opportunity to receive feedback and further interpretation of the emergent concepts grounded specifically in the experiences of the participants. In order to ensure quality and conceptual soundness, I applied specific strategies meant to establish trustworthiness and goodness while also accounting for ethical considerations. Integrating my own researcher positionality and reflexivity into the process allowed me

to reflect on the meaning that was constructed and assumptions considered. As a result of these methodological procedures, a theory of college to post-college transition was generated.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### THE PROCESS OF COLLEGE TO POST-COLLEGE TRANSITION

This study explored the transition experience for recent college graduates. I conducted two interviews and a member check with each of the 13 participants. All 13 participants, seven women and six men, were recent college graduates between one and three years post-graduation at the point of the initial interview. In an effort to have a diverse participant group, the participants were of varying gender, racial, sexual orientation, and socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, the college experiences (i.e., major, residency, activities) and post-college experiences (i.e., location, employment status, continued education) of the recent graduates differed considerably. Following the constant comparison method of simultaneous data collection and analysis, 26 total interviews were conducted with 13 participants throughout the research process. The constructivist approach to data collection and analysis resulted in emergent concepts and categories based on the experiences and interpretations of the participants surrounding the college to post-college transition process.

The findings of the study are presented in two chapters. The major findings build upon each other throughout the two chapters and are presented in gradual advancement ending with the grounded theory of college to post-college transition. The grounded theory that emerged incorporates three distinct findings: the post-college transition process and corresponding experiences and characteristics, the developmental tasks that accompany the “transitioning adult”, and the way in which recent graduates make meaning of and approach the transition. In this chapter, I introduce and describe each of the 13 participants in the study. I then provide an overview of the transition process

moving from college to post-college experiences using thick description and describing the stories of the participants. The core concept of post-college transition, navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters, is presented. I go on to describe in detail the four corresponding characteristics that emerged in relation to the process of post-college transition: managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose. The chapter ends with a discussion on how recent graduates negotiated various external and internal support systems during the post-college college transition. The findings in chapter five present a concept of transitioning adult while identifying various approaches to the post-college transition. The series of findings that are presented all build up to the grounded theory of college to post-college transition.

The total sample consisted of 13 participants ranging not only in gender and race, but also college major, graduation year, and current status (i.e., employment status, continued education, living situation and geographic location, relationship status). At the time of the first interview in Spring 2009, each participant was between one to three years' post-college graduation. Five of the participants graduated in 2006, four in 2007, and four in 2008. Within the study, one participant was married, (another got married during the study), two of the participants were parents, two of the participants lived at their parents' home, and four of the participants were in graduate or professional school. During the course of the study, I witnessed job changes, local and long distance moves, break-ups, entry into graduate school, an engagement, and a marriage.

### **Participants**

Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants in the study. Following the table is a brief description of each participant, including an overview of

how he or she has been spending his or her time since graduation. Each participant chose his or her pseudonym used in this study to protect anonymity. All the names of partners and children have also been changed. As part of the member check, each participant had the opportunity to read and edit the description before agreeing on the statement below. I used this member check experience in part to promote participant confidentiality.

Table 1

*Participant Profiles*

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race / Ethnicity</b>	<b>College Major</b>	<b>Graduation Year</b>	<b>Professional Status Overview</b>
Anne	Female	Asian American/ Filipino	Communication	2006	Temporary Employment/Retail
Bobby	Male	Asian American	Finance & Marketing	2008	Associate at Consulting Firm
Connor	Male	White	Journalism & Government/ Politics	2008	Working for National Service Organization
Emily	Female	White	Biological Sciences	2007	Graduate Student in Professional Program
Eric	Male	Multi-Racial	Cell Biology & Molecular Genetics	2008	Facility Management Consulting
Giselle	Female	Latina	Marketing & Business	2006	Human Resources Manager
Karen	Female	White	Psychology	2007	Research Assistant at Hospital
Nicole	Female	African American	African American Studies & Journalism	2006	Graduate Student with Graduate Assistantship
Razac	Male	African American	African American Studies	2008	Unemployed/Local Government Employee
Rocky	Male	White	History	2007	Insurance Broker/ Unemployed
Sonia	Female	Asian Indian	Government and Politics	2006	Law Student
Victoria	Female	Latina	Theater	2007	Customer Service Agent/Graduate Student
Winston	Male	White	Aerospace Engineering	2006	Structural Engineer

**Anne**

Anne is an Asian American woman of Filipino ethnicity who graduated from college in 2006 with a major in communications. Anne is from a working class background and was 25 during the course of both interviews. Following graduation, Anne pursued a job out of state working in higher education administration. She left her job after two years and returned home, near the college, to live with her parents. For the next year and a half, Anne worked in various temporary jobs while pursuing her interest in poetry and performance. She also helped found an organization that provides support for and fosters the growth of Asian American and/or Pacific Islander (API) artists.

**Bobby**

Bobby is an Asian American man who graduated from college in 2008 with degrees in finance and marketing. He was 22 at the beginning of the study and 23 during the second interview. Bobby is from an upper middle class background and has been employed with the same large consulting firm since graduation. For the first year following graduation, Bobby stayed near home and school working for the large firm. However, at the time of our second interview, Bobby had recently changed jobs within the same company and made a long distance move to the northeast. Many of his closest friends from college, as well as his sister, were living in the new city at the time Bobby decided to make the move. In our second interview, Bobby mentioned he had started looking to purchase a condominium with his sister.

**Connor**

Connor is a White man who graduated with degrees in government and politics and journalism in 2008 and turned 24 during the course of the study. Connor was an out

of state student during his undergraduate years. Following college graduation, Connor went to work for a national service organization working in public schools in an urban area within the northeast. Connor was also taking graduate level classes at a nearby college as part of his service commitment; he otherwise would not be taking graduate courses. Connor lives on a modest public service income in the city. As of our second interview, Connor had recently started up a long distance relationship.

### **Emily**

Emily is a 25-year-old White woman and was an out of state student during college. She graduated in 2007 with a major in biological sciences and stayed at the university for Dental School. Emily was finishing up her second year of Dental School during our first interview and was almost halfway through year three by our second interview. She started her clinical hours at the beginning of year three. Emily has been living in an apartment near the dental school with a friend she knew from college.

### **Eric**

Eric is a 2008 graduate of the university. He is a multi-racial man who turned 23 during the course of the interviews. Eric is from an upper-middle to upper-class background. Though Eric's undergraduate major was cell biology and molecular genetics, Eric has been working with an engineering firm owned by his father since graduation. Eric grew up near the college and spent his first few years commuting from home. Following college graduation, he stayed locally in an apartment with friends he met through college. Outside of work, Eric is also an opera and choir performer.



### **Giselle**

Giselle is a Latina woman who graduated from college in 2006. She was 24 at the beginning of the study and 25 by the second interview. She identifies as Puerto Rican and Cuban and her Catholic faith is important to her. She lived only 45 minutes from home during college. Giselle graduated from college with a degree in marketing and business and immediately went to pursue a master's degree in human resources at an out of state Ivy League institution. Following her 2008 graduation, Giselle became an Associate Human Resources Manager for a major manufacturing factory in the south. She was in this position at the time of her first interview. However, by our second interview she had recently relocated within the same company to the East Coast in order to pursue new responsibilities. As a result of the move, she ended a relationship with her significant other. She is now living three hours from her family.

### **Karen**

Karen is White woman who identifies strongly with her Jewish faith. She is a 2007 graduate with a degree in psychology and was 25 during most of the study. Karen went to college close to home but upon graduation moved to a large metropolitan city in the northeast with friends from college. After moving, she found a job as a research assistant at a major hospital. During the course of the study, Karen got married to her partner Ben and took a new job within the hospital. Karen is considering going back for graduate school in either counseling or psychology.

### **Nicole**

Nicole is a 25-year old African American woman. She is also a graduate student and mother. She graduated from college in 2006 with a degree in African American

studies and magazine journalism. She grew up near the college and is attending the same institution for her graduate degree in education. Nicole also works as a graduate assistant in the same campus office she worked as an undergraduate. Most important to Nicole is the fact that she is also the mother of a young daughter named Morgan who was born her first year following graduation. At the time of our first interview, Nicole was still dating her daughter's father. However, they decided to end the relationship just prior to our second interview.

### **Razac**

Razac graduated from college in 2008 with a degree in African American studies. He is a 23-year old African American man and recently converted to Islam. Following graduation, he moved home to live with his parents not far from the University. Though Razac worked in a summer internship immediately following college, he was unable to find a job at the end of the summer. For almost a year following graduation Razac was unemployed. However, he took a job working in the Public Defenders office in the nearby city. As of our second interview six months later, he was still with this job but had recently been promoted. In addition, he had just started the process of preparing to apply for graduate school to study policy administration.

### **Rocky**

Rocky graduated with a degree in history in 2007 and stayed in the area following college. Rocky is a White man and was 24 years old during both interviews. He was an out of state student during college; his family still lives in New England. Rocky took a job with an insurance company after college and was still working there during both of our interviews. However, between our two interviews, Rocky relocated and changed

branch offices. At the time of our second interview, Rocky had recently given his two-week notice that he would be leaving his job. Rocky made the decision to temporarily move overseas to live with his girlfriend Elise to whom he was planning on proposing.

### **Sonia**

Sonia graduated from college in 2006 and started law school out of state in the fall of 2007 after working as an administrative assistant for a year. Sonia was a government and politics major in college. At the time of both interviews, Sonia was a full-time law student. Sonia is a 25-year old Asian American woman. Her Indian ethnicity and Hindu religion play important roles in her life. During college, her parents lived in the area, and she plans on returning home following law school graduation. In between our first and second interviews, Sonia stayed at school and spent the summer working for the State Senate as a law intern.

### **Victoria**

Victoria is a 24-year old Latina woman who graduated from college in 2007 with a degree in theater. Following graduation, Victoria moved to a large metropolitan city in the northeast. Her mother passed away her first year out of college and the rest of her family is still out of state living near where she went to college. For the first two years post college graduation, Victoria worked a variety of jobs. At the time of our first interview, she was working as a customer service agent. However, she had recently been admitted to graduate school to pursue a master of fine arts degree. Victoria stayed in the same metropolitan area for graduate school, though she did move across the city. Victoria had just finished her first semester of graduate school at the time of our second interview.

## **Winston**

Winton graduated from college in 2006 with a degree in aerospace engineering. He is a White man and was 25 years old during the study. Winston got married after college and he and his wife Katie have one son named Ethan. Following graduation, Winston and Katie moved twice before finally returning to the town in which they grew up. They bought their first home and now live close to family and about 45 minutes from the college. Winston also changed jobs between college graduation and the first interview. During both interviews, he was employed as a structural engineer for a large company. As of the second interview, Winston and Katie were starting the adoption process to expand their family.

### **Emergence of a Grounded Theory of College to Post-College Transition**

A primary focus of this study was on understanding the transition experience from college to post-college life by recent college graduates. In the years immediately following graduation, the participants in this study simultaneously experienced great loss while establishing newly found roles, responsibilities, and priorities. They were also searching for purpose and meaning in the period of time following college and more than other previous points in time, there was an emphasis on putting self first. As the participants in this study left the familiar (college) and entered the less familiar (post-college life), they intentionally situated themselves at the center of their experiences and decisions. They were redefining who they were and what mattered to them in a post-college context. Varying outside factors and support systems also influenced the transition experience for the participants in this study, particularly the specific approach taken.

The participants in this study viewed the post-college transition as a time of limbo and a feeling of in-between (Arnett, 2004); they were no longer college students but did not necessarily view themselves as adults. As Rocky stated in reference to his experience after graduating college, “I definitely still had one foot in college and one foot in post-college life.” Nicole specifically referenced “being in limbo;” she was not yet an adult but no longer a college student. Based on the review of relevant literature described earlier in chapter two, this study assumes that recent college graduates are in varying points of their own development into adulthood. Different labels such as young adults and emergent adults are used to define this developmental phase (Erikson, 1968; Arnett, 2000).

The term *transitioning adult* is used in this study to describe the participants during the period of post-college transition. This term is the result of a deliberate observation that although recent college graduates are legally and societally viewed as adults, the participants in this study did not yet refer to themselves as adults. Recent college graduates are in the process of moving out of college and transitioning into adulthood. As they moved through this transitional period, the participants began to navigate a series of realizations about self and what matters. A discussion on transitioning adulthood, as well as findings and developmental tasks surrounding the transition to adulthood, is described in chapter five.

As the recent college graduates, or transitioning adults, experienced specific transition characteristics germane to the college to post-college transition, they navigated a series of realizations about self and what matters while simultaneously negotiating outside support networks and internal coping strategies. The way in which recent

graduates made meaning of their transition, including how they navigated their changing situation, position, focus, and purpose, resulted in one of five approaches to the post-college transition. The five navigational approaches that emerged as a result of this study: Initiator, Instrumentalist, Observer, Adaptor, and Traditionalist, are discussed in detail in chapter five. This sequential progression of findings on the process and corresponding characteristics of the post-college transition, the developmental construct of transitioning adult, and the way in which recent graduates made meaning and approached the post-college transition developed into the grounded theory of college to post-college transition. The construction of the theory of college to post-college transition was based on the experiences and stories of the participants.

### **Understanding the College to Post-College Transition Process**

The core categories and themes surrounding the process of transitioning from college to post-college life, as explained by the participants, contributed to the grounded theory of college to post-college transition. The process of college to post-college transition, constructed from one core category with five corresponding and intersecting categories, served as the foundation for the emergent theory. The core category defining the post-college transition is characterized by the process of “navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters.”

As the participants left college and moved through the transition process towards adulthood, they encountered various transition characteristics along the way. As Winston said, “Your view of almost everything changes when you get out of college.” This study found that views, priorities, goals, and other beliefs changed dramatically in a post-college context. Such outlooks changed as the result of new experiences, events, and

realizations that arose after college graduation. Eric specifically referred to his transition experience from college to post-college life as “a series of realizations.” This study revealed that recent graduates are actively undergoing a series of realizations. Specifically, as I describe below, the recent graduates in this study were navigating post-college life to figure out their place and what matters. This became the central concept of the post-college transition theory. The post-college transition assumes a process of “navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters.” Using in vivo terminology consistent with a constructivist approach to grounded theory, this core category could simply be called *figuring it out*.

This core category – a period of figuring it out - is based on the development of five key categories generated from the stories of the participants. Four of the categories developed from four overlapping and intersecting post-college transition characteristics as experienced by the participants: managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose. Each of the four transition characteristics was simultaneously experienced by each of the participants. The fifth key category that contributed to the construction of the core category was how recent graduates negotiated the influence of support systems during the post-college transition. This fifth key category, negotiating support systems, includes both outside and societal influences as well as the presence (or lack) of available coping strategies. In addition, these characteristics had additional concepts and categories integral to the core concept of the emergent theory, or the process of navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters.

Figure 1 illustrates a visual depiction of the series of realizations that recent graduates actively experienced during the post-college transition. Each of the

participants in the post-college transition process were concurrently managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose while navigating various support systems that influenced the transition event and approach. Both the core category and the five key categories, with their additional interacting and overlapping properties and dimensions, is further explained in the subsequent sections.

### The Process of College to Post-College Transition

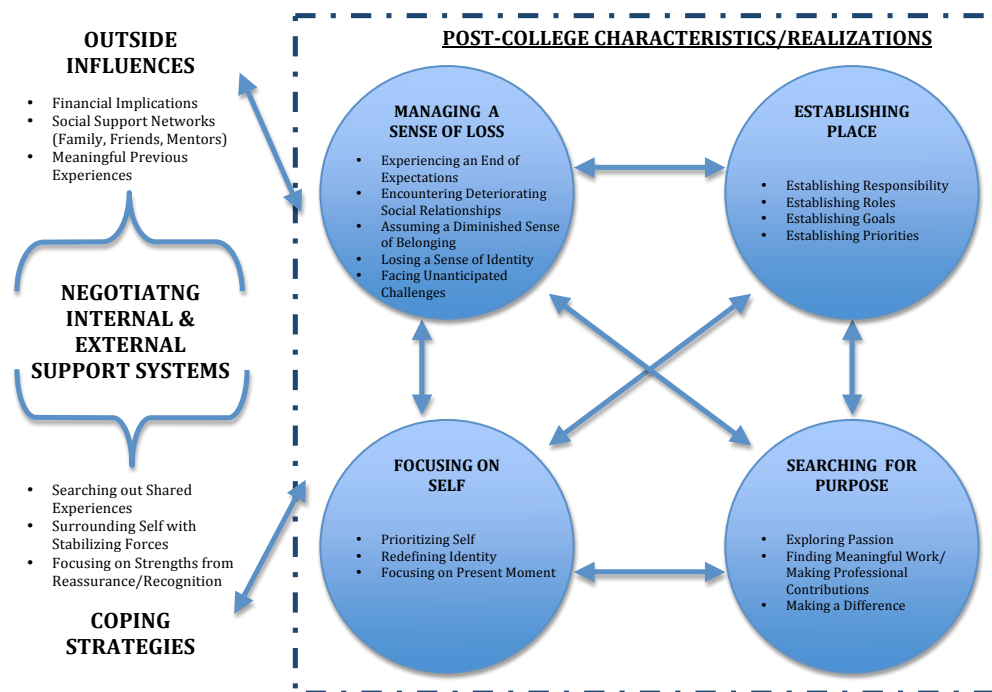


Figure 1. Navigating the Post-College Transition Process: Experiencing A Series of Realizations.

#### Figuring it Out

The core category that emerged as a result of the participants’ experiences and stories constructed the post-college transition as a period of “figuring it out,” or more specifically, the process of navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters.



Not only were they trying to figure out where they wanted to go, but for the first time they needed to figure out how to get to where they wanted to go. As Karen said regarding the period of time after graduation, “For the first time in your life you are just like, what do I do next? So, you create your own path for the first time really.”

The transition period following college was a very active phase for the participants. The recent graduates in this study were “navigating,” “facilitating,” “managing,” “initiating,” “establishing,” “searching,” “contributing,” “focusing,” “prioritizing,” and “deciding” during the transition. They moved through the post-college period while actively and simultaneously managing loss, establishing place, focusing of self, and searching for purpose. As the participants actively experienced these four transition characteristics, they reevaluated self and witnessed the evolution of personal interests, goals, values, and passions contributing to the individual process of figuring it out. Their ability to negotiate external and internal support systems contributed to the overall process of figuring it out. The following are examples, in the participant’s own words, exemplifying the process of figuring it out.

**Winston.** Winston was an engineering major in college and immediately began working as an engineer upon graduation. However, he was unconvinced that this was his passion and frequently talked in both interviews about how he might like a career in the financial sector. During our first interview he told me about his job stating, “I used to think lots about what else I can do. I still go through those thoughts, like, do I really still want to be an engineer? I think maybe I want to do financial something.” As he weighed his passion, his responsibilities, and his commitment to his family he ultimately decided to prioritize his family and did not look further into switching careers. He went on to say,

“I would like the ability to try something else, but I am content where I am. It is keeping me busy and most importantly it is paying for the house and supporting everybody.”

Winston encountered, and navigated, a series of realizations about self and what matters and ultimately chose to prioritize security for his family.

**Giselle.** For Giselle, finding a job was dependent on the discovery of her values. Giselle determined what she wanted professionally while simultaneously exploring her values. Giselle decided after graduate school to pursue Human Resource jobs in the corporate world opposed to within the federal government because she felt the federal government did not hold HR jobs in high enough regards. However, she also went on to say, “And in corporate America I felt my values didn’t line up with the finance industry, the pharmaceutical industry, or technology. Manufacturing was where my values lined up so I had to go all out and go to a plant.” Giselle also talked about she recently figured out she would like to be in a relationship and hoped to find someone special soon. In talking about her future goals she continued by saying:

In two years, I should be promoted to an HR manager. . . . Beyond that, I don’t really care what I do in regards to being a manager at a bigger facility or becoming a director as long. I don’t really care as long as I am a manager. I decided I just want to have a family, and have a husband. And be able to raise kids who are still amazing and get involved in a church and their school and be able to make an impact on my community in that way and on the children that I am raising and on my husband. I don’t really, I don’t really care what I do beyond the HR manager role. I just want to get to that point where I am on my own, where I make the strategic decisions.

**Karen.** Karen felt she had a good idea in the years after college in regards to what she wanted both socially and in regards to personal relationships saying, “I definitely don’t feel lost socially, and I don’t feel lost in my relationship.” She was content in her relationship with her partner and got married in-between our first and second interview; she also referred to her close group of friends as her family. As the same time, Karen felt overwhelmed in terms of trying to figure out what she wants professionally, especially compared to while in college, as she moved through the transition process. Karen said:

I didn’t feel like I needed to know where I was going professionally while in college because you are supposed to feel things out and you don’t need to know what you are doing. But, I definitely feel more...I don’t necessarily feel lost in my direction because I do have a direction, I think I am just overwhelmed by how much I need to do to get where I might want to go professionally. So, I am overwhelmed I guess, which I don’t think I really felt in college.

Karen reflected on the process of figuring out what she wants to do professionally and described her overall transition experience in the following way:

I think a lot of people get stuck - they get stuck in their working life and it’s hard to go back to school, that is what I found so far. It is hard to get out of this cycle I have been in. I keep saying that I am applying to school and if I actually make it happen and if I go down that path, I shouldn’t say if, WHEN I make that happen it will be great, but who knows. But, I would say emotionally and socially my transition has been fine, and successful. Professionally I think I am definitely on a path and I have a job and I am only two years out of school, so it’s not like I am

15 years out of school and not knowing what I am doing with my life. But, I think I have to remind myself of that because sometimes I just want to jump to the end. You want to jump to the final chapter of the book. You just want to kind of know where you are going and be and know what you are going to be doing. Sometimes I feel that way, that I just want to be there. But, you don't want to jump to the final chapter because a part of the process is trying to figure everything out and testing out different things, ...and reading the story.

**Connor.** Connor was also trying to figure out his professional path during the course of the interviews. His experience working in a national service job taught him that he is passionate about certain causes and “the lack of opportunity generally” for others in society. Like Karen, Connor had an idea of what he wanted, but was unsure of what steps to take to get there; he was actively embedded in the process of trying to figure that out. In regards to his career aspirations Connor mentioned in his first interview:

Someday I imagine I will end up in Government because I think that is where I can actually...you have some power and are able to distribute it where you can reach the broadest number of people. Ultimately that is what I would like to do. So, I think someday I will end up in Government, but I don't know how I will get there or what I will do.

In our second interview, Connor talked about how he was starting to prioritize having more of a sense of balance. In our first interview, he reflected at how unexpected it was to find work to be so difficult. He talked about how he experienced a sense of loss in regards to free time and time for self. Over the course of the transition period, and

through navigating a series of realizations about himself and what matters, he talked about how he has started figuring out what it takes to establish better balance. He said:

I mean, a lot of people said things to me last year and I heard them, I didn't listen to them, but I heard them. And then, once the school year stopped, well I was just kind of like in a trance last year and so focused on you know, work. I got some space from that and I could reflect on it and could think a little more deeply about what everybody's been saying to me. I made these realizations and these decisions for myself. My sister and my family were instrumental because they were very concerned about my lifestyle last year, and my sister said something that definitely gave me pause. I mean, I was so entranced with everything that was going on, but they bothered me, what they told me, in terms of how they viewed I was spending my time. So, I had some time and could think more on these things, I realized the accuracy of what they had been saying.

Although Connor was in the midst of figuring out how to thrive in the present, he was simultaneously trying to figure out his future. As Connor continues through his post-college transition, he will continue to navigate a series of realizations in order to figure out what is next. Connor went on to say the following about his future:

I mean I've thought more about it, but I don't know if I have any more of a coherent answer. I, I looked into grad school; I think I'll go some day, but I'm not going next year. I had a phone interview yesterday for a teaching job at a charter school. I've looked into going abroad. I still play around with the idea of writing a book. I still think a lot of things, but I don't have a coherent answer. I don't know is the short answer.

**Nicole.** During the second interview, Nicole talked about how she felt confident with her roles as both graduate student and mother, the two roles that defined her. The relationship with Morgan's father had recently ended and she was actively trying to figure out what else was important to her and what else she wanted to do in life. Nicole mentioned how she had always assumed she would go into teaching. However, during our second interview (three-fourths of the way through her graduate program and five months before graduation) Nicole is now rethinking her career choice. She questioned, "Is that [education] the path I want to take right now? Is that really...is that really where my interest would be best served?" During our second interview Nicole was still actively navigating her future; her process of figuring it out was evident in the following discussion:

I think the biggest thing I see right now is kind of figuring out what I want to do and how I want to go about doing that. I'm not really sure what it is that I want to do, but I pretty much have five months to figure that out and hopefully find a job. So, I am stopping and asking myself, 'what's important, what do I want, what am I willing to do, and what am I gonna do when I get there?'

As described by the recent graduates in this study, the college to post-college transition process suggests a time when recent college graduates actively navigate a series of realizations about self and what matters. However, the results of this study suggest that this process of "figuring it out" does not begin until after college graduation. As Anne said, "in college you only start skimming the surface but after college is when you really start to figure it out." In our first interview a year after leaving college, Victoria talked about starting the process of "figuring it out" having said, "I am just trying to get

to grad school and figure it out.” This study further explored what encompassed the process of figuring it out and revealed four key categories that characterized the transition experience and influenced the navigation process. Specifically, participants in this study navigated post-college transition while managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose. Additionally, the recent graduates in this study also negotiated various support systems during the post-college transition. The participant’s accounts of experiencing the four transition characteristics while negotiating support systems set the context for the central theme of post-college transition: navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters.

### **Post-College Transition Characteristics – A Series of Realizations**

The recent graduates in this study experienced a series of realizations about self and what matters anchored in the occurrence of four post-college transition characteristics: a sense of loss, the establishment of place, a focus on self, and a search for purpose. Each of these four key categories, or transition characteristics, intersects and overlaps. The transition characteristics and corresponding properties are not sequential; instead they occur simultaneously, some more pervasive than others. Although all of the participants in this study were actively navigating these four characteristics, the occurrence of each characteristic differed depending on the person. To best capture the *active* transition characteristics as experienced by the participants, the key categories are defined below using active terminology.

#### **Managing Loss**

The most prevalent experience in each of the participant’s college to post-college transition was a profound sense of loss, which led to the emergence of the first key

category, *managing loss*. The recent graduates in this study were actively working through and managing the immense sense of loss that they experienced post-college graduation. The recent graduates experienced isolation and loneliness while facing unanticipated and unexpected challenges; they experienced a loss of status and understanding as they moved from the position of expert in college to the position of novice post-college. Up to this point in life, no other experience paralleled the post-college transition and the unfamiliarity that resulted. Connor talked about having never experienced anything “as crazy” as the transition from college. Meanwhile, Sonia talked about the void in her life that emerged after leaving college. For Sonia, Connor, and the other participants, the sense of familiarity that had previously always existed was suddenly gone.

The findings suggest that each of the participants had to manage elements of loss during the post-college period, and the difficulty encountered was unavoidable. Connor’s story about his transition from college to post-college life exemplifies the overall challenge of the transition:

I was unprepared for what I was plunged into. ... If you want to take the plunging thing literally, you graduate from college and you jump into the deep end and you’re treading water for a really long time. You don’t even look at what else is happening in the pool or the ocean, or how big the pool or the ocean is, or where your friends who used to be swimming right next to you are, or anything because you’re just trying to tread water.

Razac’s account of his transition experience captured specific aspects of managing loss during the transition. He reflected:



The transition of coming out of college, that was a major step backwards. I am living at home and my independence is limited. And also not having a job for a while. And my relationships with my friends and my social life also took a major hit. I didn't have any money so I wasn't able to go out or anything like that.

Wondering about my whole viewpoint on life, and wondering how things ended up here. It was a really low point. It took a major toll - and feeling alone. ... I couldn't help but to lose sleep about it and feel depressed knowing that my plan just sort of fell apart. Without a job, living at home. I know it sounds like I am dwelling on something that is very small.

Feelings of isolation, a loss of freedom, feeling misunderstood, losing a sense of self, and experiencing life not going according to plan were all prominent throughout the participant's stories. Specifically, the following dimensions were present in narratives of the participants representing the category of managing loss: moving from expected life situations to unexpected life situations, dealing with a loss of social relationships, lacking a sense of belonging, losing a sense of identity, and facing unanticipated challenges.

**Experiencing an end to a sequence of expectations.** According to the participants, life was a series of expectations up through graduation. Each of the participants expected to go to college; it was a definite component of the life path. As a result, college graduation marked the first time that life was not predictable. Rocky explained:

I still don't know what I want to do when I grow up exactly, but I always knew that college was the next step. Up until college graduation, you go station to station. Life is plotted out to a degree. And then college graduation hits and

boom, you can go to grad school, you can get a job, you can go free load off your parents, you can do what I did and stay away from your parents place. There is no time frame specified. ... That is weird; it is a weird mindset to transition into. You knew you were going to graduate from high school and you knew you were going to graduate from college, but now what?

Each of the participants in this study always assumed they would be college-bound, including the first-generation college students. Victoria was the first person in her family to go to college and stated, “The first time I could understand what they [family] were saying to me it was, ‘you are going to college.’ I always knew I was going to college...there was never a reason, I never thought about it.” Though Razac saw friends drop out of high school, Razac also mentioned how he always knew he was college bound ever since he was a kid. He told me that college “was just a transition in your life that you do. You go to school and then you get a job. I never questioned it.”

For most of these participants, there was no immediate need to think about what was next until college graduation. For those few who had post-college plans during college, it was a very narrow and vague focus with only the immediate future in consideration. In describing her transition experience, Karen emphasized this point and stated:

Your whole entire life you know what the next step is. You go from nursery school up until graduating college. I never had to think about what the next step was; the path was always laid out for me. Then, all of a sudden you are just thrown into this world and you just have no idea what to do. It is really discouraging.

As Karen stated, college graduation was the first time these participants had to really think about what the next step was. The recent college graduates moved from a period of expected to unexpected, from known to unknown. For them, the period of time after college encompassed a lack of awareness and understanding. Bobby talked about the difference from college to the time of the interview and explained how in college he had specific goals but now he does not know “what is around the corner.” He went on to talk about the uncertainty that appeared after college and how it was endless and daunting.

**Encountering deteriorating social relationships.** The participants in this study were not only navigating through a period of uncertainty, but they were also faced with unanticipated challenges, including a shift in social relationships. Changing social relationships, primarily the unexpected loss of social relationships, was incredibly prevalent in the transition stories of the participants. Winston explains, “With these life changing events, you lose some of that close friendship with people. When I was at school and seeing these guys everyday I was talking to them about everything. Now I see them once a month – maybe.” Anne also struggled with the deteriorating social relationships and described her changing experience in the following way:

I think my core group of friends, once we graduated we all had the expectation that we were going to stay in touch and stay really close even though we were moving away. I was actually the only one who really moved away and because I was so isolated I was really reaching out to everyone. All the relationships that I built in college started to falter a little bit. And, I started to feel like no one was really supporting me. Not many people understood how isolated I was and no one saw what type of world I was living in.

Of all the challenges encountered during the post-college transition, Emily felt that maintaining friendships “has actually been the most difficult part in the transition.” She went on to talk about how people at this stage of life are selfish and that can be hard on friendships. Like Emily, Sonia had a difficult time with the shifting social relationships and referenced it was one of the most difficult aspects of the transition. She said, “I thought a lot of people would make more of an effort to stay in touch. I think that was the main thing that I was kind of surprised about. I really thought people would make an effort.”

**Assuming a diminished sense of belonging.** The participants in this study reflected on not feeling a sense of belonging during the post-college transition. Not only was this diminished sense of belonging in part the result of changing social networks, but the participants repeatedly referenced how college had an automatic and built-in sense of belonging that was quickly lost upon college graduation. Giselle talked about how much easier it was in college to have an established sense of belonging while Karen specifically described her experience as one of “being lost.” Connor mentioned how he does not know his place right now; he feels weak connections to many aspects of life but no strong sense of belonging anywhere. Specifically he stated, “I don’t know what I fit in, or if I have a role or whatever. I guess maybe that is part of the problem. I feel it weakly with a bunch of different groups.”

Sonia talked about how in college she experienced a sense of belonging through student organization involvement but had yet to find a sense of belonging in law school. She recalled:

I think once I got involved in my student organization [in college] that the purpose became more of finding who I am. I found my identity; I found a sense of belonging at college. ... It was just some of the best experiences of my life. I talk about it all the time, I talk about it in interviews, I've talked about it on my law school applications. I mean I have talked about it everywhere because it was so important to me. That is just who I am. But here, now. I don't feel like I have a sense of belonging. There is no real sense of unity.

Giselle meanwhile found her sense of belonging during college through religion and community service. However, those aspects of her college life were no longer prominent now as a working professional. As Giselle said, it "was easier to be in that environment fully during college."

For Emily, a sense of belonging was equated with a sense of home. In college, she felt a sense of home. And, though she asserted how she assumes a sense of home will be established again in the future, she does not feel "at home" right now. She stated, "I haven't made [this city] my own, because I don't necessarily feel like I live here, I feel like I go to school here." Karen also felt like she would have a better sense of belonging if she felt like she had an established home. When talking about where she lives and where she might move, Karen said, "Once you move and settle yourself somewhere else, that becomes home. But, I haven't found that yet...it feels temporary." This feeling of temporariness and impermanence was also relevant for Razac. He specifically referenced how it was hard to establish a sense of belonging because his life is so transient and temporary.

**Losing a sense of identity.** In addition to a solid sense of belonging, the participants in this study reflected on feeling a strong sense of identity during college. However, the participants in this study shed light on the fact that they felt lost after graduation and often questioned their identity that formed during college. Anne emphasized:

I think in college I was finding out who I was, finding out what I valued and how I perceive the world. College gave me the academic foundation to really understand how the world functioned and what was my place in it and how I wanted to change the world. So, I think it was very sort of ideological in a sense. And then when I graduated it was more like, “OK so is this true?,” you know – what I’ve learned about the world and also about myself. I think in college I was discovering the best parts of myself and also what motivated me. But, then you take away the safety net of college, and being around people your age who are interested in the same things you are, and you’re placed in, in this sort of unpredictable environment. So with this sort of unpredictable context you figure out more about the contradictions of yourself within yourself.

Rocky talked about losing a sense of identity in terms of losing his college “status.” He commented on how he was a student leader during college but after college you lose your connections. During college, Rocky was involved as a Resident Assistant and within his fraternity and was able to establish himself as an experienced leader, especially to younger students. However, after college he talked about being “At the bottom of the totem pole.” Important to the post-college transition experience for the participants was the need to redefine who they were in the context of a recent college graduate. In order

to do this, the recent graduates undergoing the post-college transition process spent significant time focusing on self and establishing roles, both of which are detailed in later sections.

For most of the participants, redefining self after college included losing a sense of adolescence and transitioning into an adult role after college. Winston, who within three years of graduation is both a husband and father, mentioned that after college “it was going from a college kid to an adult.” The recent graduates in this study perceived adulthood as not occurring until after college graduation. Winston, like other participants, talked explicitly about how college students are not adults. For instance, the participants reflected on how moving from “college kid” to “adult” also meant losing a sense of youth and irresponsibility. This emergent concept of transitioning to adulthood is further explored and described in chapter five.

The participants often reflected on real responsibility did not fall upon them until after college graduation. Connor mourned the loss of his carefree lifestyle talking about how a sense of responsibility was the most challenging aspect of his transition and he missed being able to have “little responsibility” like while in college. He went on to say, “In college, if you do irresponsible things it is almost expected because there is very little responsibility. And, I think I was a more than average responsible student.” Leaving behind the sense of irresponsibility that accompanied college was a loss that was experienced and managed during the transition.

**Facing unanticipated challenges.** Though the newly established responsibility proved difficult for the recent graduates in this study, it was not necessarily an unexpected outcome of college graduation. Connor and others referenced their

perspective of college as the opportunity to be irresponsible. However, there were many unanticipated challenges that arose after graduation. Stories frequently centered on the fact that life did not go according to plan following graduation, such as the unexpected difficulty of maintaining friendships or the loss of feeling a sense of belonging.

Additionally, Karen, whose Jewish faith was still very important to her, had yet to find a fit within a religious community like in college. Even though there are a number of local synagogues nearby, she explained, “I don’t really feel part of any community. . . . We still observe the Sabbath and have Friday night dinner with friends, but I don’t have the Hillel to go to like in college. I don’t have that here.” Not only did the recent graduates in this study experience a loss of belonging, identity, and status, but also the losses themselves were unexpected, which made the transition more difficult.

These unanticipated challenges, or “life unexpected,” were rampant in the participants’ accounts of the post-college transition. Not only did many specifically reference “the safety net of college” being gone, but they also all acknowledged how life after graduation no longer went according to plan. This was definitely the case for Nicole and her post-college experience. After graduating in 2006, she planned to work for a year before going back to graduate school. In her first year out, she worked a few part-time jobs while applying to graduate school. Soon after deciding to start graduate school, Nicole learned she was pregnant and gave birth to her daughter during her first semester. Nicole described that transition in the following way:

I was kind of disappointed because I always had this really set idea that I will do undergrad and then, bam, I will go to grad school and, bam, I will have this fantastic job and life will be perfect. But, it didn’t happen that way.



For Eric, it was the unanticipated lack of structure in the post-college environment that was particularly challenging. He talked about going from college “with a very structured environment” to “the real world” that no longer had the built in structure. He elaborated stating, “I enjoy structure. ... There are a lot of structures that are in place when you are a student, both academically and socially. You really lose that.”

Many other unanticipated challenges described by the participants centered on professional hardships. These included not getting a job, not being good at a job, and not getting into graduate school. For Bobby, one of the most challenging and unanticipated aspects of the transition was moving into a job where he was no longer an expert. He talked about this experience in the following way:

It’s been difficult because all of a sudden you are at the bottom of the totem pole again. When you are a senior in college you know everything pretty much. You know how to navigate through college, you know how to play the system, you know exactly who to talk to in what department to get your way. ... The most challenging part was realizing that I was not the best at what I was doing anymore. I think that going into the working world now and realizing that you might be good but you are not the best, that was really hard to reconcile.

For other recent college graduates in the study, finding a job was more difficult than anticipated. Victoria talked about this unexpected difficulty stating, “When I graduated I actually had a really hard time finding work. I sent about 60-80 applications and resumes in total and only one job responded back to me.” Razac also unexpectedly struggled to find a job and stated, “I worked so hard to plan for this *not* to happen, and then for it to

happen.” For Sonia, she faced the unanticipated challenge of not initially getting admitted into law school. She described her experience in the following way:

A big thing for me was *not* getting into law school. That was a huge event for me ... When people ask what you do, I had already said that I was going to law school. When I didn’t get in, my parents were like, “”what are you going to do with your life, what are you going to do?” And I didn’t know. I just didn’t have an answer. So that was a big letdown for me.

Though Giselle, Rocky, Connor, and Winston all found jobs with some amount of ease, they all faced unexpected challenges at work. Connor stated, “I wasn’t expecting how relentless the work is,” while Rocky felt even though he studied hard at work, he could not perform like he expected. He recalled, “I was just doing terrible work. I was trying really hard but ... I just kept fumbling with work for about three weeks.” As the result of unexpected challenges in the work environment, Winston changed jobs within his first year of the transition. Giselle also did not have the work experience she anticipated; she mentioned, “I wanted to quit for the first three months. ... I knew there would be a learning curve but I didn’t realize it would be so emotional of a learning curve.”

The participants in this study faced numerous unanticipated and unexpected challenges. This was just one way they experienced loss after graduation. Reflections on areas of loss during the post-college transition were frequent and common in the stories of the participants. Winston referenced the loss of free time; Razac who moved back in with his parents referenced his loss of independence. A loss of stability, a loss of friends and relationships, a loss of freedom, a loss of anticipated outcomes, and a loss of

understanding and expectations are just a few areas of loss that were prevalent in the transition experiences of the participants. The participants in this study had a variety of coping strategies to assist with managing the loss including: searching out shared experiences, surrounding themselves with stabilizing forces, and focusing on personal strengths as the result of reassurance and recognition. The ability to negotiate various support systems and coping strategies during the post-college transition is described more in a subsequent section.

### **Establishing Place**

The participants placed a significant amount of focus on establishing their post-college life. This translated to the second key category of *establishing place* and includes establishing responsibilities, establishing roles, establishing goals, and establishing priorities. As most of the participants mentioned, up until college graduation, life was designed and plotted out to a degree. Giselle talked about how “things just kind of happened in college.” Meanwhile, Eric talked about how he realized at the end of the summer following graduation that life was happening. He talked about how “all of a sudden, there is this one semester where you graduate...and the end of the summer, that is when it really hit me.”

As the recent graduates in this study managed loss, particularly surrounding a sense of belonging, they were simultaneously facilitating a process of establishing their post-college life. Karen talked about the intentionality of establishing herself after college in the following account:

I graduated college and I knew I had to get my life together. ... Part of graduating from college is establishing how you want to live your life separate from your

parents. ... I think I really established my own ways much more out of college than while in college. As much as college is great, you are living in a bubble. I don't know, I was just living with my friends and we did everything together. Now for the first time it is, how do I want to do it?

**Establishing responsibility.** As mentioned earlier, a newly established sense of responsibility emerged after college graduation for the participants. Winston proclaimed that the newly established responsibility after college coincided with leaving behind the status of “the college kid.” The element of establishing responsibility was widespread in the participant’s descriptions of the college to post-college transition. Winston reflected on how “in college you can make mistakes and you’ll have time to change them,” while Sonia referred to having “no real sense of responsibility” during college. Razac also mentioned how the aspect of responsibility struck him during the post-college transition. He explained, “making the transition to adult life it hit me, I am not young, I am not a teenager anymore, I can’t really do that. I have responsibilities so I can’t just abandon them to have fun all the time.” Although the notion of transitioning to adulthood is discussed in chapter five, the concept of establishing responsibility during the post-college transition was a prevalent factor in the category of establishing place.

Connor frequently talked about the change in responsibility during the post-college transition in both interviews and how his level of responsibility “went through the roof” following graduation. He specifically contrasted his new responsibility to the amount of responsibility he had in college explaining, “college should be a very selfish time period of no responsibilities, or very little. Most people have very few except to learn and have a great time and then you go to graduate.” As the recent graduates

navigated the post-college transition, the emergence of responsibility and need to establish responsibility was often difficult. Connor described the challenge of this new responsibility:

I think really it is just the amount of responsibility that is so challenging. I think you can say that regardless of what job you get just because most people have very little responsibility in college so as soon as you leave you have more. ... There is not much carefree about my existence these days. And that's kind of, I mean, don't cry me a river but there is something tragic if you are only 23 and there is not a lot of carefree about your life because it just gets less carefree supposedly from here on after.

Responsibility was established in a variety of ways with varying levels of importance and focus. Though reluctant, Connor established responsibility. For others, responsibility was established out of the concern for family. Anne talked about feeling a responsibility as part of her culture to contribute more to her family. For Winston, his responsibility was established in relation to his role as a husband and now father. For Nicole, it was the new responsibility that came along with being a young mother. However, Nicole also felt because she was still a graduate student “there's still this little bubble that I exist in” and the responsibilities aside from motherhood were not yet “grown up responsibilities.”

The existence of newly found responsibility within the professional realm was not only significant, but was a new experience for many of the participants. Eric referenced how he has enjoyed the fact that “work and responsibilities have increased” while Giselle talked often of the learning curve and new responsibilities at work. Responsibility was also established in terms of lifestyle for many of the participants. Victoria and Eric,

among others, talked about responsibility in terms of newly established financial responsibility including paying rent and bills. Emily talked about establishing herself financially after college specifically mentioning how she was underprepared. She mentioned, “There is not a lot at either the undergraduate or graduate level around financial counseling. I don’t feel like anyone teaches you how to write checks or balance a checkbook.”

**Establishing roles.** For many of the participants in this study, their newly established responsibilities were often the result of roles that were established following graduation. For instance, as a result of his new roles as a husband and father, Winston explained, “With both of those things comes a heck of a lot of responsibility that I probably wasn’t ready for.” He also referenced the responsibility that came with his newly established role as a homeowner. For Winston, the most challenging aspect of his transition from college to post-college life was getting used to all of his new roles. Like Winston, the participants in this study established numerous new roles – that came with new responsibilities - after college graduation. New roles that emerged included that of professional, partner, and parent. Giselle’s focus after college was on her career and she established herself in the role of a professional. She moved away from friends and family to best establish herself as a professional. Meanwhile, Nicole talked about her new role as both a mother and a graduate student. She mentioned how she knew it would be a lot of responsibility to take on both, but it was something she wanted to do and cares about both new roles.

For some participants, establishing roles helped fill the void that was left as the result of a diminished sense of belonging after college. For example, Anne talked about

how she was establishing herself as a poet attending weekly open-microphone nights to establish herself in the local poetry scene. She mentioned, “The one consistent thing that I really do is write. I think the other parts of my life are going to change.” Many of the participants also talked about establishing roles to forge a post-college identity. In our first interview, Emily mentioned how she felt like her college education expired two weeks into dental school and so she had to work to re-establish herself. By the second interview, Emily felt she accomplished that and understood her new role. She stated, “I think I have a good sense of identity at the dental school. I think that I have a good sense that this is my role and how I want to help people.” Both Eric and Rocky talked about how their post-college role straddled both college and post-college life. For example, Rocky’s first year after college still incorporated many aspects of his college role. He said:

My weekends are pretty similar to what they were in college, a lot of socializing. ... My first year out of college, I still had a girlfriend who was a senior there so I spent a lot of weekends down there. I was back in the place I went to school two nights a week doing similar things I was doing when in school. I definitely still had one foot in college and one foot in post-college life at that point.

However, Rocky’s roles expanded throughout the course of the study as he moved through the post-college transition. During the study, his relationship with a new significant other evolved and he intentionally thought more about his role as a professional. At the time of our last interview, he was planning on applying to graduate school and proposing to his girlfriend. He was also about to move to Europe to be with

his girlfriend. Rocky recognized how he was establishing himself in the role of partner and acknowledged, “things are gonna change once I’m engaged.”

Many of the participants became established in the role of “partner” after college graduation. For example, Winston got married between graduation and our first interview, Karen got married during the study, and Rocky was on the verge of becoming engaged as of our final interview. However, even those participants not involved in a significant relationship talked about establishing the role of significant other, or partner. For many, this was something they truly hoped to establish before long. Eric, Sonia, Giselle, Bobby, and Victoria all acknowledged how a relationship was missing from their life but they hoped to be part of an established partnership shortly. Victoria, who stated, “I hope to be in a relationship. That would be lovely,” went on to talk about how her strong desire to be part of a relationship surprised her.

**Establishing goals.** As the recent graduates in the study redefined their identity, they not only focused on what they wanted in terms of relationship status, but they simultaneously focused on what they wanted in terms of professional ambitions, personal desires, and social aspirations as well. For the participants, the post-college transition differed from the college years in that it became a period of establishing professional, personal, social, and relationship-centered goals. As Rocky explained his post-college transition, his story incorporated the key elements of both establishing place and establishing goals.

I think the period where you change the most, and learn the most about yourself is right after college, mostly because it is not structured anymore. You select what you do. After college you learn what is important to you financially, what is



important to you socially, and you are trying to figure out how you are going to advance professionally.

Like Rocky, the recent graduates in this study were trying to figure out bigger life plans and what goals were important to them in the post-college context.

As the participants navigated a series of realizations after college, important to the process of figuring it out was the establishment and integration of professional, personal, social, and relationship goals. For instance, Bobby not only talked about trying to figure out what he is passionate about in relation to work, but he also talked about figuring out what matters to him socially, having said, “I think just trying to figure out who your good friends are, that is really challenging.” For Karen, she felt a sense of social and relationship satisfaction, but was trying to figure out what she wanted both professionally and personally, particularly in terms of religion and family. She inquisitively stated:

I still wonder about how in the future I will live my life. I think I will want to be a little more religious than I am now. Raising a family and everything because that is how I grew up and I really valued it. The traditions and the customs and the culture, I really enjoyed it.

Not only were goals established during the post-college transition, but they also evolved throughout the post-college transition. For example, Rocky initially defined himself as a “social guy” and in his first interview talked repeatedly about establishing social success and satisfaction. For him, social status was an easier goal to both figure out and achieve than professional or personal goals. However, by our second interview Rocky started to look at the greater context of his life direction. Having established

himself as part of a partnership, he talked about how his relationship influenced his goals and what he wanted personally, professionally, and socially:

I want to make an attempt to have a job that I believe in. But I definitely want to take a chance. ... I think having decided that Elise is gonna be my future wife sort of made me make some decisions quicker and think harder about things and decide that [healthcare administration] is definitely a worthwhile pursuit. I have the clarity of mind in knowing who I'm gonna be with the rest of my life, now I've gotta make sure I can figure out what, or at least start making moves towards what. I foresee a little bit of a shift in my social life. It's not a dissatisfaction, but just seeing the writing on the wall about how things are gonna change once I am engaged. I am very much satisfied with this young lady of mine. I could go on and on, but I couldn't be happier with her.

For the participants, the transition from college facilitated a process of establishing life goals while still searching and trying to "figure it out." Bobby described establishing goals after college and reflected:

My goal in life originally when I went into college was to get a high paying finance job, work really hard, and just make money. But now, after working for a year I see that my goals have shifted and I just really want to find something that I am passionate about. And, you know, it also needs to sustain my lifestyle...but having something that I am passionate about is a lot more important to me than necessarily making money for the sake of making money. I feel like at this point no one really knows what they want to do, I don't know what I want to do and it is just a matter of searching out what you are passionate about.

Though Bobby could talk at length about both the professional and personal goals he was establishing, it became clear that his priority was on figuring out his professional goals. However, other participants prioritized social, personal, or for a few - relationship-oriented goals.

**Establishing priorities.** As goals were established, roles developed, and a sense of responsibility emerged, so did competing priorities. Rocky, for instance, talked about sacrificing his social life to establish himself in a relationship and career path. The participants in this study found themselves establishing priorities like never before. For instance, in addition to getting married and establishing herself as a partner, Karen also began to establish herself as a professional. However, this did not come without dilemma and the resulting need to prioritize. After feeling stuck in her job, she took a new similar position in a different department with the same organization. She contemplated making a vertical move, which would have come with supervisory roles and a pay raise; however it would have also meant less time to dedicate to her new marriage. As a result, she decided to make a lateral move. Karen explained:

I had this dilemma for what is better for my future, for my career, for my eventual grad school applications. So, I went back and forth about it and I decided that I wanted to focus on my quality of life. And, even though it was a lateral move I still think I could grow in it and get my life back.

The concept of sacrifice and dilemma was common in the experiences of the participants' post-college graduation. As roles and responsibilities were established, sacrifices and choices needed to be made in unparalleled new ways. As Nicole explained, "the stakes are a lot higher now, and the degree to which other people are

affected; it is just not the same.” She went on to say, “I may ask for other people’s opinions, but when it comes down to it, I have to make the decision. I have to live with it and that’s how I base my choices.” Like Nicole, the recent college graduates in this study talked extensively about how choices and priorities at this magnitude were relatively new concepts after graduation. In addition, conversation about sacrifice was common throughout the participants’ experience. Connor sacrificed happiness; Sonia sacrificed time with family; Karen sacrificed potential promotion; Winston sacrificed a desired career change; Giselle sacrificed a romantic relationship; Rocky sacrificed his job to move to Europe to be with partner; and Victoria and Emily sacrificed friends. The participants sacrificed some aspect of their life as the result of establishing priority.

Although in law school, Sonia sacrificed time spent with family and because of the distance and necessity to prioritize on law school she often had to miss big family events. As a result, Sonia recognized that being geographically close to her family was important to her. Sonia stated, “I am the only child so it is important for me to stay near my parents just so I could see them and my family.” She planned to return home following graduation even though she realized that by prioritizing family she would limit herself professionally. Like Sonia, Victoria contemplated the role she wanted to establish in regards to her family. Victoria’s mom passed away shortly after college graduation, but her dad and grandma still live where she grew up. She was faced with the dilemma of “living her dream” in a new city while her father was back “home” taking care of her grandma. She chose to stay in her new city to attend graduate school and she talked extensively in her second interview how her priority of school and as a student.

Giselle worked to establish herself as a career person, at the detriment to her relationships. A focus on career was her main priority; Giselle explained:

I had to sacrifice relationships. I lost all of my friends. I am still somewhat close to some of them, but mostly dating wise I had to sacrifice the relationships that might have lasted would I have stayed where I went to college. Had I stayed in Tennessee, the last place I worked, I would still be dating someone right now. So, I think that is the element where I have had to sacrifice.

Unlike Giselle, Eric prioritized maintaining friendships after college. Additionally, his involvement as a performer was “really significant in terms of me keeping that social structure.” Bobby also talked about how he had to make priorities in regards to his social life. Bobby was simultaneously establishing and prioritizing the role he plays in his various circle of friends now that he was out of college. He talked quite a bit about the difficulty juggling two sets of friends compared to during college. He said:

I think juggling different sets of social circles has been really tough. In college it was really easy to juggle multiple sets of friends because you could go out on a Wednesday night and it wasn't a big deal. So, you could have a different circle of friends every night and it didn't matter. Now, on the weeknights I'll go to dinner with my best friends and grab a bite to eat or cook or something, and then on weekends they want to go out with me and my other circle of friends wants to go out with me. I think the fact that I straddle 2 communities...it is really difficult because sometimes you just have to go with one or the other.

Winston prioritized family during the transition and talked about how he intentionally sacrificed career growth because he is “a family person” and must prioritize

the roles of husband and father that he established after college. Winston talked about how he had an interest in making a potential career change to the financial industry, but chose not to because his priority was that of a father and husband. He mentioned how even though he “would like the ability to try something else, I am content where I am. It is keeping me busy and most important it’s paying for the house and supporting everybody.” It is evident from Winston’s interviews that his priority was that of a father and husband. He described his experience prioritizing family during the post-college transition in the following way:

I am definitely a family person – a family guy, family dad – that’s what I have decided. I don’t think I knew that in college. In college I thought, you know, I’m gonna have a nice car and I’d like to have a real nice job and be CEO of some big company. ... Everybody can’t be everything I guess. You kind of have to pick something that you want to do and go with it. ... In a perfect world I would love to do that. I just get more rewards from family than I do at work. It’s more important to me. I mean, I do work to make money and so that we can have benefits and things like that. But for me, I want to be a dad to these children and a husband to my wife and you know, I think that is very important. Like I said, if I wasn’t in this position, who knows? ... This is what I decided and so I’m committed 100% to it.

Although each of the participant’s established priorities during the post-college transition, there was variety among what was prioritized. Anne, for instance, placed an emphasis on her poetry and had yet to find a job because she was waiting for one that allowed her the time and ability to work on her poetry. As a result, however, she felt

some internal conflict because she also thought she should probably “step up and get a job “ to help her family. She talked about how she saw taking care of her family as a burden and was trying to figure out a way to both sacrifice for her family while also living the life she wants for herself. Unlike Winston, Anne talked about choosing her self and personal interests over the needs of her family. However, establishing priorities surrounding personal interest during the post-college transition was not unique to Anne. In all the participants’ stories about the post-college transition, there was an overwhelming focus on prioritizing self.

### **Focusing on Self**

Anne was not the only participant to talk at length about her need to “live life for herself.” This notion of “priority of self” was a constant and considerable theme in the study and evolved into the third key category, *focusing on self*. For some participants, focusing on self equated to being selfish and they discussed the period of time after college as a selfish period. For instance, Emily talked about how after college she became selfish and no longer “wants anyone telling me what I have to do.” She talked about how she no longer put the same energy into focusing on friends or family and instead focused on herself and her goals post-college. She provided her perspective on this period of time proclaiming, “I think everyone at this age of life is very selfish. I am very selfish. I can admit it.”

What was particularly noteworthy in this study was that this focus on self was a new occurrence that arose after graduation according to the recent college graduates. This newly established focus on self resulted in many participants feeling guilty and needing to justify the focus on self. Like Emily, Victoria talked about how she is selfish,

particularly in regards to social situations. Victoria explained the difference between college and post-college life and her lesser focus on others explaining:

I am focusing on myself and that is all that matters. It's horrible to say it but I am very selfish right now. I like being that way because I was always so focused on other people. So, I feel like even though I am very very worried about my family all the time - and I am, always. But, I guess I have this mentality that I am number one. If I am not happy, then no one else is happy. In college I could have cared less about me, I was always willing to put my neck out for you.

However, with the term "selfish" comes a negative connotation. Even though the word "selfish" was used by many of the participants, I use the term, "priority of self" instead to describe the concept of focusing on self and putting self first. As Anne stated, "you just owe it to yourself to be true to you. And people should be allowed to have that space." The process of focusing on self appeared to be necessary in order for these recent graduates to be able to figure it out. The need to focus on self during the post-college transition was indeed prevalent in the experiences of the participants and will be discussed through the concept of prioritizing self.

**Prioritizing self.** As mentioned above, prioritizing self was a new development for many of the recent graduates; a priority that was necessary during the post-college transition in order to establish both place and a post-college identity. As Rocky said, "You've gotta be selfish. You've got to do what's right for you." Though Nicole, Karen, and Winston incorporated others (i.e. partner, child) into their priorities, choices, and actions, they too talked about being "selfish" when it came to decisions and placing a priority on self during the post-college transition. Nicole explained, "I think I've gotten



more selfish in the sense that I used to do things a lot more based on what others felt about it or how they fit into that.” Karen talked often of her difficulty with decision making and ultimately choosing to “be selfish” and prioritize her personal desires. For example she was conflicted over the decision of where she and her husband will eventually move, knowing it might involve moving away from family. She explained:

I think that ultimately I would have to make the decision that is best for me, and for us. But I guess a part of me will always be thinking about you know, how my family is here and it is not just me I have to worry about and whether it would be hard for them if I move far away. But, ultimately, I think when you are making these huge life decisions you have to be selfish because if you are making all these decisions based on all these other people who knows if you will be happy.

This element of prioritizing self emerged in different ways throughout the participant stories. For Karen and Nicole, prioritizing on self appeared in terms of decision making. For Eric, however, it materialized in terms of establishing responsibility. He mentioned:

I really like being able to be responsible for myself; especially you know, not to be too egotistical about it, but I feel like I’m capable of being responsible for myself and that people can trust me to do what I’m expected to do, when I need to do it. It comes from that selfish mentality where it is me being able to do it my way. It is always a little more satisfying if you can take control of something.

Prioritizing self was also a new realization, something that did not fully manifest until after college graduation, according the participants’ stories and experiences. Giselle talked about how it was easier to focus on other priorities including family, friends,

relationships, religion, and service during college, but post-college her priority became herself and her career. She described establishing a priority on self through the following account:

I moved away from home and am making the best career move for me. If they would have moved me to New Mexico I would have gone even though that would have meant I was really far from my family because it is what's best for my career and I have to think about that. I have to make decisions for myself now and I am responsible for my own career. Where as really things just kind of happened I guess in college.

Giselle's description shows how this prioritizing self and making decisions for self is a new construct since college graduation. College, according to Giselle and other participants, was a time where "things just kind of happened" and there was not a need to place an intentional focus on self. This focus on self became both an integral and necessary aspect of the transition experience that contributed to the element of figuring it out. As Razac said:

It comes along with being an adult. It is hard but I understand that I have goals in life and if I want to go there then I know that I need to work on them. It's nice to have fun but in the end I need to focus on *my* goals and *my* dreams. That is what I need to do; it comes along with the territory.

**Redefining identity.** As referenced in the managing loss section, in addition to an increased focus on self, there was a widespread sense of "loss of identity" that took place after graduation for the participants. As a result, these recent graduates underwent a process of redefining their identity. As the participants attempted to figure out and

redefine self, they focused on determining what was important, what they were good at, and how they would get there. As Bobby said:

I think in college you start to discover who you are; it is a time of discovery. But, right after college you start to discover what you are going to do with your life. ... Recent graduates are trying to figure out what it is they want to do. They are figuring out what it is they are good at; are they better at one thing or another. I think these first couple of years out of college are about figuring out who you are and what you want to do with your life.

This belief that college was a period of discovery and defining identity while post-college was a period of rediscovery and redefining identity was common in the narratives of the participants. Anne felt lost following graduation and underwent a process of rediscovering her identity; and as a result she also underwent tremendous personal growth. She reflected:

The first two to three years out of college is really awkward and it makes you grow exponentially. So, that awkward stage of - you know, we're fed this notion that when we graduate you will have a hot apartment and a hot partner and have this amazing job that you love and will stay at for a while. But then you realize, wait, actually maybe not. And you start to wonder, is this what I really want? It's figuring out that this is what I was told my life should look like, or what I should have, and realizing that maybe that isn't really what I want. It is that awkwardness of trying to figure out what it is that you want. It is interesting because I was actually really lost. Before the poetry thing I felt really lost and my way of gaining some kind of perspective and some direction is reading.

The recent graduates in this study reinvented themselves in part after college. Like Bobby and Anne, they began the process of figuring out who they were and what they wanted from life, resulting in a redefined identity. Anne talked about undergoing the process of redefining her identity as an advocate, a daughter, and a friend. However, at the forefront of her redefined identity was that as a poet and explained, “Everything else is going to be shaped around that because that is what is most important to me.” Anne mentioned, “loving the process” of rediscovering who she is stating, “ I really enjoy finding out more about myself now that I am out of college.”

Each of the recent graduates remarked on how their post-college sense of self differed from their college sense of self. For example, in college, Victoria was a student leader and particularly active in her sorority which she continued to be involved with initially following graduation. However, now she has prioritized herself first in an attempt to redefine her identity as a graduate student working towards a professional career path. As she said, “My full time job is to study. Which I love. ... When I was in college I was a student leader. I decided that I need to put my entire focus on my education.” Victoria’s identity was redefined to incorporate that of a graduate student. She went on to say:

My life has been really just being a grad student. I mean, I’ve been trying to give myself a cultural life, and I sort of had a relationship for like six weeks and then now that’s done. ... I have not been to my father’s house since August and I definitely have become selfish but I’m OK. I am very OK with that. ... I made my education my top priority.

Victoria established a new identity, that of a graduate student and prioritized a focus on herself. Meanwhile, Nicole redefined her identity after college as both a mom and graduate student. She reflected on how the post-college transition contributed to her newly defined identity, which contributed to her process of “figuring it out,” stating:

I think school and being a mom really define me now. I really really value those two things. I think they both contribute to why I do things and how I do them. They influence a lot of the choices I think I will make for my future so when it comes to Morgan’s future – do we live here, do we live there, do I take classes earlier or later.

As Razac moved through the transition process, he was undergoing the process of redefining his identity, comparing and contrasting it to his defined identity in college. Specifically, Razac was focusing on what it meant to be a Black male in a post-college world. He talked in detail about his experience as a Black male in college compared to his experience as a black male now that he is out of college. In college, Razac associated closely with other black males at college and within his organizations. He even wrote his senior thesis on what it means to be a Black male growing up in America. However, now that he was out of college and away from the intentional communities that the college environment provided, Razac realized he did not have many close Black male friends. The following exemplifies Razac’s realization of his sense of belonging and identity post-college in relation to the process of figuring it out:

I am still looking and searching and just trying to figure out things. I wish I could identify with other Black males. There are very few that I have close friendships with and on the whole it is not with many. I sort of feel a disconnect with other

Black males in general. I am still trying to figure it out; and trying to figure it out in my identity and what place I have in the whole construction. But, who constructs what it is to be a Black male. That is my own personal journey that I am trying to figure out. This is where I am right now.

**Focusing on the present moment.** As the participants focused on self, redefined their identity, and prioritized self, it was hard for them to focus beyond the immediate and right now. Like Razac above, “This is where I am right now” was a phrase said by numerous participants throughout the study. As other priorities evolved and recent graduates moved through a period of figuring it out, the focus rarely went beyond the present time or the immediate future. Even Winston, who was three years post-graduation at the time of our first interview and was the most focused on the planning for the future still defined himself by “what I do everyday.” He stated that although he has an idea of what he might want to do in the future, he was only able to really focus on the present. For Winston, there was intensity placed on the present even while figuring out the future. For the other participants, however, their focus was solely on the present – or “right now.”

The participants often justified the narrow focus due to the notion they are situated within a temporary period of time. In our second interview, Razac described his current situation explaining how it was temporary saying:

I’m still living at home. Same old, same old. I mean, I can’t complain. I mean there times where I just wish that I had my own place but you know, every time I think about it, I am saving money and all. It’s not forever. It’s not, you know, where I am stuck here. I know that I have a time limit that hopefully come next

summer I'll have my own place. If not by summer then definitely by the fall. So as long as I know that there's a light in the tunnel, that I'm not gonna be here forever, then it doesn't bother me too much. It's temporary. And also, my job situation. I know that's not permanent, I know it's temporary.

Razac expected that he will eventually focus on the future, but right now his focus is on the present period of time. Even though he is not completely satisfied with his professional or living situation, because he assumed it is only for right now, he is not too concerned. Nicole is also not concerned about longer term planning in terms of her professional career and teaching. She said, "I've never really looked at teaching as this is what I have to do forever. It's just, you know, it is something I'm very interested in right now." Rocky also looked only to the present and immediate future and did not think too much about the future; even though he is planning on getting engaged he could only talk in terms of the immediate future.

Additionally, Eric believed that the desire to focus only on "the right now" was related to his expectation of immediate action and instantaneous success. Specifically, he said:

It is a byproduct of the information age in which we live, where you can get a lot of things instantaneously. If I have a question, I get online, I look it up and the answer comes right away. And I've noticed it especially in terms of having to wait for things, waiting for decisions, waiting for something to arrive, waiting for someone to get back to you. We have the luxury of all that instant gratification.

Bobby also talked about expecting instant gratification in terms of status at work. It was hard for him to think about work in the future, yet he talked often of wanting instant

success at work. Expecting immediate success and not attaining it was one of the areas where the recent graduates experienced a sense of loss. In fact, many of the participants were surprised that they did not find instant success in the work place including Bobby, Giselle, Rocky, and Connor. It was difficult for the recent graduates to comprehend the notion that career advancement comes with time in part because they are only able to focus on the present time and immediate future. When asked about future career plans, Connor admitted that he was not focused on any period of time beyond right now. He mentioned, "I have job security for one more year so that is a luxury and I don't need to know at this point what it next."

For other participants, by focusing only on the immediate and right now, they were unable to focus on other things they deemed important, particularly religion and community involvement. Although these were valued by all of the participants, their experiences illustrated how these values were not a priority "right now," but instead something they planned to be more engaged with in the future. Razac was unable to simultaneously focus on a job search and his religious involvement with the Mosque stating, "In the whole process of trying to find a job, I haven't been attending as much as I could. I hope to get more into it once I actually get on my feet." Karen also expected to be more involved with the Jewish community in the future, stating, "I will want to be a little more religious than I am now"; but as of this study she had not sought out a religious community.

In addition to religion, the desire to do something good and give back to the community often emerged in terms of future importance, but not a current priority. For instance, this engagement was assessable in college for the participants but not in their



post-college life. As Rocky explained, “I did a good amount of community service while in college...organically it was pretty easy to do.” In our second interview, he talked about the difficulty of figuring out how to continue in community involvement. He tried initially but did not continue because it was not a priority at this point. However, like most of the other participants, he discussed how he wants to “do some more” in the future. Even though it was not a priority, the concept of making a difference emerged as a prominent value for the recent graduates in the study. This concept coincided with the fourth key category that emerged, *searching for purpose*.

### **Searching for Purpose**

Though many of the participants referenced the post-college time as encompassing a period of selfishness, it was intentional to use the language “putting self first,” “focusing on self,” and “prioritizing self,” instead of “selfish.” Although the period immediately following college graduation is a period of prioritizing and focusing on self, the participants were simultaneously focusing on figuring out their place in a larger context. Within participant interviews, conversations abound in terms of wanting to feel a sense of contribution, making a difference, and having a passion for doing things that matter. From these accounts flourished the key category of searching for purpose, which includes the dimensions of exploring passion, contributing to meaningful work, and making a difference.

**Exploring passion.** Prominent in each of the conversations with participants was an unwavering passion to find purpose and make a difference. There was a strong desire to “feel passionate” about life and work. Bobby talked at length about how he was changing jobs because he did not have passion for his first job and that his work “is not

going to good use.” By the time of our second interview, Bobby had been working in his new job for about six months. He talked about the difference in level of passion between the two positions in the following way:

It’s funny, I tell people that there is a very clear difference between when I was working at [previous job] and now. When I was working at [previous job], I would wake up in the morning and be like, “ok, I have to go to work.” It felt very much like a chore. And, I wasn’t really satisfied at the end of the day. Having moved into this role, it is so different. ... It was definitely challenging and I was definitely working a lot more hours than when I worked at [previous job.] But the thing is, since I am passionate about the work, I really enjoy what I am doing, and I am helping to make decisions I don’t really mind. I see the purpose behind it, I see why we’re doing it, and I am happy to do it. That made a big change in my attitude; I am pretty excited to go into the office.

For Bobby, part of the process of finding purpose was to have a job with passion. However, for many of the participants, they were still searching for passion. Throughout our interviews, Karen was contemplating her future career and unsure of the direction she wanted to go. What she was sure of, however, was that she needed to have passion for her career and next move. For example, in regards to becoming a doctor she said, “I no longer think it is for me. I have thought about it, and I think I am capable, but I don’t think it is something that I am passionate about.” Additionally, she mentioned how she does not feel “passionate” about going back home. Rocky was also actively searching for passion and hoping to find a career path in which he was passionate. Rocky talked about this in the following account:

I owe it to myself, and my future wife and family, to try to pursue something I like. I mean, Elise loves teaching and you know I, I would love to be able to be as excited about my job as she is. With my job, you know, I haven't believed in for the last couple of years. I want to make an attempt to have a job that I believe in ... to have a job that I could be passionate about.

Although most of the participants were looking for meaning and passion in their jobs, others purposefully searched for meaning and purpose outside of the workplace. Anne's inability to find a job in which she had passion or felt a sense of purpose prevented her from attaining a job. In the interim, Anne focused on writing and performing her poetry to construct meaning and passion. She found a sense of passion through her poetry instead of through work. She talked about how she made meaning of her experiences with poetry and provided justification for not getting a job:

I have actually self-published 2 books of poetry. ... I would actually really love for it to be a career path but the practical side of me, and my family really, I know better. I know that I can't really do that. ... Ideally I would like to have a job that still allows me the time and space to work on my art. And, that is the other thing that contributes to my pickiness, or let's call it my standards. ... I think because I have established myself in the poetry scene that everything else is going to be shaped around that because that is what is most important to me.

Specifically, Anne felt she could contribute to a bigger purpose through her poetry and prioritized passion for poetry and performance over passion for a job opportunity. She explained her choice to not search for a job because, as she said, she was afraid she "would get sucked into a job and not have time to save the world." Anne decided that as

long as she felt passion in some area of her life, it did not have to be through a job. She referenced her need to somehow “still dedicate a part of your life to those causes and to those issues that your passionate about.”

Eric also conveyed the belief that you do not have to have passion in your job as long as you have passion in another aspect of life. He told a story about coming to this realization when his father asked him if his job was his passion. Eric responded, “I’m not sure yet.” He went on to explain the following about his search for passion during the post-college transition:

We have been brought up to believe that you can do what you want. And, you should do what you want as long as you’re excited about it and as long as you’re passionate about it. But, I think we are much more transitory because we’re looking for that one thing that seems to just spark and maybe that’s a little bit impractical in a way. You can’t always expect that be to the case. Some people will find that and some people won’t.

Eric talked about how although he enjoys his job, that work is not where his passion lies. In actuality, Eric, like Anne, felt he could find passion in other aspects of his life, particularly through performance. Eric explained:

I am much more passionate about the performing things that I do. I really like my job, and I do really enjoy it. But, “passionate” is just kind of a hard word to apply to it because the one thing that I’ve discovered that I’m really, really passionate about is the performing.

**Contributing to meaningful work.** As alluded to in the previous section, many of the participants had a specific passion for making a difference personally and

professionally and contributing to a “bigger picture.” Participants repeatedly described their passion for finding purposeful and meaningful work. For instance, although he is unsure of what he professionally wants to do next, Connor stated that it does need to have purpose and meaning stating, “I take my work really seriously. Whatever it is that I decide to do, I’m very concerned that my next step is purposeful and meaningful.” Giselle also wanted to have a meaningful and purposeful work experience. Giselle felt she had something to contribute to Spanish speaking employees within her company and purposefully chose a job location between our first and second interview that allowed her the ability to work on behalf of Unionized Spanish speaking employees.

There was a strong desire from the recent graduates in this study to make meaning of their post-college life by achieving a sense of contribution, particularly at work. As Karen said, “I get inspired and I get excited to hopefully contribute to a field one day.” Connor chose his national service position because, as he said, “I realized that not only is it a worthy cause but I might have something to contribute.” It was not only having passion for a job or a cause that mattered to the participants, but also having the capability to contribute. When talking about his first job, Winston referenced how he did not feel like he was contributing or adding much value to the company stating. As a result, he also did not get any reward from his job. After changing jobs he mentioned how people depend on him and that was what keeps him happy. He felt like his job “mattered.” Giselle also talked about contributing, or more so the inability to contribute as expected, in the workplace. Specifically, Giselle told a story about how her transition from graduate school to work was particularly difficult because there was a larger learning curve than she expected. Giselle contrasted her ability to contribute in college

through leadership positions to her inability to contribute as she had expected in her first job. As she said, “I was asking a ton of questions and learning more than I was contributing. And so the transition was huge!” Giselle had trouble coping with her inability to contribute to something meaningful during the post-college transition.

Anne also talked about wanting to contribute professionally to a bigger cause. She expressed her desire to contribute to “something bigger” as she is searching for purpose in the following account:

I realize that I do want to find meaning professionally, and that meaning comes from feeling like I am contributing to something bigger than myself. ... There have been opportunities where people have said just to get a daytime job, like working at a bank. But, I don't feel like that is doing justice to me and my own potential. ... Eventually it will work somehow. It will fit together, I just don't know when.

Anne focused on her poetry and performance as a way to contribute to something meaningful. For Rocky, the need to contribute was particularly strong as he prepares to move to Europe to be with his girlfriend. Although he was excited to be leaving an unrewarding job that did not challenge him, he was concerned about his next step and how he would be able to contribute. In addition to contributing to a work environment, Rocky was concerned with how he would contribute to his relationship stating, “I'm sort of nervous about what I'll do because I don't want to be - you know - not contributing.”

In their search for purpose, many of the participants felt very strongly about choosing jobs that allowed them the ability to do meaningful work. Emily explained, “Professionally, I knew I wanted a job where I have passion and where I can help people,

so I went to school for that. It is about finding those things that make you happy and doing them.” Nicole talked about wanting to “get a job that I enjoy, that gives me some kind of fulfillment and hopefully will be helping other people at the same time.” For other participants of this study, they looked for meaningful work in where they could serve others. Karen talked about how she would love to volunteer if she had the time, but for now takes comfort in the fact that her job is “kind of like volunteering.” Razac also viewed his job working in the public defenders office as a version of community service. He described his job by saying, “I still consider my job sort of you know, community service, where we’re helping out the community. ... It’s a really good feeling.” Like Razac, Sonia found a sense of meaning in her pro-bono job that she held during law school. She described this feeling by saying, “I do that job because in my sense I am helping out someone who really is in need. Like who really, direly...this is it for them, they’re not gonna get help otherwise.” She went on to say, “It is important for me because I feel like everyone should be doing that. Like, it’s just something people should do you know? You’re here and you should be making a difference in other people’s lives.”

The need to have a meaningful job where you feel like you are “making a difference” was apparent in many of the participants’ experiences. Connor was preparing to lead a group of high school students on a service-learning trip to New Orleans and Victoria talked about her desire to eventually own a production company focuses on Latino writers and artists. Nicole talked about wanting to do culturally relevant teaching in the future. She explained:

I want to have a sense that what I will do eventually will matter. It is like, yea, the suffering will be worth it if I can make a difference for that one kid. ... I want to be that teacher that matters. ... I can't really in good conscious do something that doesn't matter.

Meanwhile, Bobby was trying to make an impact at work through his responsibility of diversity recruiting, paying particularly focus on recruiting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees to the firm. Each of the participants in this study indicated their desire to find meaningful work where they could make a difference.

**Desiring to make a difference.** In addition to making a difference in the workplace, another noteworthy and recurrent discussion amongst the participants surrounded finding purpose by making a difference outside of work. For example, Giselle volunteered teaching English as a Second Language because she wanted “to make an impact on my community.” Anne felt she could make a difference through her art and even helped to start a community organization focusing on Asian American and Pacific Island artists. Eric has started to become involved with different arts boards in the area and felt it was important for the community to keep these organizations alive. Emily’s interest in volunteerism led to her becoming the recipient of a community service based fellowship where she volunteers 200 hours providing health seminars and oral health screenings to a women’s homeless shelter. By serving others and making a difference, recent graduates in this study developed a sense of purpose. As Emily explained, “Anyone can be a dentist, it’s doing something else that matters.” At the time of our first interview, Victoria was actively volunteering as an alumna member of her sorority. In



addition, after college, both Razac and Rocky looked into volunteering with local service organizations.

However, although there was strong consensus surrounding the desire to make a difference and find purpose, there was a disconnect between the values and actions of the participants. As the recent graduates prioritized goals and roles while focusing attention on the present and immediate future, taking intentional action to make a difference was rare. Rocky talked about how volunteering would help him to “find that purpose” but did not actually volunteer, explaining, “I sort of shifted my priority for the time being, but I’ll definitely look to continue to do that once I’m able to focus on it more.”

As the recent graduates in this study searched for purpose, it was evident that they valued finding passion, desired being able to contribute to something meaningful, and wanted to make a difference. As a result, this search for purpose was an active and ongoing aspect of the post-college transition for the recent graduates. However, how the desire to contribute to something meaningful with a sense of passion and purpose actually manifested during the post-college transition remained unspecified. For example, although the participants are searching for purpose, they do not necessarily know what that purpose is. As Emily explained, she is “driven by things that are long lasting and have deeper meaning.” What exactly “that” is, however, she is still trying to figure out however.

### **Summary of Post-College Transition Characteristics**

Each of the participants in this study were simultaneously managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose as they moved through the post-college transition. These four transition characteristics coincided with the

realizations that the recent graduates navigated in an attempt to figure out a sense of self and what matters. Each of the four categories illustrating the college to post-college transition intersects and overlaps. For instance, while figuring out what he wanted in life, Bobby incorporated a focus on self and the desire to make a difference while establishing his professional goals while enduring loss that accompanied leaving college in terms of not finding immediate success. He illustrated the intersection of some of the characteristics during the transition in the following account:

I really like helping people. But in that sense I know I am a little more selfish. I like to have money; I like to have a sustainable lifestyle so I know I need to work in an industry where I can support myself. ...Plus, I want to have a high-powered career also, but I want to do it while I still help people.

However, although each recent graduate in this study underwent a process of navigating a series of overlapping and intersecting realizations about self and what matters, or “figuring it out,” the actual realizations discovered varied between the participants based on different priorities and divergent interests and events. For example, most of the recent graduates made a concerted effort to figure out what they wanted professionally, however others, like Eric and Anne, placed more of an emphasis on trying to figure out what they wanted personally or socially. What was consistent among the participants, however, was that they were each situated within the process of actively trying to figure out self and what matters.

For the participants, the post-college transition was the first time they were undergoing such a process of figuring it out. For example, though assuredly confident in

her decision to go to dental school and become a dentist, Emily was still figuring things out. She explained:

I still actually don't know where I go from here. That is probably weird to say because it seems like I have planned out a lot. But, I think right now I am at a crossroads trying to figure out a location where I want to go and finding my own niche. I think I have been very good in the past about making new situations my own so I don't really fear that. I just want to find a place that is new and different and I can kind of make it my own.

In addition, Sonia initially thought she had everything figured out once she got into law school only to realize, as law school graduation approached, that she was only now immersed in the process of figuring it out. As she said, "I think the next six months will be critical. I need to figure out what I'm doing."

### **Negotiating Post-College Support Systems**

Although each of the recent graduates simultaneously experienced loss, established place, focused on self, and searched for purpose in an attempt to "figure it out," they also experienced individual discrepancies in the course of the post-college transition. Specifically, the recent graduates encountered different outside and societal influences, while also employing various coping abilities and strategies that impacted the transition. The fifth key category that emerged in this study was *negotiating support systems*. The availability or lack of support, and the way the support systems were negotiated during the transition, were influential during the post-college transition process for the participants. This section discusses the effect of outside influences and

internal coping strategies on the post-college transition, specifically exploring the way in which the participants negotiated these support systems.

### **Outside Influences**

As the participants moved through post-college life, they experienced similar transition characteristics and spent time figuring out what mattered to them personally, professionally, socially, and in terms of love/partnership, relationally. However, the post-college transition process was also influenced by the participants' ability to negotiate external and internal support systems. Additionally, the recent graduates typically had little control of the various outside influences they encountered. The outside influences that influenced the participants' post-college transition included financial implications, support networks, and meaningful prior experiences.

**Financial implications.** It is important to note the state of the economy during the time this study took place (2008 to 2010) and the implications for the transition experience of recent college graduates. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (2010), the United States economy entered into a recession on December 1, 2007. In addition, according to a study by the New York Times, jobs in the private sector declined 7 percent since the recession began in 2007 and the economic downturn was widely reflected in the job prospects for new graduates (Lipka, 2008; Rampell, 2011). A 2010 report looking at the hiring intentions of the nation's employers for new two- and four-year college graduates researched hiring found a decline in hiring trends each year from 2004 to 2008 for new graduates with the most drastic decline in 2008 (Collegiate Employment Research Institute, 2010).

Each of the participants in this study graduated from college during that time period and the consequences of the recession were noticeable. For instance, Victoria submitted a total of 60-80 job applications and resumes only to have one job respond back to her. Now that she was in graduate school, she mentioned how she will have three different internships as part of the program to gain experience and networking connections to future jobs. However, she was still nervous about the economic impact referencing that “whenever the economy suffers it is usually the arts that are most affected.”

Anne summed up the job search process after college in relation to the current state of the economy when she said, “I underestimated how hard it was to get a job. Especially now with the whole economic crisis.” Razac had a similar experience finding it difficult to find full-time employment post-graduation. Others, like Winston and Karen, momentarily entertained the idea of changing jobs but the lack of available jobs contributed to their decision to stay put. Sonia mentioned how she was concerned about her ability to get a job after law school because law is one of the hardest hit professional field’s in this economy. However, the poor economic situation was used as justification for many of the participants to either not job search or to not pursue a different career path. In her second interview, Anne talked more about not having a job during the current economy. She mentioned how others at her part-time retail job understood her not having a full-time job because “the economy is kind of rough right now and so it makes sense.” However, Anne admitted that the current economy was not the reason she did not have full-time employment stating instead, “I think it is mostly because I don’t want to.” Again, she prioritized finding a job with passion over just finding a job.

In addition to the recession and state of the economy, other financial implications factored in to the post-college transition experience for the recent graduates in this study. Many of the participants commented on the extreme difference in the availability of financial resources between college and post-college life. Winston mentioned how he was not the one who paid for his college and as a result did never think about finances during college. As he said, “my parents would just send the money in.” However, during the interviews he talked about how the availability and lack of financial resources during the transition impacted many of his post-college decisions and experiences. Eric reflected on being financially independent for the first time but realized that even with his apparent “secure” salary that, “when you do the math and add in the rent, groceries, taxes, gas, traveling, and this and that, it really isn’t that much anymore.” For other participants such as Sonia and Bobby, their families still provided much financial support which allowed them to be less challenged by financial implications during the post-college transition. Although the available finances and everyday expenses varied among the recent college graduates, it was an external influence that affected the post-college transition for the participants.

**Social support networks.** Parental support, including financial contributions, was just one instance where outside support influenced the post-college transition for recent graduates. In addition to financial support, participants in this study encountered varying social support systems from family, friends, partners, co-workers, supervisors, and mentors. Most influential to the participants as they experienced the post-college transition process were the following three types of support networks: family, peers, and mentors.

*Family support.* In terms of family, some recent graduates depended on their parents or partners for sources of support. Winston, Karen, and Rocky specifically talked at length about the support they received from their significant others. Karen relied on the support of her partner during her transition stating, “He is very supportive. ... I don’t think I could have been as strong alone.” Rocky said of his relationship:

I certainly take comfort in talking to my girlfriend. ... Just to hear somebody out and stay engaged and ask questions. I take a lot of comfort in that. ... I take all kinds of comfort in her presence and in being with her. I take comfort in seeing my best friend everyday, it is pretty awesome.

The lack of support from a significant other also influenced the transition experience for some of the participants. Sonia, Bobby, and Eric all talked about how they wished they had a romantic partner in their life, specifically referencing how that would have been a nice source of support. By the time of our second interview, Connor had entered a serious relationship, and credited that relationship for helping to make his transition more manageable.

Winston relied on the support of both his wife and their families. As he and his wife prepare to grow their family through adoption, he referenced the challenges they will face but talked about how helpful it is to have the support of family for both childcare assistance and emotional support. Even though Nicole was no longer in a relationship with the father of her daughter during the second interview, she still talked about how they still co-parent and are very supportive of each other. Nicole specifically referenced the benefits of having his support, not only in terms of parenting but also for the overall transition. Nicole also talked about the support she had from additional

family members, stating, “I doubt I will ever leave [the area] at this point. Even though I am much more independent and could probably leave my parents here.” She talked about the benefits and “comfort of being able to run home if things went wrong.”

Emily mentioned her transition was made easier because of the support she received from her parents and reflected, “Personally, I think I have been able to get a good grip on things because of my family.” Sonia maintained a particularly close relationship with her parents following graduation and even though she is in law school two hours from home, she still sees her parents weekly. Sonia’s mom even prepares home cooked weekly meals for her so that Sonia does not have to worry about where her next meal will come from while she is in school. Anne, on the other hand, does not have the support from her parents that she would like explaining, “they’re not exactly supportive in the way that I would really want them to be supportive. I don’t really share that much with my parents.” However, her parents were supportive in the sense that they provided financial support and allowed her to live at home. This support allowed Anne the opportunity to spend time looking for a job and working on her poetry.

***Support of peers.*** The support of close friends and peers also helped to ease the transition experience for recent graduates. Anne talked about she relied her fellow poets for personal support and wellbeing. Karen, who equated her friends to family, talked about one of the reasons she chose to live in the city she does is because of the numerous friends and support networks that exist there. Nicole talked about the support provided by friends, and the influence of peer support on her transition and her process of figuring it out. Nicole explained, “Friends have a large role in how I think about what I am going to do next.” As mentioned earlier, for many of the participants the change in social



relationships was a significant aspect of the college to post-college transition experience. Although family was influential to the post-college transition to the participants, the relationships with friends played an even bigger role in the college to post-college transition. Many of the participants in this study, including Karen, Eric, Nicole, Anne, Victoria, and Rocky specifically referenced how their friends were more influential than their parents during the transition.

According to the participants in this study, although they could not necessarily control the amount of outside support from friends, the support (or lack of support) did impact the transition experience. Karen and her husband celebrate the Sabbath each week with the same group of friends. And, Victoria talked about the support provided by her sorority sisters, specifically how they have provided support, resources, and networking connections during her transition from college to post-college life. When reflecting on her support systems after college, Victoria said:

My sisters. Whenever I say “my sisters” I mean my sorority sisters. Everything I have in life is because of them. The only thing that I have not gotten because of my sorority sisters is getting into graduate school. I live with a sister, I work with a sister – she got me my job. And the reason why I’m working with the play write is because I went with my sisters to see one of her plays; and the main reason she wanted to meet me is because she loves my sorority. Everything in my life has been because of my sisters.

***The role of the mentor.*** In addition to friends, family, and significant others, another noteworthy support system that aided the participants’ transition, particularly the professional transition, was the presence of a mentor. Emily specifically referenced how

she benefited greatly from her faculty members as professional role models stating, “There are some really great faculty members that I can look up to as professionals.” Nicole found a mentor in her supervisor who was, “absolutely fabulous” and took the time to understand and work with Nicole as both a graduate assistant and a mother. Of her supervisor, Nicole said, “she’s been really great with just understanding what that’s like for me and trying to really get a picture of what my life is like outside of the position.”

Bobby talked about a mentor at work who informally provided guidance and support through his difficult transition. Of this mentorship relationship he said:

A significant person has been my senior who coached me through work. She always encouraged me to expand my network, to find what I wanted to do. She thought the first year is really about learning how to work. ... She told me to take my first three years to really explore and get as many projects as I can. She was instrumental in coaching me through thinking that I didn’t like what I was doing. She was like, you really need to find what you want to do, and that was really instrumental in helping me figure out at the 6 or 7 month mark that I really needed to start exploring my options.

Similar to Bobby, Giselle was having difficulty transitioning into a full-time job and talked often about how she felt “so overwhelmed” for quite some time. However, her company intentionally placed new employees with more seasoned “mentors”; this intentional mentorship proved to be beneficial to Giselle in regards to her transition and professional development. The mentor specifically provided much needed validation to Giselle’s feelings about work. She mentioned:

I knew there would be a learning curve, but I didn't realize it would be so emotional of a learning curve. ... I was just so exhausted that I wanted to quit for three months. It wasn't until I talked to my mentor that she told me she went through the same thing and that it was completely normal. I didn't know it was normal to want to quit your job; now I can't imagine ever quitting!

**Meaningful prior experiences.** In addition to outside support systems, the participants in this study talked about the benefits of meaningful prior experiences, particularly work and internships, in easing the transition from college to post-college life. As the participants progressed through the transition, many talked about the ability to build upon prior experiences, either from college or earlier in the post-college transition, to gain experience. For Razac, the prior experience of an internship the summer following graduation helped ease his personal transition while supporting his process of figuring it out and redefining identity. Razac talked at length about how the summer internship after college opened up his mind and allowed him to learn more about himself while forcing him to leave his comfort zone. He said:

The summer internship after college was very inspirational. To be there and to be out of my comfort area, and getting away and now having contact with the people I usually have contact with. It was a growing experience. I was really glad I had a chance to work with those people and learn a lot about myself as well.

However, more prominent to this study was the role of previous work experiences and internships in aiding the professional transition for the participants. The recent graduates in this study moved through the professional transition process with varying levels of prior experience; those participants with prior professional experience,

internships and/or work experience commented on their greater ease in professional transition. For instance, Eric credited the ease of his professional transition to the fact that he had worked in professional environments since he was 13 years old. He explained that his transition “hasn’t been too hard because I worked every summer in different fields and in professional environments since graduating high school – a bank, property management, and now this professional environment.” In addition, he went on to mention how he felt advantaged for specifically leaving the comfort and confines of the college environment to working in an off-campus job during school. He said:

The fact that I was working, and working in a job that wasn’t a campus job, was helpful because I learned about the real world and I was dealing with professional expectations. ... It set me up well to understand how to function in a professional environment. Most of the people I knew who didn’t have those jobs, or who had campus jobs, they were still in a bubble because most of them were where the expectations weren’t quite the same as they are out in the business place. So having been out there and having to work within that was really helpful because I got to understand what it was people wanted and what people expected and needed.

In addition to Eric, a few other participants including Rocky, Bobby, and Giselle, attained jobs with companies where they had previously interned. Rocky, a history major, interned with his company during his senior year of college. He talked about how the company got back in touch with him and specifically asked him to apply for an 18-month executive development program within the company. Giselle also took a job that resulted from an internship. She took part in the internship during the summer of

graduate school, was offered the job at the end of the internship, accepted, and began immediately after graduating from graduate school. However, more than the internship, Giselle credited her first job for contributing to her success in her second job. Giselle said the following about the experience gained:

I learned from my transition to my first job to make this second transition, to my second job, so much better. The way that I was able to build relationships with people completely differently, the way that I was able to understand the stress that was going to take place the first week, and the overwhelming feeling of just overload, I wasn't as emotional. I knew what to expect. I have learned so much that I just pick up things quicker and am able to work a lot faster. And also, how to work with a boss. I made so many mistakes my first time with a boss that now I was able to build a great relationship with my boss and with the people in my new job.

This is particularly relevant to this study given 10 of the participants switched professional experiences within their first three years post graduation. Though he did not switch jobs, Connor echoed these sentiments talking about how his previous year in the job enabled him to have a more successful second year. He said, "I just have a better sense of having been through it all. The fact that it is my second year makes things a whole lot easier for me." The ability to build upon meaningful experiences was important for many of the participants.

However, the absence of specific meaningful prior experiences also influenced the transition for the participants in the study. Specifically, the lack of prior financial planning and financial management made the transition more difficult according to the

participants. Regardless of the current economic situation or availability of funds as the result of wages or parental support, the recent college graduates faced little financial experience. Eric talked about how even though he makes a “very nice salary” it is still “challenging to manage the finances.” He went on to talk about how he did not really think about all the expenses that would be incurred after college, nor did he have the preparation to properly manage his finances. He even stated, “I eat out a lot; it becomes expensive that way. My biggest challenge is managing my spending.” The lack of financial preparation was a theme throughout the participant interviews. Emily and others talked about how there is not much financial counseling or preparation – including balancing a checkbook - for undergraduate students. Although some had better management skills, many referenced the lack of previous understanding about managing finances.

Each of the participants within the study experienced different amounts and types of outside influences, particularly in regards to financial implications, support systems, and previous meaningful experiences that impacted the post-college transition experience. According to the participants, the current economy and lack of financial stability impeded the transition, while the presence of outside support systems and previous experiences appeared beneficial to the participants transition experience. The outside influences contributed to the way in which the recent graduates navigated the series of realizations experienced during the transition from college to post-college life. However, in addition to outside influences, the availability of internal support systems, specifically the ability or inability to develop coping strategies during the process of transition, also impacted the post-college transition for the recent graduates in this study.

## **Internal Coping Strategies**

The presence of outside supports such as financial security, parental support, peer support, the availability of mentors, and previous experiences were all external influences that were typically outside the realm of control for the recent graduates. However, the process of managing the supports and negotiating an availability of supports was an internal process. The recent graduates in this study demonstrated various ways to cope with the post-college transition. Though the participants' coping approaches varied by both capability level and technique, the participants' stories detailed how each of the participants developed at least one of three specific coping strategies germane to the post-college transition: searching out shared experiences, surrounding self with stabilizing forces, and focusing on personal strengths. While navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters, the recent graduates took an active role in seeking out and enhancing various coping strategies in an effort to support the transition process. Though the ability to seek out, develop, and practice one or more of the post-college coping strategies differed from participant to participant, it was an active, and often intentional, undertaking that resulted from moving through the post-college transition.

**Searching out shared experiences.** The participants' accounts of the post-college transition illustrated the belief that in college, students are in relatively similar situations. However, after college, particularly during the period of post-college transition, there was no one experience shared by all of the participants. Many of the recent graduates talked at length about how after college graduation was the first time life did not follow a set path, resulting in feeling a sense of isolation and lack of belonging after college. As previously mentioned, post-college was the first time this group of

recent graduates felt out of place while experiencing significant loss. In addition, the participants described the lack of automatic networks of peers in which to share similar experiences in the period of time following college. In an attempt to reconcile this feeling of isolation and lack of belonging, many of the recent graduates developed a coping mechanism of searching out shared experiences.

Some recent graduates sought out a network of shared experiences in the work environment while others looked through community involvement or new social relationships. Razac described the difficulty he faced regarding the post-college transition; particularly the feelings of loneliness and isolation while realizing life did not go according to plan. However, he went on to talk about how he specifically took a job that provided him a support network of peers experiencing similar circumstances. Razac described the benefits of being immersed in a like-environment and how finding others with shared experiences helped ease the transition. He explained:

I feel this is the perfect position, the perfect transition from college to going to the workforce. Almost every other fellow that works there is also a recent college graduate or is in graduate school right now. So, having other people who are you know, not too far disconnected from undergrad or who are currently in a graduate program, it was good for me to see what path they are currently doing to get there. So, that was a good experience – seeing other people who are experiencing the same transition in their lives as well, and it's a great workplace to have mostly young people who work there so I can relate to them.

Giselle recalled graduate school as a college-like environment where everyone was new and eager to make friends socially. As a result, living alone was not difficult because



peers and social support networks automatically surrounded her. However, after graduate school and transitioning into a full-time work setting, Giselle described becoming distinctly aware of her loneliness both in her social situation and at work. Unable to find others who shared a common experience, Giselle coped with her transition by seeking out others with shared experiences through a church community. Giselle particularly sought out a young professional group with the expectation they would be undergoing similar circumstances and have shared interests and beliefs. As she described:

I found myself not as comfortable at work as I have always been. I lived by myself again, but I was so much lonelier because everyone at work already had their friends. I was no longer surrounded by 50 people who wanted to be my friend. I had to take a lot of initiative to make friends and reach out beyond the work environment. So, I became very involved in my local church. ... In January I decided to go into the city; if there were people that were my age they were in grad school, or still single, or young professionals versus local, married, already having kids. People were more in a similar stage of my life so I have made a lot of friends in the city through church. It has been great.

Each of the participants in this study talked about how they experienced a sense of loss following graduation. For Victoria, she lost a sense of her cultural identity upon entering graduate school. She talked about how she did not feel comfortable discussing her background in her classes as one of the few people of color in her graduate program. According to Victoria, she “lost a little part of this important identity.” Faced with this sense of loss, Victoria purposefully sought out a friendship with the one African American woman in her program saying, “We have a connection, the two of us, being

she's the only Black girl, I'm the only Latina." By searching out a shared experience, this newly forged friendship helped Victoria cope with the challenge of "feeling like an outsider" amongst her graduate school classmates.

Many of the recent graduates in this study intentionally sought out new social relationships with others who shared common experiences as the result of a shift in social relationship post-graduation. Throughout the interviews, the participants conveyed the difficulty that arose as the result of no longer finding themselves constantly surrounded by peers. In addition, they were experiencing more loss with the unexpected difficulty of maintaining college friendships. To cope, Bobby joined a volleyball team, while Eric immersed himself within performance arts because it gave him "not only the opportunity to go out and meet new friends, but meet people that all have similar interests."

As new parents, both Nicole and Winston coped with their new roles and responsibilities during the transition by intentionally seeking out other parents. Nicole explained, "I feel at home when I'm with my other friends who have kids because they get that significant part of me that's you know, so important." Throughout the course of this study, Winston talked at length about how he made purposeful decisions that allowed him to be surrounded by others in similar situations. He explained the importance of seeking out shared experiences in the following way:

What has happened is we've become friends with people that we weren't necessarily close to before because they have kids now. ... They are living a similar lifestyle to us now compared to our college friends who are still, you know some are living at home, some are living by themselves – still going out in

the cities and clubbing and stuff like that. Now, if you've got younger babies well then you know we're kind of in the same group.

Nicole also talked about how she relied upon a newly forged friendship with another graduate student who also worked at the institution. Although they were acquaintances during college, they did not become friends until post-college when they shared common experiences. Karen also recognized that it was easier in her current transition to be surrounded by others experiencing similar life situations. Though interested in attending graduate school, Karen had not taken any steps towards pursuing school because, as she explained, "all of my friends are workers, they work. It would be hard for me to be the one staying at home every weekend or staying home every night when my friends are hanging out." The desire for finding others with shared experiences provided a support network and helped the recent graduates cope with feelings of isolation and loneliness. Searching out shared experiences, particularly peer support networks, was a common coping strategy employed by the participants during the transition.

**Surrounding self with stabilizing forces.** The first few years after college was filled with uncertainty, changing relationships, and newly established and expansive options, according to the participants. In addition to searching out shared experiences, many of the participants looked for a source of stability during this transition period to combat the unexpected, uncertain, and unstable aspect of post-college transition. For some, the shared experiences served as stabilizing forces. For a few participants, stability emerged as a result of intentional commitment to faith. Karen, Sonia, and Giselle all talked about the comfort that arose from their involvement within their religious communities. Other participants talked about the lack of stability and how this provided

difficulty during the transition. As Nicole said, “I see my friends that have that stable thing; I just feel like in a lot of ways I’m really in limbo.” For her, the lack of stability, particularly as a new mother and graduate student, hindered her transition process.

The participants provided accounts about how securing a sense of stability was beneficial to the post-college transition process. However, the way in which this coping technique was facilitated during the transition varied amongst participants. For some of the recent graduates in this study, the ability to sustain friendships from college provided a stable force during an otherwise uncertain and sometimes confusing stage. Sonia referred to this saying, “I have a lot of very good friends. I have two really, really good friends who I talk to every day. If there is something going on, I have to tell them.” Achieving stability by maintaining ties to college and a college lifestyle in the years immediately following graduation was common for many participants. For instance, during our interviews both Rocky and Eric discussed still straddling college and post-college life and explained how maintaining college ties helped ease the transition. Specifically, Eric reflected on coping with the difficulty of life after college as being “so open ended.” He described his transition experience and the value to him for maintaining college ties in the following way:

It was mostly the transition from being a student to not being a student anymore. There are a lot of structures in place when you are a student, both academically and socially too, that you can really lose if you don’t have ties to that. I feel really fortunate through the transition process that I still had ties back to college. I did a couple programs that allowed me to maintain that tie to the university and still have interaction with all the people that I had “left behind.” And, part of it was

living close; I knew my two roommates – there were both students here. ... There were all these ties that sort of helped to make it less of this abrupt.

Rocky intentionally maintained social relationships from college to cope with the changes of post-college life and find stability. He further explained:

Having [friends from college] around was good because I felt like professionally I was forced to transition super fast into a totally different thing that I never knew about. But, socially it was steady. To see them and see what they are doing and how they are handling this, I think that is the biggest part. I have been able to have people to relate to because they are going through what I am going through.

However, as discussed earlier, the majority of recent graduates in this study experienced diminished social relationships after college, making it more difficult to rely upon college friends as a source of stability during the post-college transition. As a result, the participants assumed various strategies to secure a sense of stability during the period of post-college transition. For Anne, poetry became her source for stability while undergoing the transition. She specifically referenced that in the “awkward stage” of post-college life, it was finding poetry that helped her cope with the transition stating, “Before the poetry thing I felt really lost.” Emily trained for a triathlon in an attempt to get back into her routine with hobbies after losing the safety net of college. Sonia, who relied on the stability of her family throughout her transition, went home many weekends to cope with the isolation of law school.

Winston experienced a number of changes in the years immediately following college graduation including marriage, the birth of his son, a job change, and two moves. In an effort to cope during a period filled with so many major changes, Winston and his

wife intentionally moved back to their hometown near extended family because they provided sources of stability. He appreciated the fact that “everything is familiar” in his hometown. Karen, meanwhile, sought out stability through her relationship with her partner. Upon describing how she was discouraged and overwhelmed by the uncertainty and enormity of post-college life, she reflected on the importance of having a stabilizing force to help aid the transition. She said:

I think after college you need some sense of stability, whether it be professionally or relationship wise. I think it is a huge help to have Ben and have some sense of stability. This may not be all that innovative, but your whole entire life you know what your next step is. ... Then, all of a sudden you are just thrown out into this world and you just have no idea what to do. It is really discouraging. So, the fact that I did have Ben, it was something that anchored me. I wasn't totally lost.

The participants in this study established a sense of through a variety of outlets including family, significant others, hobbies, work, friends, community, and religious institutions. In addition, attaining a source of stability in one aspect of post-college life often contributed to achieving a sense of stability in another aspect. Rocky talked about this in regards to his personal and professional life. As Rocky achieved personal stability, particularly the relationship with his girlfriend/fiancé, it resulted in him achieving a sense of professional stability and awareness. He explained:

Having decided that Elise is going to be my future wife sort of made me make some decisions quicker and think harder about things. ... I think that her presence in my life, and being who she is and encouraging me, has given me the clarity of

mind in knowing, OK, I know who I'm gonna be with the rest of my life. ... She definitely made me pull my act together and stop running in place.

**Focusing on strengths as the result of reassurance and recognition.** The final major coping technique employed by recent graduates in an attempt to ease and strengthen the post-college transition was focusing on personal strengths, particularly through reassurance and recognition of others. For example, Sonia coped with some of the difficulties of the transition experience by focusing on being recognized for her strengths as a law student. She told a story of how she was awarded a scholarship during her first year of law school and how the recognition was important in both making her feel better about the transition while reassuring her that she could succeed in law school. She reflected on the experience and said:

It was really nice, and actually at that point I felt like, "wow, I can do this!" It was a boost. I had to get a recommendation from a professor here for that and I still have the recommendation on my wall. Whenever I am having a bad day I just read the letter and am like, "see, that was me."

As the recent graduates in this study navigated the process of "figuring it out," they were also figuring out and focusing on their personal strengths. For instance, as Connor tries to figure out his next personal and professional move, he talked about utilizing his strengths and wanting to do something at which he is particularly good.

For the most part, however, the strengths that participants focused on during the transition were professional strengths related to the professional transition. Little attention seemed to be paid to strengths unrelated to the professional realm. In addition, for the recent graduates in this study, the capacity to focus on abilities and strengths was

usually the direct result of receiving reassurance and recognition from others. Recent graduates in this study relied on reassurance and recognition in order to figure out their strengths. For instance, Bobby had a desire to be recognized by others because this recognition gave him drive and motivation. He stated, “I always want to be a high performer and be recognized for the fact that I can perform in that capacity.”

This need to be recognized by others for abilities and professional talents was a common theme throughout our interviews. As the result of positive feedback and reassurance during her performance, Anne progressed from seeing her involvement with poetry as a passionate hobby to pursuing poetry as a profession. She reflected on her decision making process in the following story:

As soon as I started featuring and getting really good feedback from the audience, and also the hosts who asked me to feature, I was like – “You know, I’m good at this!” You know? And, I enjoy it and have fun and it’s also really challenging.

In making his decision to go change jobs and go into Human Resources, Bobby reference how conversations with others gave him the reassurance he needed to make the decision to make a professional transition. He explained:

The HR director told me she always thought I would be successful in HR. She said I have the business skills and the smarts to get further in HR than most people usually do. She thinks I have potential to really go further. That helped to boost my confidence. ... And I talked to my Aunt, a very high up executive level person. She was like, with your personality type, you really like people, and I think HR is definitely a good field for you to go in.



Nicole also talked about coping with the difficulty of her transition by focusing on her strengths within the professional arena. She not only proclaimed that the most successful part of her overall transition was the professional aspect, but she talked about how she knows this as the result of getting positive reassurance at work. Nicole said:

I'm supposed to do my job well. But it's really nice when people recognize me for whatever I've done. Just hearing little anecdotal things when people are kind of commending the work that I do is really nice and gives me this 'ok, I'm doing things right.'

Some of the participants in this study focused on personal strengths to cope with the difficulties that accompanied the post-college transition. However, it is noteworthy that the awareness of strengths was the result of external reinforcement. For Victoria, it was the result of recognition from classmates and mentors that led to her decision to pursue theater production as her area of expertise. She explained, "I definitely know what I want to do now. People keep coming up to me, asking me to help them produce shows because apparently I am the expert in the field, according to everyone." For many of the participants in this study, the ability to focus on personal strengths was the product of reassurance and recognition from others; it was also a valuable coping technique to help ease the post-college transition experience.

### **Summary of the College to Post-College Transition Process**

The theory that emerged from the experiences faced by recent graduates in the years immediately following college graduation helped generate the theory of college to post-college transition (see Figure 2). The theory of college to post-college transition involves recent graduates navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters

## Understanding The College to Post-College Transition

*\* The development of the grounded theory for recent college graduates builds upon a process of navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters. The post-college transition was a process of actively navigating a series of realizations that resulted from experiencing four distinct post-college transition characteristics while interacting with a negotiation of external supports and internal coping strategies.*

### **4 Post-College Transition Realizations**

*\*The 4 post-college realizations overlap, interact, and occur simultaneously. Each of the four transition realizations/ characteristics occurred in each post-college transition, but with differing levels of prevalence depending on the experience and transitioning adult.*

- **Managing Loss**
  - Experiencing and End to a Sequence of Expectations
  - Encountering Deteriorating Social Relationships
  - Assuming a Diminished Sense of Belonging
  - Losing a Sense of Identity
  - Facing Unanticipated Challenges/Life Unexpected
- **Establishing Place**
  - Establishing Responsibility
  - Establishing Roles
  - Establishing Goals
  - Establishing Priorities
- **Focusing on Self**
  - Prioritizing Self
  - Redefining Identity
  - Focusing on Present Moment
- **Searching for Purpose**
  - Exploring Passion
  - Finding Meaningful Work/Making Professional Contributions
  - Making a Difference

### **Negotiating Support Systems**

*\*The way in which recent graduates experienced and negotiated support systems varied from participant to participant. In addition to the presence (or absence) of outside influences, three internal coping strategies emerged germane to post-graduates experiencing transition.*

- **Presence or Absence of Outside Influences**
  - Financial Implications
  - Social Support Networks (Family, Friends, Mentors)
  - Meaningful Prior Experiences
- **Internal Coping Strategies**
  - Searching out Shared Experiences
  - Surrounding Self with Stabilizing Forces
  - Focusing on Strengths as the Result of Reassurance and Recognition

*Figure 2. Understanding the Process of Transition from College to Post-College Life for Recent College Graduates.*

while transitioning from college student to adulthood. The post-college transition, and the process of figuring it out, was manifested by the following four active and interrelated characteristics experienced by recent graduates: managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose.

This study also illustrated the way in which each of the participants encountered a variety of transition support systems during the post-college transition. These support systems included external factors such as the current financial situation, available support from family, friends, and mentors, and opportunities from meaningful previous experiences. In addition to outside influences, the presence of internal supports, specifically the availability of coping strategies, also shaped the transition experience in different ways for the participants. The three coping strategies employed by the recent college graduates in this study included searching out shared experiences, surrounding self with stabilizing forces, and focusing on personal strengths as the result of reassurance and recognition.

Recent graduates actively experienced distinct transition characteristics unique to the post-college transition while negotiating both external influences and internal coping strategies. The theory of college to post-college transition builds upon the process of the college to post-college transition and the contributing presence of these characteristics. The intersection of the four post-college transition characteristics experienced by recent graduates, combined with the ability to negotiate external and internal support systems during the post-college transition, resulted in the way in which recent graduates made meaning of the post-college transition. How the recent graduates made meaning of the college to post-college transition process will be illustrated in the next chapter. In

addition, chapter five describes the construct of transitioning adulthood that emerged from the experiences and stories of the participants while also revealing the five approaches to post-college transition.

## CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

### APPROACH TO POST-COLLEGE TRANSITION FOR TRANSITIONING ADULTS

For recent college graduates, the period of time following college graduation is marked by a process of *figuring it out*, or navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters. As detailed in chapter four, as the recent college graduates in this study underwent the transition from college to post-college life, they experienced great amounts of loss while they also established roles, responsibilities, goals and priorities. The recent graduates were especially focused on self during this process and spent time searching for purpose. Also instrumental in the experiences of each of the participants during the post-college transition was the presence, or absence, of internal and external support systems. How the participants' negotiated available support systems influenced the transition from college to post-college life. This chapter builds upon the process of transition experienced by the participants to incorporate how the recent graduates made meaning of the college to post-college transition.

The process of transition assumes moving between phases. When talking about the period of time after college graduation, Eric said, "it is a transitory period, and I am certainly well rooted in it." He further described the transition process proclaiming, "a transitory period in and of itself because I am moving to the next stage - on the way to something different." As the participants "moved on to something different" and moved between college and post-college life, their stories revealed a change in situation, position, focus, and purpose. The participants alluded to the transition from college ending upon reaching adulthood. For instance, Eric specifically said he was "moving from college to adulthood." This study deliberately uses the term *transitioning adult* to

reflect the period of adulthood assumed by recent college graduates as they experience the post-college transition.

As recent graduates navigate a series of realizations about self and what matters during the process of post-college transition, they experience four similar transition characteristics distinct to the post-college transition: managing loss, establishing place, searching for purpose, and focusing on self. However, what emerged from the participants' stories was that the actual transition was approached through a variety of ways. In this chapter, I further explore the constructed concept of transitioning adult, particularly in relation to the changing situation, position, focus, and purpose experienced by recent graduates, as well as illustrate the various approaches by which recent graduates, or transitioning adults, navigate the series of realizations about self and what matters. The grounded theory of college to post-college transition emerged from the three distinct findings illustrated in these two chapters: the process of transition, the concept of transitioning adult, and the approaches to post-college transition.

### **Transitioning Adult**

The purpose of this study was not to define a developmental stage or understand the pathway to adulthood, but rather to understand the process of college to post-college transition. However, what became apparent during the study was that from the perspective of the participants, the transition from college to post-college and the transition to adulthood are interconnected and cannot be separated. As a result, it is important to explore and present the process of post-college transition in relation to transitioning into adulthood and specifically to understand the construct of “transitioning adult.”

It is intentional to use the term *transitioning adult* instead of *adult* based on the accounts of the participants. The participants in this study were aware that they were legally and societally defined as adults, however, individual narratives repeatedly reflected the fact that they did not yet view themselves as adults. For instance, Sonia referred to her elders as “adults,” but did not refer to herself as an adult. Meanwhile, Razac stated, “I look forward to being more of an adult and being more independent.” Razac referenced newly established “adult responsibilities” now that he was no longer a college student and specifically defined his current situation as, “making that transition to adult life.” He contrasted the elements of becoming an adult and establishing responsibilities to his college life, which was without responsibility. Similarly, Nicole talked about how she is looking forward to “finally arrive” at being an adult, and in our second interview, Nicole stated, “I want to assert myself as an adult now.” The notion of just beginning to reach reached adulthood after graduation was prevalent throughout both rounds of interviews with all of the participants.

As part of the process of figuring it out, participants reflected on choosing to postpone or delay adulthood during college and viewed the transition to adulthood as being embedded within the post-college transition. Winston was one of the furthest removed from college in terms of length of time since graduation - three years as of the first interview. However, he reflected on the years following graduation as one marked by a process of transitioning from college student to adult. Winston referenced his experience of post-college transition as specifically needing to transition from college student to adult and reflected:

For me, I am going from a college kid to an adult. Some people say you turn adult at 18 or whatever, but then you go to college and you are still probably not an adult. I kind of had a quick transition there...the last day of graduation and then by the end of the summer I was married and living away from school.

Furthermore, the participants in this study presumed the post-college transition would end when adulthood was “achieved.” Karen, for instance, specifically reflected on how “this chapter” of her life would end when she became an adult.

### **Understanding the Transitioning Adult**

To best reflect this viewpoint constructed by the participants, I use the term *deferred adult* to refer to adulthood during the college years, *transitioning adult* to refer to adulthood during the post-college transition, and *achieved adult* to mark the end of the post-college transition and entrance into adulthood. It is important to note that all of the participants within this study were fully immersed within the process of post-college transition and would describe themselves as a transitioning adult. Rocky talked about being “on the path to adulthood” and described the goal of moving through the post-college transition in the following way:

Everyone does that differently and at a different rate but I think ultimately that is the purpose - to transition to adulthood. There are so many different ways to go about it, but ultimately that is where we are all headed.

Although the approaches to adulthood are described in detail later, it is important to understand transitioning adulthood in comparison to deferred adulthood and achieved adulthood.



As participants detailed the college to post-college transition process, a variety of characteristics distinguishing transitioning adults from both college students/deferred adults and achieved adults emerged. Because the purpose of this study was to understand the process of transition from those experiencing the transition, it is important to illustrate the corresponding characteristics of transitioning adults. Although this is best exemplified in contrast to deferred adults and achieved adults, it must be noted that the characteristics of both deferred and achieved adulthood are constructed based on the stories of the participants in relation to the transition process and are therefore not comprehensive, nor the focus of this study.

The findings presented in chapter four illustrated how transitioning adults are simultaneously managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose. To understand transitioning adults, it was important to explore these post-college characteristics in contrast to before and after the transition. However, as presented earlier, these characteristics are specific to the process of the post-college transition and therefore not characteristic of either deferred adulthood or achieved adulthood. For the purpose of understanding the transitioning adult in contrast to before and after the transition, the specific transition characteristics actively experienced by recent college graduates (managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose) are presented within broader categories. These broader categories represent the changing scenarios described by the participants as they illustrated how recent graduates move from college to post-college to achieved adulthood.

These categories are based on the accounts of the participants to help make meaning of the transition and the corresponding changes in situation (managing loss),

position (establishing place), focus (focus on self), and purpose (search for purpose) that occurred during the transition. Specifically, it was important to understand the developmental characteristics of the transitioning adult as they experienced a change in situation, position, purpose, and focus compared to before the transition (deferred adulthood) and after the transition (achieved adulthood.)

Understanding transitioning adults during the process of college to post-college transition helps to provide context to how recent graduates make meaning of the transition and approach the transition. This understanding is essential to the construction of the grounded theory on college to post-college transition. Based on the experiences of the participants, the following interpretations emerged: managing loss is positioned within the larger category of *situation*, establishing place is located within the category of *position*, *focus* encompasses the characteristic of focusing on self, and *purpose* incorporates searching for purpose.

To better understand transitioning adults, it was necessary to understand the experiences of the participants before and presumably after the transition with relation to each of these broader categories. The interpretation of transitioning adulthood was constructed by exploring the situation, position, focus and purpose of the participants before, during, and after the transition. Similar to the four post-college transition characteristics, it should be noted that each of these larger categories overlaps and intersects. Table 2 illustrates the position, situation, focus, and purpose of a transitioning adult in comparison to both a deferred adult and an achieved adult.

Table 2

*Characteristics of Transitioning Adults*

	<b>COLLEGE/ DEFERRED ADULT</b>	<b>POST-COLLEGE TRANSITION/ TRANSITIONING ADULT</b>	<b>POST- TRANSITION/ ACHIEVED ADULT</b>
<b>SITUATION</b>	Expert  Period of Structure/Series of Expectations  Expected  Sense of Belonging	Beginner (“First Time”)  Lack of Structure/Period of Unexpected/Change  Unanticipated/ Temporary  Lack Sense of Belonging/Experience Loss  Develop Coping Strategies	Experienced    Sense of Belonging  Coped through Loss
<b>POSITION</b>	In College  Lack of Responsibility  Roles Exist/Exit Roles upon Graduation	In Limbo  Responsibility Established  New Roles Established  Priorities Emerge	Removed from College  Responsibilities Evolve  Roles Evolve  Priorities Evolve
<b>FOCUS</b>	Focus on Present and Immediate Future  Focus on Self/Friends/Family  Self-Aware	Focus on Present and Immediate Future.  Begin to think about “rest of life”  Intentional Focus on Self  Self-Focused	Focus on Future/Long-Term  Balanced Focus on Self and Others
<b>PURPOSE</b>	College was Expected; Purpose was Inherent  Start to think about “what” want in life	Searching for Purpose  Think about “what” want; Start thinking about “how” to get there  Desire to Contribute	Intentional action steps to achieve “what” and “how” in life  Find ways to Contribute

**Situation.** As described in chapter four, the situation for recent college graduates is foremost one of experiencing, and managing, loss. The participants in this study talked about moving from a college experience filled with structure and expectations to a period marked by temporariness, a lack of structure, and unanticipated challenges. The transitioning adults in this study embarked on an experience that was unexpected and described their post-college transition situation as lacking a sense of belonging, a sense of belonging that was present while in college. The recent graduates in this study also anticipated they would again feel a sense of belonging after the transition concluded. For instance, Giselle talked about not feeling a sense of belonging “right now” but stated, “I am not too worried about it now . . . I understand that is normal to not have yet found my sense of belonging.”

One situation that was present during the post-college transition for the recent graduates within this study was the emergence of coping strategies. Recent graduates developed various coping strategies during the post-college transition including: searching out shared experiences, surrounding self with stabilizing forces, and focusing on personal strengths. According to the participants, this was the first time it was necessary to develop such coping strategies because purposeful support networks were automatically provided while in college. Sonia and Karen talked about college as a “bubble”; and, both referenced how they relied on others in college and therefore did not need to develop an internal coping or support system. Bobby echoed this sentiment stating, “College is a very rosy, bubble-like atmosphere.” As a result, the need for the participants to develop coping strategies was situational to the post-college transition.

Developing coping strategies was just one of the many first-time experiences that emerged as part of the post-college transition situation according to the participants in this study. The prevalence of stories talking about experiencing something for the “first time” post-graduation generated the perception that transitioning adults are in a situation of novice or beginner. Nearly all of the recent graduates referenced it was the first time life was filled with uncertainty, the first time they were unsure of what was next, and the first time the future was unknown. Specifically, they cited the following examples illustrating the beginner status during the transition: the first time experiencing such a big learning curve (Giselle); the first time she didn’t know what to do next (Sonia); the first time feeling isolated and not understood (Connor); the first time life had no direction (Karen); the first time faced with real choices (Rocky); the first time uncertain of goals (Bobby); the first time experiencing no sense of belonging (Victoria); the first time making important decisions (Nicole); and the first time experiencing responsibility over decisions (Emily).

This situation of first time experiences, or beginner status, was specific to the period of transitioning adulthood for the participants. In contrast, and based on the conversations of the participants, college students graduating college could be viewed as experts at the point of graduation. For example, Bobby and Rocky both talked about moving from expert to the “bottom of the totem pole” after graduation. In regards to expert status in college, Bobby reflected:

When you are a senior in college you know everything pretty much. You know how to navigate through college, you know how to gain the system, you know

exactly who to talk to in what department to get your way. You can coach younger students.

Similarly, the participants talked about working to achieve expert status or expertise in the future. Although the transition might not end at expert status, the participants presumed that achieved adulthood would encompass a gain in experience. For instance, Victoria, Eric, Rocky, and Winston each talked about trying to gain expertise during the transition. Winston stated that his “short term thing right now it trying to make an effort to get expertise.” He continued to talk about the need to achieve expertise in the following statement, “I don’t think I am an expert in what I do right now, but I’m to the point where I have been doing it for three years.” Winston, one of the furthest removed from college is in a situation where he hopes to soon be achieving adulthood and “experienced” or “expert” status.

**Position.** Although the participants’ situation changed as they graduated from college and become transitioning adults, so did their corresponding positions. Literally, there is positional movement from life as a college student, to life as a recent college graduate, to life beyond the post-college transition. Constructed from the experiences of the participants, deferred adults are physically positioned in college as college students. Similarly, achieved adults are positioned in a post-transition context. Each of the participants in this study was positioned within the process of post-college transition, as transitioning adults. Although this is explored further in the approaches to transition section, it should be noted that some of the transitioning adults retained a position of close connection to college while others were removed from college. Additionally, some were disconnected from the college environment while some straddled college and found

themselves more “in limbo” between college and post-college. As Rocky said of his post-college transition position, “I definitely still had one foot still in college and one foot in post-college life.”

The transition characteristics of establishing place is related to the larger element of position. Chapter four demonstrated how the post-college transition is a time of establishing place. The recent graduates took on the positions of: establishing responsibility, establishing roles, establishing goals, and establishing priorities. In contrast, according to the participants within the study, college is filled with established roles that, after becoming experts, are then lost upon college graduation. Rocky talked about losing leadership roles at graduation and said, “You definitely lose your leadership hat pretty quick. I had a lot of that as an RA, within my fraternity, and other various things I was involved with.” According to the participants, college was also a period filled with reduced levels of responsibility and few priorities. Sonia reflected on going to college in the following account:

I was very excited about living away from home and I think I was more excited about, not educating myself, but being away and having fun and having no one to answer to and you know, having no real sense of responsibility.

Because the participants in this study were all in the process of experiencing the post-college transition, no clear picture of the position of achieved adulthood emerged. However, when talking about short and long term goals, many of the participants associated achieved adulthood with being in positions of partnerships, home ownership, and career stability. There was a common belief among all of the participants that the

roles, responsibilities, goals, and priorities established during the post-college transition would continue to evolve post-transition.

**Focus.** The recent college graduates in this study described how they were self-focused during the post-college transition; there was a priority during the post-college transition to focus on self and redefine identity. The term *redefine identity* is used because, according to these participants, there was a sense of self-awareness while in college that was lost or reduced upon graduation. The participants talked about losing a sense of belonging and sense of identity following college. Razac talked about this experience as one of the biggest challenges of his post-college transition. As a result of establishing roles and responsibilities while simultaneously focusing on self during the transition, there was a focus from participants on redefining identity. As Anne said, during this time period “you owe it to yourself to be true to you.” In part because of the greater sense of responsibility and importance of decisions, it was necessary for the recent graduates to focus on self. In contrast, the participants reflected on college as a time when there was not only a focus on self, but also a prevalent focus on family and friends. Victoria emphasized this focus stating, “I am focusing on myself and that is all that matters. It's horrible to say it but I am very selfish right now. I like being that way because I was always so focused on other people.”

Additionally, there was widespread belief amongst the participants that this period of self-focus was temporary. The participants repeatedly stated “I owe it to myself” to focus on myself at this point; however, they asserted this period of self-focus as temporary and explained how they would make a concerted effort to focus on others in the future. This temporary focus was also seen in relation to involvement within religion



and community. Many talked at length about the value of religion and service, but saw it as a future opportunity and not something they could focus on in the present moment. This focus on self for the participants was interconnected with the focus on the present time and for transitioning adults; there is both an intentional and unintentional focus placed on the present moment. This is in part a reflection of participants viewing the post-college transition as a temporary period of time with a temporary self-focused perspective.

However, as stated earlier, the period of time following college graduation was also the first time the future was unknown for the participants. As a result, it was hard for the recent graduates to focus beyond the present time and immediate future. However, based on the stories of participants, this was similar to college where the focus was also bound by the present and immediate future. As the recent graduates in this study repeatedly mentioned, they never thought about “what” would happen after college. Though the primary focus of the participants in this study was on the present and immediate future, there were initial thoughts towards thinking about the long term. However, as Sonia stated, thinking in that way will take place during “the next chapter” of her life. She went on to state, “Both getting a job and getting settled, yeah I think that would be my next chapter, and then the next chapter after that would be getting married.” As the transitioning adults in this study primarily focused on the present time and immediate future, movement to embark on long terms plans was expected to be an area of future focus.

**Purpose.** The period following college was one where the recent graduates were searching for purpose. According to the participants, the search for purpose post-

graduation was in clear contrast to college where the purpose was relatively defined. The participants in this study talked at length about how college was expected and they never thought much about “the purpose” while there. As Razac said:

College was something that was said to me since I was a kid. It was – I don’t know – it was never just like how I knew that once I turned of driving age I was gonna drive. It was just a transition in your life that you go to school, and then you know you get a job, and you know you get married – this is what’s expected of you in life. I never questioned it.

Many participants reflected on initially believing the purpose of going to college was to get an education for a good job. However, many followed up with stories about how that initial impression changed, and in actuality, they never actually thought about the purpose of college until after college. Bobby talked about this realization regarding the purpose of college in the following account:

I thought the purpose of college was to learn technical skills, skills that you could apply at work. I have really realized that is not what college is about, which is good ... I think the purpose of college is to really help people grow as a person, and help you learn how to build relationships with people, and work together and gain leadership skills and I feel like as long as you are active and proactive about that you can really succeed at any college. It is not necessarily what you learn in class. ... It is more about on the job training at work, and so I think it is about just growing as a person and the journey.

The participants in this study approached the purpose of the post-college transition as a period to actively search for purpose. For them, the purpose of post-

transition, or achieved adulthood, was to intentionally take action to achieve the purpose found during the transition. The participants in this study shared stories about their post-college transition and how it was a time to start focusing on figuring out their purpose and “what” is next in life. However, they thought minimally about “how” to get there. Giselle, among others, talked repeatedly about how although she knew what she wanted, she was not sure how to get there. The recent graduates searched for purpose and worked to figure out what was important, both professionally and personally, during the post-college transition. As a result, intentional action towards achieving purpose was therefore pivotal to achieving adulthood. The participants talked about this in terms of the post-college transition as a period where one *thinks* about what one wants, but achieved adulthood is a period where one *acts* upon the purpose. In addition to professional and personal purpose, this was also seen through the participants’ strong desire to contribute to something meaningful. Although this was important and each of the participants talked about making a difference, little action was actually taken at this point because they assumed this would instead be achieved in the future. As mentioned earlier, all of the constructs of transitioning adulthood overlap and intersect. This notion of acting upon a larger purpose in the future as described by the participants overlaps with other constructs, particularly the focus on self and the temporariness of the position.

### **Summary of Transitioning Adulthood**

In summary, as college students graduate, move through the post-college transition, and enter achieved adulthood, they experience various situations, positions, focal points, and purposes. As a reminder, the purpose of this study was to understand the transition from college to post-college life, not the development into adulthood.

However, for many of the participants in this study, the post-college transition and the transition into adulthood were seen as synonymous. As a result, it was important to understand transitioning adulthood in contrast to deferred adulthood and achieved adulthood and to explore the broader categories of each of the four key categories actively experienced by the participants: managing loss (situation), establishing place (position), focusing on self (focus), and searching for purpose (purpose) during college, during the post-college transition, and during the period after the post-college transition.

### **Approaches to Post-College Transition**

As recent college graduates move from college to post-college, they navigate a series of realizations about self and what matters and experience changes in situation, position, focus, and purpose. The series of realizations described by the participants in this study, and the approaches to their situation, position, focus, and purpose, were navigated in a variety of ways. The way in which recent college graduates attempt to figure it out during the post-college transition forms the context from which participants in this study approach the process of post-college transition. How the participants approached the post-college transition varied based on levels of both pervasiveness and importance of the four post-college transition characteristics and the available support systems. From the accounts of the participants, five approaches to transition developed illustrating the way in which recent graduates approach post-college transition, specifically the corresponding situation, position, focus, and purpose of the post-college transition. The following five approaches to post-college transition emerged as a result of this study on post-college transition: Initiator, Instrumentalist, Observer, Adaptor, and Traditionalist.

Each of the transition approaches is unique; there is not a continuum of transition approaches during the post-college transition process. Understanding that the post-college transition is by definition transient, it is possible that a recent graduate would straddle two or more approaches, or even move in and out of various approaches as post-college experiences and relevance change and realizations about self and what matters transform. Though there were some overlapping features between the five approaches and corresponding categories (i.e. primary support, connection to college, period of focus), each approach was distinct. Additionally, there was no clear movement through one approach to another approach. In this study, each of the participants was situated within one singular approach to post-college transition. It should also be noted that based on the experiences of the participants it emerged that one approach does not facilitate the process of achieving adulthood faster or more successfully than another. Achieved adulthood would assume successful navigation of a series of realizations about self and what matters in terms of managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose.

The approaches described below are not approaches to adulthood, but approaches to the post-college transition. The approaches to post-college transition incorporate the way in which recent graduates navigate a series of realizations about self and what matters. Furthermore, each transition approach assumes different ways of *navigating* the situation, position, focus, and purpose of the post-college transition paying particular attention to the participants' primary support, decision making capabilities, connection to college, frame of focus during the transition, and the approach to personal and professional life. Constructed from the stories and experiences of the participants, the

following depiction (Table 3) illustrates the college to post-college transition approaches.

The five navigational approaches to transition described below – Initiator,

Instrumentalist, Observer, Adaptor, and Traditionalist - were constructed based on the stories and experiences of the participants.

Table 3

*Approaches to Post-College Transition*

Approach to Transition	Managing Loss Situation	Establishing Place Position	Focusing on Self Focus		Searching for Purpose Purpose	
	Approach to Changing Situation	Approach to Establishing Place	Priority of Focus and Support	Period of Focus	Approach to Professional Life	Approach to Personal Life
<b>Initiator</b>	Change Agent	Take Risks	Self	Present & Long Term	Pro-Active	Pro-Active
<b>Instrumentalist</b>	Change is Necessary	Means to an End	Self	Near Future	Pro-Active	Inactive
<b>Observer</b>	Wait for Change	Live in the Moment	Self	Present is Temporary/Day-to-Day	Passive	Passive
<b>Adaptor</b>	Open to Change	Shaped by Others	Others	Present Time	Re-Active	Re-Active
<b>Traditionalist</b>	Cautious to Change	Desire to be Settled	Others	Long Term	Dismissive	Pro-Active

**Initiator**

Constructed from the experiences and stories of the participants, recent college graduates labeled as *Initiators* could be described as “go-getters” or transitioning adults who were proactive, both personally and professionally. The Initiators within this study approached opportunity with enthusiasm. They had clear goals in mind and took a proactive approach to meet their goals. The Initiators took the opportunity to network and expand their horizons. In this study, Bobby and Giselle would be considered Initiators. Both Bobby and Giselle initiated career progression and geographically moved from one state to another during the course of the study for career advancement and

opportunity. Bobby explained his decision to pursue a new job in a new city and state in order to advance and gain additional experience:

I realized that if I wanted to make that happen, I need to take a risk and put myself in a different position. In the end I am going to be networking with so many people in the global network... You can't just sit back and let work do things for you, you really have to be proactive in finding your own opportunities and networking and making those right connections.

The Initiators were more likely to take risks during the transition than other types of recent college graduates. Since graduation, Giselle has moved three times, to three different states, where she knew virtually no one else. She reflected on the decision to move far from friends and family and how an important aspect of the decision was “the opportunity there.”

However, unlike Instrumentalists described below, as Initiators, both Bobby and Giselle were also more likely take initiative in their personal lives. Giselle talked at length about living in places where she initially had few friends and lacked a social support network. Living alone, working amongst people in a very different age demographic, and having few friends initially was an incredibly difficult aspect of her post-college transition. However, Giselle took initiative to meet friends and became involved in both a local church and a young professionals group. As she said, “I had to take a lot of initiative to make friends and reach out beyond the work environment.” By the time of our second interview, Giselle had moved yet again but was “looking into taking a salsa dancing class as another way to make friends and a way to enjoy the city.”

Bobby also moved during the course of the study because, as he said, “I decided to go for the opportunity. You have to work for it, you have to network and make those connections.” However, he also took his personal life into account and declared, “I definitely wanted to move to a bigger city. The dating scene also factored into that; here the dating scene is smaller and I really wanted to move to a large major city where you can just totally get lost.” However, even though he had friends and family in his new city of residence, he purposefully, as an Initiator “still wanted to step outside of my comfort zone and just meet people.” Bobby joined a volleyball league and took initiative to expand his social network and strengthen his personal capacity during the post-college transition.

Based on the experiences of Bobby and Giselle, Initiators were more willing to step outside of their comfort zone both professionally and personally. Initiators approached post-college transition by maintaining a connection to college through social relationships. They relied on college experiences to influence decisions about the present and the future. For instance, Bobby talked about his leadership experience mentoring younger students while in college as leading to his desire to change into a Human Resources position and specifically focus on college recruiting. Unlike the approach taken by Adaptors and Observers, both Bobby and Giselle talked about looking for long-term relationships and life partners and families. Initiators were focused on utilizing present experiences and opportunities to achieve personal and professional future goals. Initiators made decisions with little input from others and were more likely to take risks and make decisions that were most advantageous to self. As Giselle said:



I moved away from home and am making the best career move for me. Even if work would have moved me to New Mexico, I would have gone because it is what's best for my career. I have to think about that.

### **Instrumentalist**

An *Instrumentalist* approach to post-college transition was constructed from the experiences of the participants who approached the transition as a temporary time where current experiences were viewed merely as a means to an end. Personal sacrifices were often made, because as Emily said, “you do what you need to” to eventually get to where you want. Many recent college graduates enrolled in graduate or professional school might be considered Instrumentalists. The Instrumentalists in this study had long-term goals and were focused on the future. However, although they did not know exactly what the future held, they were purposefully taking steps to get there. As Instrumentalists took steps towards the future, they viewed their actions as temporary and only impacting the near future. For Instrumentalists, the long term was still theoretical and obscure. Though “driven” the focus for Instrumentalists was on the immediate future through action and deliberate thought about the near future. Specifically, they focused on temporary yet tangible short-term accomplishments that would eventually and purposefully meet longer-term goals. Both Emily and Victoria fell into the Instrumentalist approach to post-college transition. Victoria described this approach as a period where you should be, “living your dreams but becoming what you need to be.”

Instrumentalists in this study jumped right into situations that were instrumental towards achieving a larger goal, a means to an end. However, unlike Initiators, Instrumentalists were likely to only focus initiative on the professional aspect of life,

often purposefully rejecting personal gains. For instance, Emily and Victoria both talked about the necessity of sacrificing personal life in order to get where they needed to be professionally. Emily mentioned, “I am pretty gung-ho. Once I find something I love, I do everything I need to do to get there.” Victoria echoed this sentiment and stated, “I don’t really have a social life, and I could care less. I really don’t care because I am focusing on myself and that is all that matters.” Although many graduate students might be considered an Instrumentalist, it was not found to be an essential characteristic of Instrumentalists. Not only were other graduate students in this study not Instrumentalists, but at the time of our first interview, Victoria was not enrolled in graduate school. However, throughout the entire transition process, Victoria was focused on doing what she needed to for her professional future. It was her professional future that guided her decision for where she lived and even the temporary job she took. She only decided to go back to graduate school because, “when looking at all the jobs, they all said ‘must have master’s degree,’ so I realized I need to get a master’s degree.” In this situation, attaining this advanced degree was a means to an end for Victoria.

Though Instrumentalists were actively in pursuit of professional advancement, they also surrendered a level of personal accomplishment. Instrumentalists were purposeful in their decision to sacrifice personal needs and social relationships. Instead of being passive, they were purposefully inactive when it came to relationships. Instrumentalists viewed this transitional period as temporary and a period of time to put your “real life” on hold. They chose to be intentionally removed from the college lifestyle and were focused almost solely on self and acquiring the necessary professional tools to advance. Instrumentalists were less likely to feel connected to people or places

and talked about the hardships of this current state of life. However, Instrumentalists accepted the challenges and were willing to put up with difficulty because they recognized it as a temporary phase that served as a means to an end. As Emily stated, “Why am I going through this hell if it doesn’t mean anything in the end.” Instrumentalists like Victoria and Emily took responsibility for all of their actions and had ownership over their situation, decisions, and choices.

### **Observer**

Some of the participants “lived in the moment” and had not yet established long-term personal or professional goals. These recent graduates were more likely to “go with the flow” and feel comfortable with the idea that life will happen upon them. Such a wait and see approach to post-college transition is classified as the *Observer* approach.

Observers expected and welcomed change, but had taken little action to initiate change following college graduation. Observers wanted to have the chance to experience many different opportunities. They did not have a specific path or plan of action they intended to follow; instead, Observers decided to wait and see what happened and desired to keep options open. In a sense, Observers went “along for the journey” of the post-college transition. In this study, Anne, Razac, and Connor would all be described as Observers.

Observers took a passive approach to both their personal and professional life, unlike Instrumentalists who were purposeful and active in their approach to professional wellbeing, or Initiators who were purposeful and active in both their professional and personal/social pursuits. It was unlikely for Observers to have particular or set career goals in the years immediately following college graduation. Following graduation, Razac did not focus on getting a job because, as he stated, “I just thought, you know, I

would find something.” Eventually, Razac did find a job and admits, “It wasn’t something that I worked hard and planned for. It just sort of happened.” Anne, who had a variety of both part-time and full-time jobs since graduation, was working in a part-time temporary capacity during the course of the study. However, she talked about how she was not too concerned with looking for a “real job” even though others told her she should be concerned. Connor took a short-term two-year national service job position following college. Though his commitment would be ending shortly after our interviews, he had yet to start looking for a job. Not only was he not concerned with the lack of job security, he was actually excited by the possibilities saying:

There is a part of me that thinks not knowing is exciting. Right now it’s kind of exciting to have this moment in time where I can pause and look around at my different possible options and then make a choice.

Observers were also unlikely to have long-term goals, particularly professional goals. For example, Anne described her transition experience as one where she was living in the moment and was not concerned about the future or taking action toward the future because she assumed, “eventually it will work somehow. It will fit together, I just don’t know when.” Observers were not bound to specific career paths, certain people, or even geographic location. Based on the experiences of the participants, Observers might be considered the least established in terms of professional roles and significant personal relationships among the types of approaches. However, Observers were not bothered by this notion because they saw this time period as temporary and assumed it “will work out.” Like Instrumentalists, Observers justified the post-college transition as temporary. The word observer is intentionally used because they took a passive approach to their

transition and observed the temporary environment they were in while anticipating change. Connor talked about “waiting for something” to help him decide what to do next, but what that “something” was he was not sure. Connor, like other Observers, was open to options and expected change and instability.

Razac and Anne also anticipated change and avoided commitment. Although Traditionalists desired feeling settled, Observers were not focused on the future and did not want to be settled. In contrast, the Observers were excited by the potential of new and unknown experiences and opportunities. Anne purposefully did not commit to long-term aspirations because, as she explained, “it is also me understanding that I am going to change and what I want is going to change.” Because Observers anticipated change, the lack of change often made the transition more difficult. Specifically, Razac was disappointed by the lack of change following graduation. He explained:

I like change, I don't like doing the same thing or being in the same place too long. I don't like my current situation, but I do like change. I guess one of the positives in my life right now is that I like change.

As an Observer, Razac was not taking specific action to initiate change and was instead waiting for the change to happen to him. About his future, Razac said, “Who knows? I'm not ruling anything out.”

Observers in this study preferred the uncertainty of the post-college transition and were the most likely to feel “lost” following college graduation. Anne admitted that she was very lost until she found poetry as a source of self-fulfillment. Unlike Instrumentalists, Observers placed little emphasis on how experiences of this particular period of time affected the immediate or long-term future. Observers were disconnected

from the college environment but had not forged a commitment in either their social or professional realms. The Observers also tended to rely on self for support and decision-making and rarely depended on others. According to Connor, “I have to make these realizations and these decisions for myself. ... I try to solve most of my issues myself.” Unlike Adaptors who were also focused on the short-term and tended to be more reactive, Observers took accountability for their lack of action while they waited for impending change; they put the burden of responsibility for decisions solely on themselves.

### **Adaptor**

*Adaptors* were the recent graduates who approached post-college transition by adapting to the surroundings in which they were situated. In this study, Nicole, Rocky and Eric would be characterized as Adaptors. Adaptors were molded by the experiences and situations that surrounded them. They relied on others and the experiences they encountered to help aid decisions whereas other recent graduates were more likely to rely solely on self for needs and decisions. More than the other approaches to post-college transition, the Adaptors maintained ties and connections to the college environment and found themselves straddling college and a post-college life. Rocky talked about straddling college and post-college life. Nicole also talked about being in limbo, feeling like a college student even though she is now a mother. She went on to say:

I just feel like in a lot of ways I’m really in limbo. I am kind of waiting for that point where I’m like, ‘ok, now I am grown up.’ I just feel like I haven’t necessarily gotten out of that college phase of my life. I have these grown up responsibilities, but I’m still in school, at the same school, and I’m still a student so there is still this little bubble that I exist in.

Adaptors, like Observers, were likely to go with the flow and be comfortable with uncertainty and impending change. The Adaptors in this study were more focused on the present or near future and are not as concerned about the long term. Eric explained, “It’s a bit daunting looking forward, so I try to take things one day at a time.” Adaptors were living in the moment and their decisions and experiences were shaped by current, and temporary, situations. Nicole talked about how she did not have too many expectations because, as she said, “I know that things will change.” As a result, she adapted to the situation she was in. Unlike Observers, Adaptors changed to adapt to the situation and experiences surrounding them while Observers lived in the moment and passively waited for the change to occur.

Compared to the other recent graduates, Adaptors felt less out of place during the post-college transition because, as Eric said, “I feel like I can kind of go with whatever – go with the flow in whatever situation I am put in.” Adaptors were inclined to be professionally impartial and likely to make easier transitions socially. Eric talked about how he did not need to find the perfect job but instead would adapt to the job that he has; he believed it was unrealistic to find a job that catered to your every desire. For him, it therefore made sense to adapt to the job. Rocky also approached his professional positions with this attitude. And, Nicole, Rocky and Eric all found more ease, compared to the other transition approaches, in terms of the social transition. Though the Adaptors in this study were not necessarily either socially proactive or socially passive, the ease of the social transition was due to maintaining college friendships and adapting easily to new social settings. For instance, in our initial interview, Rocky spent time doing similar activities to when he was in college and even chose where to live because, “I have a lot of

college friends still in that area.” Eric talked about having multiple friendship groups (college friends and theater friends) and how he adapted to each group to fit the dynamics of that group. Like Eric, Nicole has distinct friend groups she adapted to fit in with including her graduate student network and her mom network of friends.

Finally, the Adaptors were also likely to change direction without much hesitation as the result of being able to “go with the flow.” For instance, Nicole applied for graduate school, gained admission and accepted, and then shortly thereafter found out she was pregnant. Though she talked about how her life was “derailed” and did not go at all according to plan, she was able to adapt to take on multiple roles simultaneously. She changed directions with more ease than other recent graduates. Furthermore, Eric referred to himself multiple times as a chameleon saying, “Who I am really depends on what capacity you find me in.” By our second interview, Rocky was in the process of making plans to move temporarily, and without a job, oversees to spend time with his girlfriend. He was not only influenced by his girlfriend, but was also willing to adapt to yet a new situation. During the period of this study, Rocky quickly fell into a relationship and adapted to this new role, which then started to mold his future. Although Adaptors took little action to create change, they were both open to change and unlikely to resist change. The participants in this study who approached transition through the Adaptor role were shaped by the change that surrounded them.

### **Traditionalist**

*Traditionalists* were the recent college graduates in the study who approached the transition experience with a hesitant and cautious attitude. Recent graduates who did not like change and had a strong desire to feel settled in both their personal and professional



life during the transition would be characterized as Traditionalists. The Traditionalist in this study would rather be content and settle for the familiar than live in chaos or limbo. Unlike Observers, Traditionalists thought of “change” as a hassle and had no desire to explore the unknown. Karen, Sonia and Winston would all be considered Traditionalists. Even though Winston talked in both interviews about his interest in switching careers to the financial field, he discussed the “hassle” aspect of changing jobs and repeatedly justified why he chose to stay in his current position. He explained:

I’m not looking to change jobs. I’m pretty happy with what I have and you know, a big fear would be in I wanted to change I would have to go through all the benefits stuff again, all the human resources paperwork, and start new. It’s just too much of a hassle. It’s much easier to stay where I am. You know, I have a group of guys at work that I am pretty close with and you know, it’s become much more enjoyable.

He also talked about going back to graduate school but was not willing to disrupt his family time. Like Winston, Traditionalists might be established in a career but were not necessarily passionate about the specific job. As a result they took a dismissive approach to their professional life. Even though Sonia was in law school, she had not taken any steps to her law career post-graduation. In addition, she was more concerned about moving home and becoming settled then establishing a law career saying, “I would definitely take something temporarily” as long as she could move home.

Not only did Traditionalists want to be settled and established, but this desire often resulted in “settling” or giving up on a bigger professional dream. In this study, the Traditionalists were apt to prioritize personal and family wellbeing over professional

advancement. Karen had yet to pursue graduate school because it was “easier to stay” in the lifestyle she was presently experiencing. Sonia sacrificed forging bonds at law school and instead traveled three hours almost every weekend to go home. She even mentioned that although it would be easier to find a job in the state where she was attending law school, she would rather move home to be near family even if she does not have a job. She explained, “I feel a lot more comfortable when I’m back home.” Winston also sacrificed his career for his personal life. He justified this to himself and talked about how “in a perfect world” he might do something else but that would likely take more effort and “eight hours is what I signed up for, so eight hours is what I’m gonna do because I’ve got to come home to my family.”

The Traditionalists did not make decisions easily; they were very cautious but also thoughtful with decisions. Unlike Adaptors who took a “go with the flow” approach, or Initiators who took risks, Traditionalists took time making decisions and were hesitant to take risks. Winston talked about how though he does not make decisions easily, once he does make a decision, he does not waiver and “is 100% committed” and “sticks” with his decisions. Though Karen changed jobs within the same organization during the course of our interview, this was not an easy decision. Karen explained her situation and said, “It is hard for me to make changes. I was nervous I wasn’t making the right change. Even though I wasn’t happy, I knew what my job entailed and what was involved.” In Karen’s perspective as a Traditionalist, it was “easier” to stay in a job that made her unhappy than take a risk and apply for a new job. After “collecting everyone’s opinions on it and gathering as much information as possible and getting many perspectives” she

decided to go for a new position. Sonia also talked about her difficulty making decisions and mentioned:

It takes me a long time to make a decision. I am very indecisive. I'd rather somebody else make a decision for me. I like to hear what everybody else has to say and then I'll make my decision based on listening.

One reason why the Traditionalists in this study took so much time to make decisions was because they relied on the input and interest of others to make decisions. Winston referenced how he always thinks about what is best for both him and his family when making decisions. He talked about how "when you have a family, your world revolves around your family." Meanwhile, Sonia relied on her parents to provide input in all of her decisions. Karen also talked about how she relied on others, specifically her partner for decisions. She stated, "I don't think I could be as strong alone." The participants in this study who took a Traditionalist approach also recognized the long-term effect of each decision; they thought about the impact on their current situation but with a focus on the future. They were reluctant to make decisions that involved change because they preferred the familiar and comfortable and just wanted to "be settled." All three Traditionalists in this study talked about wanting comfort and ease. According to Karen, "it's hard to get out of this cycle that I have been in." Though not in a relationship yet, Sonia talked about the comfort level of staying physically connected to her family. She stated, "I want to go back home (after law school). I plan to live with my parents probably."

The Traditionalists, though slow to change were likely to establish lifelong relationships sooner. They were removed from the college lifestyle and strived to attain

“adulthood” as defined by a stable job and a stable relationship. Winston was married with a child and hoped to expand the family in the near future. Throughout the study, Karen progressed from dating, to engagement, to being married. When talking about the wedding, she even referenced how she didn’t like the planning and just wanted to be married. In the interview after her wedding, she talked about marriage in the following account, “It’s great – we feel very settled now.” Though not settled or in a relationship, Sonia talked frequently about how she cannot wait for law school to be finished so she can be established. She referenced how she wants to get married and has been talking with her uncle about helping her to meet a partner. She wanted to move home and told the following account regarding her approach to transition:

I need to know what I am doing. I need to know my plan of action. Once those things settle in I think I will find my sense of belonging. Just being back in my home community and being connected to my family and friends. Just being connected back with all that.

Unlike the Observers who appreciate the uncertainty of post-college transition and were along for the journey, Traditionalists were focused on the future and were intent to get there soon, even if it meant passing up the journey. As Karen stated in regards to her transition, “I just want to jump to the end.”

### **Summary of Approaches to Post-College Transition**

Recent college graduates simultaneously manage loss, establish place, focus on self, and search for purpose. In addition, recent graduates experiencing the post-college transition are concurrently negotiating supports as the result of the presence (or absence) of various outside influences and the development various internal coping strategies. As

they move from college student, or deferred adult, to transitioning adult, they experience a change in situation, position, focus, and purpose during the post-college transition. Although the experience of recent college graduates experiencing transition is similar, there are distinct differences in how recent college graduates approach and navigate the post-college transition. As a result, five distinct approaches to post-college transition emerged based on the stories and experiences of the participants in this study. The recent college graduates assumed one of five approaches to navigate a series of realizations about self and what matters while negotiating internal and external support systems. Constructed from the stories and experiences of the participants, the following depiction (Table 3) illustrates the college to post-college transition approaches.

#### **Summary of the Grounded Theory of College to Post-College Transition**

As the findings in chapter four detailed, the participants in this study navigated a series of realizations about self and what matters in the period following college graduation. This series of realizations, or figuring it out, was the product of the following active experiences: managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose. As recent college graduates experienced specific transition characteristics in order to navigate a series of realizations about self and what matters, they simultaneously negotiated outside support networks and individual coping strategies. This chapter further explored this theory of college to post-college transition and generated distinct ways transitioning adults approach post-college transition. Constructed by the experiences of the participants in this study, this chapter defined the period of transitioning adult and illustrated the five distinct approaches recent graduates take to post-college transition: Initiator, Instrumentalist, Observer, Adaptor, or Traditionalist.

The grounded theory of college to post-college transition is depicted in Figure 3. In each of the five approaches to post-college transition, recent graduates experienced the process of navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters. All five of the approaches assume the transitioning adult is simultaneously managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose while negotiating various supports.

### A Grounded Theory of College to Post-College Transition

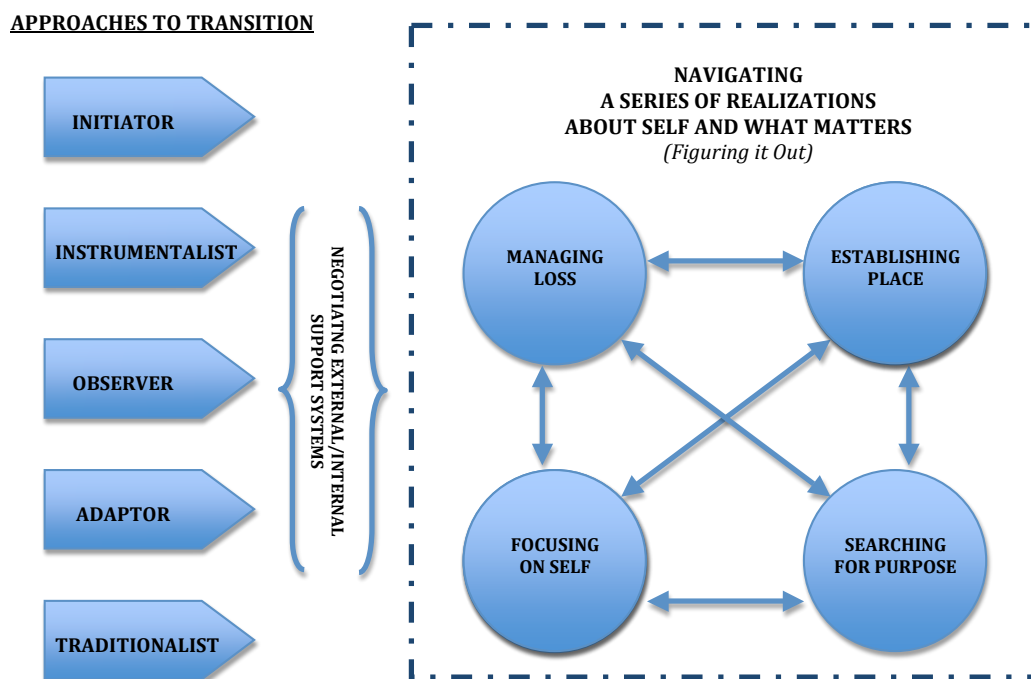


Figure 3. Distinct Approaches for Recent College Graduates Navigating a Series of Realizations about Self and What Matters. A Grounded Theory of College to Post-College Transition.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The emergence of a grounded theory of college to post-college transition centered on the process by which recent college graduates navigated a series of realizations about self and what matters during the post-college transition. Recent graduates actively manage loss, establish place, focus on self, and search for purpose while simultaneously negotiating the interaction of available external influences and support networks and the development of internal coping strategies. As recent graduates leave college and prepare to transition into adulthood, they are immersed in the phase of transitioning adulthood. Recent graduates situated within transitioning adulthood assume one of five distinct post-college transition approaches, Initiator, Instrumentalist, Observer, Adaptor, or Traditionalist, as they face changes in situation, position, purpose, and focus that occur during the post-college transition.

In this chapter, I discuss the emerging theory of college to post-college transition detailed in the previous two chapters in relation to the research questions that guided this study and the literature that informed the study. This chapter also discusses implications for theory and practice, as well as implications for future research. Finally, I conclude with an examination of the limitations and strengths of this study.

### **Discussion of Emerging Theory in Relation to Research Questions**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to understand the transition process for college graduates from college to post-college life. The following research questions guided the study: (a) what is the college to post-college transition process like for recent college graduates; (b) what experiences are most salient during the transition process for recent college graduates; and (c) how do recent college graduates make

meaning of their post-college life? The intended outcome of the study was to develop a theory of college to post-college transition constructed from the experiences of recent college graduates undergoing the transition to post-college life. The three research questions guided all aspects of the study and the categories and concepts that emerged as the result of the three questions guided the theory of college to post-college transition.

### **What is the Post-College Transition Process Like?**

The first research question focused on the actual transition process for recent college graduates. Little research has been done looking at the college to post-college transition process, and therefore, this research question was at the forefront of the study. The participants in this study each experienced the navigation of a series of realizations about self and what matters during the post-college transition. Specifically, they experienced four active characteristics germane to the transition from college to post-college life including: managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose. Each of the participants also experienced other aspects related to the transition contained within these characteristics.

For instance, the participants were managing loss as the result of experiencing deteriorating social relationships and a diminished sense of belonging. The time after college graduation was also the first time that life was not planned out for the participants. Each of these participants had always planned on going to college; until college graduation, there was a pathway filled with expectations and certainties. However, during the transition, each of the recent graduates either experienced uncertainty about the future for the first time, or experienced life not going as planned. As the recent graduates experienced uncertainty in life for the first time, they also faced



unanticipated challenges such as deteriorating social relationships, losing a sense of identity and self-awareness, and the inability to find professional and/or personal satisfaction and success.

Although recent college graduates managed a loss of expectations, social relationships, sense of belonging, and sense of identity that ensued after college, they were also in the process of establishing responsibilities, roles, goals, and priorities as they entered a period of unknown uncertainty. The period of time after college was again the first time that recent college graduates were faced with the necessity of establishing responsibility. There was a common belief from the participants that college was the “last chance” to be irresponsible. Responsibility was established in relation to the new professional and/or personal roles that recent graduates assumed. The roles established were interrelated to the newly established goals. For Anne, she focused on poetry and established herself in the role of performer within the community. For Winston, two of his new roles were that of a husband and father. Giselle’s goal was to attain career growth and she focused primarily on her newly established role of professional. As a result, a new set of priorities emerged based on the newly established roles, responsibilities and goals. Not only did priorities change during the transition, but for the majority of participants, just the process of establishing priorities was a newly formed experience.

The most prevalent priority mentioned by the participants was the priority of self. The recent graduates in this study felt that the period of time after college was, and should be, a time to focus on self. This is closely related to the experiences of managing loss and establishing place because in order to cope with the loss while simultaneously

establishing roles, responsibilities, goals and priorities, there was the need to focus attention on self. In order to figure it out, recent graduates needed to understand what was important to them and to their future, and placed an intentional focus on self during the college to post-college transition. Some focused on self in order to advance careers, others focused on self to attain social satisfaction, and others focused on self in order to become more self-aware. As the recent graduates in this study transitioned from college to post-college life, they focused on self in order to redefine their identity while establishing place. Though the recent graduates felt self-aware at the point of leaving college, as the result of unanticipated loss and unexpected challenges, they felt the need to establish self and redefine their identity. And, as the participants attempted to establish place and redefine their identity in a post-college context, they did so by focusing on self situated in the present and immediate future.

As the participants experienced the transition from college to post-college life, they also placed emphasis on exploring their individual passions with the desire to find purpose. Again, the period of time after college was the first time these recent graduates really thought about the purpose of their life. Interrelated to other post-college transition experiences, roles and priorities were established based on recent graduates' passion with the hopes that the goals attained would be purposeful. This was evident as recent graduates explored professional careers with meaningful and purposeful work. They desired to contribute at work and make a difference both at work and in their personal roles. As part of the process of "figuring it out," the recent graduates were actively and intently searching for purpose and prioritized choices and goals accordingly.

Throughout the post-college transition, recent graduates were actively managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose. However, the transition experience was also marked by an episode of first-time experiences situated within a temporary period of time. The recent graduates saw the transition as a temporary period of “in-between.” They discussed how up until graduation, life had been planned out to an extent and the post-college transition was the first time that life did not go according to plan. The participants felt that during the transition they were situated in-between two known entities, that of college student and that of achieved adulthood. They depicted this period of time as temporary and rarely looked past the immediate future when making decisions and taking action. Most of all, the post-college transition process was one in which the participants experienced a process of navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters.

### **What Experiences are the Most Salient During the Transition?**

Recent graduates transitioning from college to post-college life experienced similar transition characteristics as outlined above. However, some of the experiences that arose during the process of post-college transition were more salient than others for the participants. In general, the most salient experience was the element of “figuring it out” during the transition. More specifically, however, were the following three realizations: the characteristic of experiencing immense loss, the notion of moving into the role of beginner/novice, and the aspect of not yet seeing self as an adult.

As illustrated above and in detail in chapter four, recent graduates in this study were experiencing and managing loss that emerged after graduation. Experiencing, and managing, loss was a very present characteristic of the post-college transition as the

participants experienced an end of expectations, encountered deteriorating social relationships, no longer felt a sense of belonging, lost a sense of identity, and faced unanticipated challenges all during the post-college transition. Not only was this amount of loss prominent in the experiences of the post-graduates, but the loss was also unexpected, which made the loss that much more significant and salient during the transition. Although the graduates were also establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose, these characteristics did not come as such a surprise to the recent graduates in the study.

In addition to the aspect of loss, the participants in this study also described the process of moving into the position of beginner. The recent graduates left college with a level of confidence given their academic success (graduation), a sense of belonging as the result of intentional communities, forged social relationships, and self-awareness. As stated earlier, life had gone “according to plan” up until college graduation. For these participants, graduation resulted in regressing to beginner status. Generally, the period following graduation was the first time the participants were unsure of what was next, the first time they did not have a sense of belonging, and the first time they had to be responsible for self. The participants referred to college as “a bubble;” as a result, navigating the exposed elements of the post-college transition required new skills and abilities.

Likewise, the period of time following graduation was also the first time most of the participants started to view themselves as an adult. Salient to the post-college transition was the notion that not only did the participants not yet think of themselves as adults while in college, but most did not yet think of themselves as adults while in the

post-college transition either. In actuality, the participants in this study equated the post-college transition with transitioning to adulthood. As a result, the term “transitioning adult” was constructed to represent the college graduate experiencing the post-college transition.

### **How Do Recent College Graduates Make Meaning of Their Post-College Life?**

As part of the post-college transition, recent graduates were actively searching for purpose. The participants in this study explored their passions, values, goals, and priorities during the transition in an effort to find purpose and make meaning of their life in a post-college context. In addition, the recent graduates were redefining who they were as they established roles and responsibilities. Though this research question specifically aimed to look at how recent college graduates made meaning of their post-college life, what emerged was that recent college graduates were completely situated within a process of meaning making. In actuality, the transition process was, in itself, a process in which recent graduates were actively engaged in an attempt to make meaning of the post-college life. They were actively navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters with an intention to figure it out. Furthermore, the grounded theory that emerged exemplifies the meaning making process during the post-college transition.

Meaning making was also aided, or hampered, by the presence of external influences and internal coping sources. Specifically, the participants in this study reflected on financial implications, family support, social supports, professional supports (including mentors), and prior experiences as contributing to the post-college transition. Though these outside influences were beyond the control of the recent graduates in this study, the way in which they negotiated the external supports affected the way the

participants made meaning of the transition. Also prevalent to this research question was the participants' ability to develop internal coping strategies during the transition. For some of the participants, they made meaning of the transition characteristics by intentionally searching out shared experiences or sources of stability during the transition. There was also an intentional focus placed on personal and professional strengths, as the result of reassurance and recognition from others. This coping strategy helped the recent graduates navigate the realizations encountered while they attempted to make meaning and figure out their post-college life. The meaning making aspect of the post-college transition for the recent graduates in this study is closely associated with the journey to self-authorship, which is explored more in the subsequent section.

The participants in this study experienced similar post-college transition experiences while being immersed in a process of making meaning of the post-college transition. However, the actual external influences, the ability to acquire and facilitate coping mechanisms, and the way in which meaning was made varied from participant to participant. The interaction of the common transition experiences with the individual supports and coping strategies resulted in different approaches to the post-college transition. For example, some participants showed a greater reliance on others when making decisions during the post-college transition, while some relied only on self as a source of input and support. As the recent graduates actively experienced the post-college transition characteristics in relation to available supports, they made meaning of their transition to figure out self and what matters. The way in which the participants actually made meaning of the post-college experiences resulted in one of five distinct approaches to the post-college transition.

How the recent graduates approached the post-college transition was intimately connected to the way in which they made meaning of the post-college transition. As detailed in chapter five, these findings suggest that recent graduates assumed one of the following five approaches to post-college transition: Initiator, Instrumentalist, Observer, Adaptor, or Traditionalist depending on how they made meaning during the post-college transition.

Looking at the different approaches to post-college transition and how individuals experiencing the post-college transition made meaning of the experience, this study found that Initiators actively approached both their personal and professional life and thought about how current actions would better position them in the future. They took risks and initiated change and relied on both self and others during the transition. The Instrumentalists in this study made meaning of the post-college transition through the following lens: change is necessary, actions during the transition are a means to an end, and priority is placed on professional advancement with little focus on personal advancement. The Instrumentalists relied little on others during the transition and only looked to the immediate future while making meaning of the transition. Observers, on the other hand, did not take intentional action professionally or personally during the transition. They viewed the transition as a temporary period of time where they would just experience the day-to-day elements and life in the moment. The Observers in this study both awaited and hoped for change. As Observers waited for change to happen to them, they took no initiative nor felt it necessary to rely on others.

In this study, the Adaptors made meaning of the post-college transition by going with the flow and adapting to whatever situation they found themselves in. They were

focused on the present time and made meaning of the post-college life through maintaining ties to college and through a sustainable social life. The Adaptors made meaning of the transition by remaining open to change, reacting to the situations in which they were immersed, and adapting to others who surrounded them during the post-college transition. Finally, the Traditionalists approached the transition and made meaning out of their post-college life by focusing on personal wellbeing and how their current actions affected long term personal goals. The Traditionalists in this study were hesitant to change and relied on the support of others to make meaning of the transition. They purposefully tried to remove themselves from the college scene in order to become established and settled. As described in detail in chapter five, the participants of this study assumed one of five approaches to post-college transition. According to the stories and experiences of the participants, the way in which recent graduates approach post-college transition is interrelated to the way in which recent graduates experience meaning of the post-college life.

### **Discussion of Emerging Theory in Relation to Existing Literature**

Existing literature provided a framework for this study. In chapter two, I provided an overview of relevant literature that guided the study and how I collected and analyzed data. In this section, I discuss the relationship of the grounded theory to the existing literature outlined in chapter two. I also explore the relationship to additional ideas found within the literature as the result of interpreting the findings.

### **Post-College Transition and Transition Theory**

This study centered on constructing a theory of transition from college to post-college life. Fundamental to the study is the element of transition, and at the core of post-



college transition was the process of navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters. Specifically, Schlossberg's seminal work on transition in adulthood (Schlossberg, 1984, 2004; Schlossberg et al., 1995) is most relevant to this study and therefore must be comprehensively explored in relation to this study. Schlossberg (1984) defined transition as any "event or nonevent resulting in change" (p. 43). She elaborated that transitions not only incorporate expected life changes, but transitions also incorporate subtle changes such as the non-occurrence of anticipated events. In this study, graduation and many of the change aspects related to graduation including moving, starting graduate school, and getting a new job were expected life changes. Additionally, some of the roles and responsibilities established by the participants of this study during the post-college transition were expected. However, integral to this study was the focus on nonevents. Many of the participants anticipated an event to happen that did not occur. For Razac, this nonevent was the difficulty finding employment. Not getting a job reflected a non-occurrence of an anticipated event.

The majority of changes that occurred during the post-college transition involved an occurrence of unanticipated events. An occurrence of unanticipated events is distinct from changes surrounding the non-occurrence of anticipated events. However, these unanticipated events that happened during the post-college transition would still be considered nonevents. The presence of so many nonevents was, in itself, a nonevent encountered by the participants. As illustrated in chapters four and five, nonevents taking place during the participants' post-college transition included the loss of social relationships and a sense of belonging, the loss of a sense of self, and the loss of expert status. In addition, unanticipated challenges transpired including difficulty at work,

difficulty finding sources of support, difficulty establishing roles and responsibilities, and difficulty making meaningful contributions.

**Moving out, moving through, moving in.** Schlossberg's theory of transition (Schlossberg, 1984, 2004; Schlossberg et al., 1995) defined the transition process as a period of moving out, moving through, and moving in to a new life. As a result of conducting two rounds of interviews with each of the participants at least six months apart, I was able to explore how recent graduates experienced the *moving out*, *moving through*, and *moving in* aspects of the transition. In chapter five, I discussed the post-college transition process in relation to the college experience and post-transition as constructed by the participants. Graduation from college marked a period of moving out. The recent graduates in this study were moving out of college and leaving behind college roles and responsibilities. This process of moving out also incorporated the role exit process as defined by Ebaugh (1988). Ebaugh's role exit theory assumes a person in transition disengages from a role central to one's identity. The recent graduates in this study talked at length about losing the sense of identity that developed as part of their college role; in college, they knew who they were. Some of the participants were more likely to leave behind college roles than others. Adaptors were most likely to retain college roles while Observers and Traditionalists were most likely to be the furthest removed from college roles. As the participants graduated from college and moved out, they experienced a change in position moving from college student/deferred adult to transitioning adult.

The moving through element of transition was the premise of this study. The recent graduates were moving through the process of college to post-college life.

Schlossberg (2004) described the process of moving through as a period of searching and stated, “this vacuum is a period of neither-here-nor-there, during which you relinquish one set of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions, and struggling to figure out “what next” (p. 19). This study found that at the core of moving through the post-college transition is the process of navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters, or figuring it out. Recent graduates experiencing post-college transition are well situated in the moving through aspect, and were actively trying to figure out the “what” as they searched for purpose, passions, and priorities. However, this study on post-college transition is distinctive from Schlossberg’s understanding of moving through in that post-college transition entails an active process of navigating realizations specific to the post-college transition including managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose. An integral component of this study was to construct a thorough understanding of the moving through process of post-college transition.

The key characteristic of establishing place during the post-college transition was critical to the post-college transition and was part of the moving through process for recent college graduates. However, Schlossberg (1984) stated that the establishment of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions was part of the *moving in* process of transition. In this study, those characteristics were established while the participants *moved through* transition. However, the participants anticipated that the roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions would evolve when the transition ended and they moved into achieved adulthood. This study on post-college transition differed from Schlossberg’s work on transition in that during the college to post-college transition,

recent graduates were simultaneously and concurrently establishing role, relationships, routines, and assumptions while figuring out what next.

Based on the experiences and stories of the participants, this study found the process of moving through incorporates an evolvment, not development, of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. However, according to the recent graduates in this study, the process of moving in presumably will incorporate the establishment of a sense of belonging as well as a redefined sense of identity, both of which were void during the post-college transition. Based on the stories and expectations of the participants in this study, the end of the post-college transition indicates movement into achieved adulthood, which is interrelated to Schlossberg's element of moving out, moving through, and moving in. Specifically, the participants in this study moved out of deferred adulthood upon college graduation, moved through post-college transition while situated within transitioning adulthood, and moved out of the transitional time as they achieved adulthood.

**The Four S model of transition.** Schlossberg's theory of transition (Schlossberg, 1984, 2004; Schlossberg et al., 1995) stated that people experiencing similar transitions react in different ways. Although all the participants in this study experienced similar transition characteristics as they transitioned out of college, they also encountered different supports and internal coping strategies, ultimately creating different transition experiences and distinct approaches to transition. The external influences and internal coping strategies resonated with the *4 S system of transition* as prescribed by Schlossberg et al. (1995). Specifically, the 4 S model explores how the balance of four

liabilities and assets: situation, self, support, and strategies, influence an individual's ability to cope during transition.

Schlossberg et al., defined the first S, the *situation* variable, as “what is happening” in the transition (1995, p. 47). This variable was most prevalent for this study given the focus of exploring what was happening during the post-college transition. The situation variable looked at the following characteristics of the transition: trigger, timing, control/source, role change, duration, previous experiences, concurrent stress, and assessment (1995). Specifically, situational aspects of a transition differ for individuals and the way in which individuals react to the transition is based on differing characteristics such as the trigger of the transition, how the transition involved role change, whether or not the transition was seen as permanent or temporary, how the timing related to social factors, and whether there were other stresses facing the individual, to name a few. Schlossberg et al. (1995) found that during similar transitions “every individual's situation varies” according to the factors above (p. 53). However, unique to this study and the post-college transition was the realization that the participants in this study all experienced a similar situation as they transitioned out of college.

As illustrated in chapters four and five, the recent graduates undergoing the post-college transition experienced similar factors of situation as defined by Schlossberg et al. (1995). For instance, the post-college transition was specifically triggered by college graduation, it involved major role change including both role exit and role establishment, it was an expected transition but filled with unexpected experiences and challenges, and it was seen as temporary. Although Schlossberg et al., asserted a difference in the situation

variable for individuals experiencing a similar transition, the participants in this study encountered a very similar situation experience, which became foundational to the theory of college to post-college transition.

However, the participants in this study encountered varied experiences when it came to the presence of previous experiences, including previous work experience, internships, geographic moves, and financial preparation. The 4 S system (Schlossberg et al., 1995) looked at previous experience specifically in relation to prior transitions, however, the participants in this study expressed how this transition was like no other previous transition experienced. However, the general presence of previous similar experiences, not necessarily during a transition, was an external influence that supported the transition to post-college life.

The other two external influences that were found as a part of this study to be relevant to the post-college transition for recent graduates included financial implications and support networks. Both of these elements of transition are relevant to the *support* variable of the 4 S system, which referred specifically to various external forces that provided support to transitioning individuals. Similar to the research of Schlossberg et al. (1995), the supports and available options during the post-college transition varied for each participant within this study. Schlossberg et al. also looked at how the *self* variable influenced the ability of the individual to cope during transition looking specifically at personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources during the transition. As for personal and demographic characteristics, all of the participants in this study were traditional-aged college graduates from the same institution experiencing post-college transition. Although I specifically employed elements of maximum

variation sampling to incorporate a variety of perspectives and experiences based on social identities, this study did not look to explain the transition experience for any particular group, or distinguish one social identity from another in relation to the post-college transition. What is important to note is that individuals with varying demographic characteristics can experience similar transitions and be affected differently.

However, the post-college transition as experienced by the participants in this study did integrate other components of the self variable, namely psychological resources. Important to this study was that a focus on self was a new and predominant experience for the recent college graduates. Although this focus on self was central to all the participants experiences, they established different commitments, values, and personality characteristics. Schlossberg et al. (1995) mentioned how different individuals “approach the same transition from different frames of reference” based on varying psychological resources such as ego development, self-efficacy, commitments, and values (p. 62). Their depiction of the self variable is closely related to the distinct approaches to post-college transition that emerged in this study. The way in which the individuals approached the transition from college to post-college was based on an interaction of varying psychological resources, transition experiences, and available supports.

The five approaches to post-college transition constructed in this study could also be related to the *strategies* variable within the 4 S model of transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). This variable focuses on the differences in how individual’s cope and navigate transitions. In addition to the different approaches used to navigate the series of realizations that occur during the post-college transition, the participants in this study

developed coping strategies specific to the post-college transition. As detailed in chapter four, each of the participants in this study developed at least one of the following coping strategies to support the transition: searching out shared experiences, surrounding self with stabilizing forces, and focusing on strengths as the result of reassurance and recognition.

**Life event guided transitions.** Most recently, Schlossberg (2004) looked at the transition process for individuals transitioning into retirement. Because both post-college transition and the transition to retirement occur as the result of a life transition, it was important to explore the relationship between the emergent theory and the literature surrounding the transition to retirement. Similar to her previous research on transitions, Schlossberg found that retirees undergo three distinct phases during retirement: (1) moving out, or letting go of the work role; (2) moving through, including searching for what is next and how to restructure life; and (3) moving in, the process creating a new life. However, the process of creating a new life, which Schlossberg asserted started after the searching period ended and upon movement into the next phase, started during the moving through process for recent graduates. As transitioning adults, recent graduates experiencing the post-college transition were actively establishing self and place. More than other transitions, her study on the transition to retirement explored the need to grieve during this particular transition as the result of having to move out and leave behind the identity of worker. The participants in this study grieved during the post-college transition as illustrated through the key category of managing loss.

The research on transition to retirement also resulted in five approaches to transition to retirement, though how they were developed differed from how the



approaches to post-college were constructed. That both studies on transition resulted in five transitional approaches was just a coincidence. Schlossberg found the following five approaches to retirement: Continuers (more of the same but different); Adventures (something new); Searchers (looking for their niche); Easy Gliders (content to go with the flow); and Retreaters (giving up). Although there are some overlapping features between the approaches to retirement and the approaches to the post-college transition, they do not appear to be the same five approaches with different names. Except for the similarities between Easy Gliders and Adaptors (go with the flow), and Adventures and Initiators (take risks), there appear to be few similarities between the remaining approaches. For example, although both Searchers and Observers long for a sense of belonging, Searchers are actively searching while Observers take a very passive approach waiting for change and events to happen upon them.

**Summary of relationship to Schlossberg's theory of transition.** Although many of the findings from this study resonate with Schlossberg's research on transition (Schlossberg, 1984, 2004; Schlossberg et al., 1995), there were also many distinguishable differences. For example, assuming the recent graduates in this study were immersed in the moving through facet of post-college transition, they were still actively establishing roles, responsibilities, priorities, and goals while simultaneously searching for purpose and exploring values. Unlike Schlossberg (1984, 2005) who situated the process of figuring it out during the period of moving through while situating the establishment of roles during the moving in phase of transition, for the recent graduates in this study, the period of transition (moving through) was a period of both figuring it out and establishing place and self. In addition, Schlossberg et al. (1995) focused on how individuals reacted

to transition based on the presence of liabilities and assets surrounding situation, self, support, and strategies. She asserted that individuals experience great difference in situation, self, support and strategies while undergoing similar transitions. Based on the experiences of the participants in this study, similar post-college transition characteristics were experienced by all of the participants, which resulted in the construction of the four post-college transition characteristics. In addition, Schlossberg purposefully looked at distinct reactions of individuals experiencing transition while this study illustrated distinct approaches to the post-college transition. Finally, though her most recent work on the transition to retirement incorporated the aspect of grieving and identified different pathways to transition, the approaches and transition experiences were very distinct from one another.

### **Developmental Approaches to Transition**

As stated in the previous section and in chapter two, according to Schlossberg et al. (1995), any transition process has three distinct phases: moving out, moving through, and moving in. In this study, I constructed an understanding of 13 recent college graduates' experiences moving through the post-college transition. The purpose of this study was to focus on experiences, characteristics, and situations specific and bound to the post-college transition in order to better understand the process of the college to post-college transition. However, the transition – and the moving through phase – was better understood in relation to developmental periods before and after the post-college transition. Furthermore, based on the experiences of the participants, it was established that the actual post-college transition ended by moving in to a new and distinct phase of life. As stated throughout this study, the participants in this study equated the transition

from college to post-college life with the transition to adulthood. Although not an initial focus of the study, because a life transition assumes moving from one distinct life phase to another (Schlossberg, 2004), the participants' transition experiences were explored looking at their movement from college student to transitioning adult. Eventually the transition will end as they transition into achieved adulthood. As a result, it was imperative to explore the relationship between the post-college transition and lifespan development, particularly the transition to adulthood. Furthermore, as the recent graduates transitioned from college to post-college life, they also exhibited development tasks germane to the post-college transition and transitioning adult.

In an effort to provide context to the transition to adulthood and corresponding developmental tasks, it was important to understand the element of moving through as recognized by Schlossberg (1984, 2004) and Schlossberg et al. (1995). Accordingly, movement through the lifespan, from one developmental stage to another developmental stage inherently assumes a transition. In his research on transition, Bridges (2009) described the element of moving through one phase to another as a transitional "neutral zone." While immersed in the neutral zone, individuals are actively working to figure out what is important, what they are good at, where their place is, and what they want in life. This is similar to recent college graduates who are actively navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters during the post-college transition. As Bridges described the neutral zone, he referred to it as "an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational. It's when the critical psychological realignments and repatternings take place" (p. 5). Essential to the aspect of transitioning from one distinct phase in life to another is the concept of re-establishing identity. While in the neutral

zone, the recent graduates were redefining their identity; they were searching to understand who they were and what mattered to them in a post-college context.

**Identity development.** The concept of identity and establishing a sense of self that was prominent in the findings of the post-college transition have historically been central to both the field of lifespan development and the study of transition. In his classic eight stages of psychosocial development, Erikson (1958/1963, 1968, 1980) stated that in each stage of human development individuals undergo an identity crisis where they forge a new identity as the result of experiencing a crisis. Erikson's model of human development throughout the lifespan provided a framework for understanding that as college graduates transition out of college they reconstruct an identity. The terms *reconstruct*, *redefine*, and *reestablish* were intentionally used in this study based on an understanding of existing literature and the experiences of the participants following graduation. Josselson (1987, 1996) stated that the time during college should be one in which students explore new ideas and develop personal beliefs and commitments that are the basis of their identity. The participants echoed this sentiment and talked about college as a time in which they developed a sense of identity, beliefs, and belonging. However, as the stories from the participants in this study revealed, an awareness of identity and sense of self was lost following graduation. As recent graduates experienced the post-college transition, they navigated a series of realizations about self and what mattered in an attempt to forge a new identity.

**Developmental tasks.** As the findings of this study revealed, the theory of college to post-college transition assumes that recent graduates, or transitioning adults, show evidence of specific developmental tasks germane to the post-college transition.

Recent graduates are no longer a college student or deferred adult, but have not yet achieved adulthood either. Although in limbo, the participants in this study displayed developmental tasks specific to the transition, particularly as they attempted to figure it out. The construct of “transitioning adult” emerged from the experiences and stories of the participants; it assumes specific developmental tasks connecting the transition process from college to post-college life with the transition into adulthood. As evident from the findings, transitioning adults are learning to establish responsibilities and priorities. The focus is on the present and immediate future and as a result, decisions are made for only short-term implications. In addition, transitioning adults focus on self and move from being self-aware in college to self-focused during the post-college transition. However, there is a strong desire to make a difference and contribute among transitioning adults. A more detailed discussion on transitioning adults, particularly in relation to young adults and emerging adults, follows.

**Transitioning adult.** As the recent graduates in this study navigated the transition process, they were actively trying to figure it out to eventually achieve adulthood. As described in detail in chapter five, the participants in this study did not consider themselves to be adults while in college and they equated the end of the post-college transition with achieving adulthood. This element of deferred adulthood that emerged during this study resonates with the recent belief that young people are taking longer to reach adulthood (Henig, 2010). According to Henig, the transition to adulthood has historically been marked by the following five life milestones: completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, committing to a monogamous relationship, and becoming a parent. However, Henig found that these five milestones

are now taking longer to reach and are often reached out of order. For many of the participants in this study, certain milestones were not only non-existent, but they were of little relevance and/or importance.

Findings from this study and existing literature (Henig, 2010) assert that adulthood is not yet achieved upon college graduation. Constructed from the stories and experiences of the participants, this study defined the developmental process to adulthood in the following way: deferred adulthood incorporates the phase of college student, transitioning adulthood incorporates the phase of the post-college transition, and achieved adulthood incorporates the phase following the post-college transition. The participants in this study were all situated within the phase of transitioning adult as characterized by this study.

Though numerous theories on lifespan development exist, this study looked at transitioning adulthood in relation to lifespan development, specifically young adulthood, as recognized by Erikson (1950/1963, 1968, 1980) and emerging adulthood as characterized by Arnett (2000, 2004, 2010). These theories were relevant for this study because they incorporated similar ages and experiences within individual development. In actuality, many people situate recent college graduates as either young adults or emerging adults. Again, it should be noted that this study was not designed to discover a stage of lifespan development, but rather to better understand the post-college transition, which based on the constructions of the participants, incorporates the process of transitioning to adulthood. As a result, transitioning adulthood is not a distinct life stage. It could instead be considered a process as the result of transitioning from college to adulthood, or a process connecting deferred adult to achieved adult. For the purpose of

this study, the construct of transitioning adults is used to represent recent college graduates moving through the post-college transition.

***Transitioning adults and young adults.*** Within Erikson's developmental stages (1950/1963, 1968, 1980), young adulthood fell between adolescence and adulthood. Provided the participants in this study did not situate themselves within the stage of adulthood, Erikson's young adulthood stage would be the most appropriate developmental stage encountered by recent college graduates. According to Erikson, young adulthood is a time where individuals search to advance careers and relationships of love. The focus on both career and love were present in the stories of all the participants' experiences, however, the priority towards each differed based on the approach to post-college transition taken by the recent graduates in this study.

Erikson also asserted that young adulthood is a time in which crises of identity centers on mastering the conflict of intimacy versus isolation. However, for the participants in this study, the conflicts were broader than intimacy versus isolation, and in actuality many of the participants were not yet to a point where intimacy was very important. However, most significant in this study were the conflicts of managing loss versus establishing place and focusing on self versus searching for purpose. As recent graduates in this study managed loss, particularly loss of identity, loss of support networks, loss of sense of belonging, and loss of social relationships, they simultaneously established new roles, new relationships, new goals, and new priorities. Additionally, recent graduates had a desire to find a sense of purpose and make meaningful contributions, but this was often in contrast to the need to focus on self and prioritize self.

*Transitioning adults and emerging adults.* More recently, Arnett's (2000, 2001, 2004) emerging adulthood theory was established as a new and distinct life stage focusing on the period of life from the teens through the late twenties. According to Arnett's classification, the participants in this study and most recent college graduates would be considered emerging adults. This study found both similarities and distinct differences between emerging adulthood and transitioning adults moving from college to post-college life. In order to better situate recent college graduates within emerging adulthood, I explored the characteristics of the post-college transition in relation to the assumptions of emerging adulthood.

Emerging adulthood, according to Arnett (2004), has five main features. He asserted that emerging adulthood is: an age of identity exploration, the age of instability, the most self-focused age of life, the feeling of in-between, and the age of possibilities. Each of these features was a key characteristic found within the emerging theory of college to post-college transition. Central to the post-college transition theory was navigating a series of realizations and figuring it out. In addition, recent college graduates were establishing roles and responsibilities and redefining their identity. These aspects of the post-college transition are similar to the element of identity exploration. In addition, as recent graduates experienced an end to a sequence of expectations and faced unexpected and uncertain futures, it could be defined as a period of instability. Although the post-college transition indeed incorporated a period of instability, each of the recent graduates in this study intentionally sought out a source of stability as part of the transition process. This strategy of surrounding self with stabilizing forces inherent in the



transition process for recent graduates was not reflected in Arnett's stage of emerging adulthood.

Based on the characteristics of the post-college transition described in chapter four, recent graduates, like emerging adults, are self-focused. In this study on post-college transition, the focus on self and priority of self that was established by the participants was greater than previous points of time. However, it was seen as essential in order to establish roles, responsibilities, goals, and priorities. A focus on self was also necessary to redefine identity. Yet, this focus on self was also seen as temporary with the intention that a greater focus on others would surface upon achieved adulthood. This finding was similar to Arnett's (2004) finding that emerging adulthood is the most self-focused age of life. Arnett went on to state that this self-focused time was "normal, healthy and temporary" (p. 13). Like the declarations from the participants in this study, Arnett talked about this period of self-focus as being essential to build a foundation for adult life.

The findings surrounding the college to post-college transition suggest that recent graduates felt in-between two stages. Although emerging adulthood specifically positions individuals between adolescence and adulthood, the recent graduates in this study similarly positioned themselves somewhere between, as Winston said, "college kid" and "responsible adult." Participants repeatedly talked about feeling in limbo, no longer a kid but not yet an adult. According to Arnett (2004), adulthood assumed accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. From his perspective, emerging adults have not yet developed those qualities. However, although many transitioning adults had difficulty making

decisions, others did not. For example, in this study, many of the recent graduates, particularly the Initiators and Instrumentalists, did not have difficulty making decisions. Additionally, one key aspect of the post-college transition was the establishment of responsibility. Accepting responsibility for oneself was actually a critical element of the post-college transition process, and therefore, a criteria for the transitioning adult.

Finally, Arnett (2004) asserted that emerging adulthood is an age of possibilities. As transitioning adults navigated a series of realizations, they simultaneously sorted through different possibilities. The uncertain component of the period of time following college graduation was therefore naturally filled with possibilities. However, what Arnett does not take into consideration is the way in which emerging adults approach or react to the aspect of possibilities. For example, many of the participants in this study were excited by the open-endedness of the post-college life. The Observers in the study, for example, waited for the change and eagerly anticipated the possibilities. However, for the Traditionalists of this study, the aspect of unknown possibilities was the biggest challenge they faced during the transition and they intentionally worked to reduce unknown possibilities.

Although emerging adulthood incorporated many of the same characteristics of the post-college transition and transitioning adulthood, there were many characteristics of transitioning adulthood that were not found within Arnett's (2004) developmental stage of emerging adulthood. Most significant was the aspect of loss that recent graduates experienced. Although emerging adulthood incorporates the element of instability, it does not incorporate the loss of sense of belonging, the loss of social relationships, or the loss of identity that was so prevalent and powerful in the transition experiences for the

participants in this study. Additionally, as a result of college attendance, transitioning adults moved from holding expert status to reverting back to novice status. Arnett's emerging adulthood does not explain, focus, or begin to understand the beginner or novice status so prominent in the experience of transitioning adults. Furthermore, aside from experiencing and managing loss, the recent graduates in this study were actively establishing roles, responsibilities, priorities, and goals during the post-college transition. Emerging adulthood focuses more on the exploration, not establishment, of place that was so dominant in the post-college transition experience.

Likewise, the search for purpose, making meaningful contributions, and making a difference was hinted to in regards to emerging adulthood, but not fully explored. Meanwhile, for transitioning adults, these were all key concepts that emerged as part of the post-college transition. Finally, except for being the age of self-focus, emerging adulthood makes little reference to focusing on short-term and immediate goals. In this study, the transitioning adults overwhelmingly focused on the immediate and near future; decisions and actions were made according to present and short-term outcomes. Although Arnett's (2004) emerging adulthood described the self-focused element as temporary, the notion of focusing primarily on the present and immediate future was not a relevant aspect.

**Transitioning toward self-authorship.** Emerging adults, as well as the recent graduates in this study, experience a period of decision making and understanding of one's self. In terms of making meaning of their world view, the recent graduates in this study, were well situated along the journey toward self-authorship. Building upon the work of Kegan (1982, 1994), Baxter Magolda (1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2009)

defined self-authorship as the ability for individuals to use their internal voice and core personal values to guide their life. According to Baxter Magolda (2001), the journey toward self-authorship takes place during a person's twenties and thirties. It was relevant to this study not only because the participants were demographically situated within this age period, but Baxter Magolda (2001) also proclaimed that a goal of higher education should be to prepare students to achieve self-authorship. Self-authorship is particularly relevant to this study because at the core of the emergent college to post-college transition was the process of making meaning, or figuring out self and what matters.

Kegan (1994) specifically looked at how one makes meaning and described self-authorship as an evolution of consciousness. According to Kegan, this evolution assumes a process of developing a sense of self to guide decision making while also understanding and making meaning of other relationships. The participants in this study were situated within a process of figuring it out; they were developing a sense of self and establishing internal values, beliefs, goals, and priorities. However, based on the stories and experiences of the participants, although recent graduates were very focused on self, they were not as likely to make meaning of the relationship of self to others. Kegan stated that self-authorship is achieved in the fourth order of consciousness, when individuals establish the internal self as the source of belief while internalizing other's perspectives to guide one's own experience. The recent graduates in this study had not yet achieved self-authorship, according to Kegan's (1994) portrayal, however they appeared to be situated somewhere in the beginning stages of the fourth order of consciousness and on their way to reaching self-authorship.

In addition, the journey towards self-authorship, as described by Baxter Magolda

(1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2009) resonated closely with the emergent theory of college to post-college transition as constructed by the participants. Baxter Magolda (2009) described the journey to self-authorship as moving from external voices guiding beliefs, to recognizing the importance of internal voices, to cultivating internal voices to guide beliefs. The participants repeatedly talked about relying on the opinions and “voices” of external authorities to provide direction up through college graduation. As the graduates in this study left college and became more self-focused, they also became more aware of their internal voices. As this study showed, the recent college graduates were actively establishing roles, responsibilities, and goals while focusing on self and searching for purpose. The participants in this study were in the process of identifying their beliefs and values, and for the first time began prioritizing their beliefs and values. In addition, they relied less on external authorities. The reduced reliance on external voices was an unanticipated challenge experienced during the post-college transition as the result of decreasing social networks and sources of support. As a result, the participants faced isolation and a diminished sense of belonging, which resulted in the need to develop internal coping strategies. The establishment of internal coping strategies, the establishment of priorities, the focus on finding self, and the search for passion and purpose are all anticipated elements of the journey toward self-authorship.

The participants in this study were on the journey toward self-authorship. However, where on the journey they were located varied. Some of the recent graduates were closer to becoming self-authored and many were still situated at the crossroads. Baxter Magolda (2009) talked about the crossroads as a period where individuals are torn between following others’ values and expectations versus following one’s own beliefs

and expectations. As the participants told their story of the post-college transition, many actually used the term “crossroads,” or other similar terminology to describe their situation. Karen talked about being torn between wanting to go back to school or not, and discussed how she needed others to help tell her what she should do. Her internal beliefs told her she should go back to school, but she was still guided by external expectations and voices. Furthermore, as Emily said, “But, I think right now I am at a crossroads trying to figure out a location where I want to go and finding my own niche.” Following external voices, Emily went to dental school as she had always expected and planned. However, now that she was immersed in dental school she was trying to make her own decisions and striving to figure out what she believed and where she wanted her life to go. Others, such as Eric, used the term “limbo” to describe the crossroads between relying on others to guide the path and listening to self to describe the path.

Pizzolato’s (2003, 2005) research on self-authorship also explored the period of a crossroads and found that the element of being at a crossroads was in fact critical to individuals being able to achieve self-authorship. However, Pizzolato’s study found that the crossroads often occurred during college, while this study found the crossroads occurred and was influential during the post-college transition. What was not explored in this study, was whether or not any of the recent graduates experiencing a crossroads as part of the post-college transition had previously experienced a crossroads while in college. This should be researched further in future studies, specifically in terms of racial and gender implications as Pizzolato asserts a relationship between social identity formation and the element of crossroads on the journey to self-authorship while in college.

The findings of this study, however, further suggest that the element of crossroads is occurring for recent college graduates during the post-college transition. One aspect of this study that showcased how participants were at a crossroads was the way in which they developed internal coping strategies. One of the key findings was the need to develop internal coping strategies for the first time as a result of the loss that was experienced during the transition. Though the participants recognized their internal voice to develop coping strategies, the coping strategies were often based on the visions of others. Most specifically, while the recent graduates focused on personal strengths as a way to internally cope with the transition, they focused on personal strengths that emerged as the result of reassurance and recognition from others. The need to gain reassurance and recognition from others was incredibly strong for many of the participants.

There were also other aspects of the emergent theory of the transition from college to post-college that paralleled and supported the literature on the journey to self-authorship. For example, Baxter Magolda (2009) stated the importance of having supportive partners along the journey. The simultaneous gain and loss of friendships, relationships, support networks, and sense of belonging during the post-college transition were critical elements of the transition for the participants in this study. Two of the three coping strategies developed revolved around “finding good company” (p. 319) as the recent graduates actively sought out other individuals with shared experiences and surrounded themselves with stabilizing forces.

As this study explored the post-college transition in relation to the transition to adulthood, the transitioning adults were all situated along the path to self-authorship.

According to the experiences and perspectives of the participants, neither adulthood nor self-authorship had been achieved during the course of this study and the post-college transition. However, where along the journey the participants were located varied from participant to participant. Many were at the crossroads relying on external voices and listening to internal voices. Others were more focused on their internal voice and began to identify their voice as they established place, focused on self, and searched for purpose. The participants were also beginning to cultivate their internal voice as they began to establish priorities. According to the constructs of self-authorship established by Baxter Magolda (1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2009), the participants were in the midst of figuring it out and putting together “the puzzle” of who they were (p. 4), and therefore were not yet self-authored.

**Summary of the emergent theory as a developmental approach.** The emerging theory of college to post-college transition established that for the participants of this study, the transition from college to post-college life assumes a transition to (self-authored) adulthood. However, it must again be stated that the purpose of this study was not to develop a stage on transitioning to adulthood. The theory that emerged as a result of the experiences and stories of transitioning adults was a theory of college to post-college transition, not a theory of the transition to adulthood. However, those experiencing the transition from college to post-college life could be identified as transitioning adults along the journey to self-authorship. Transitioning adults are in the process of figuring it out and developing an internal voice; they are situated in the midst of the journey toward self-authorship, but are not yet self-authored.



## **Implications**

Many implications for theory development, student affairs practice, and future research came to light as the result of this study. This study and the corresponding theory that emerged on the post-college transition can inform higher education institutions, student affairs administrators, and entities working with recent college graduates. These implications result from the elements that framed the study, the stories and experiences of the participants, and the various categories constructed within the emergent theory.

### **Implications for Theory Development**

Implications for future theory development transpired as this theory emerged surrounding the experience of recent college graduates navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters during the transition from college to post-college life. Specifically, findings from this study illuminate implications for identity development of recent college graduates, implications for a developmental approach to adulthood, implications for social identity development, and implications for career development theory.

First, the concept of identity development is a central theme for higher education and student affairs theorists. Identity development, specifically redefining identity, was also relevant to the process of post-college transition. As Schlossberg (2004) stated, “the issue of identity is critical as you negotiate any transition” (p. 28). During college, students are given an opportunity to explore identity possibilities. Josselson (1987, 1996) stated that the time during college is typically one of a state of moratorium and that students need this opportunity to explore new ideas and develop personal beliefs and commitments to become a pathmaker and forge identity achievement.

This study illustrated how for the participants, identity was constructed while in college but needed to be reconstructed during the period of post-college transition. Identity development of college students is widely studied within the field of higher education and student affairs. However, too often the theorists only study identity development of individuals while in college. Meanwhile, the participants in this study experienced immense loss when it came to an awareness of their own identity in a post-college context. This study draws attention to the need to understand identity development of college students/recent graduates from formation of identity while in college throughout the process of identity reconstruction during the post-college transition.

Though this study did not specifically look at identity formation and development of recent college graduates, the aspect of reevaluating and redefining identity post-graduation was prominent in the stories of the participants and should be further explored in future theory development. Likewise, the purpose of this study was not to define a developmental approach to adulthood, but the transition to adulthood was an integral theme throughout the transition experiences of the recent graduates within this study. As a result, the findings from this study suggest approaches to the post-college transition. Erikson's (1980) model of human development throughout the lifespan provided an initial framework for understanding college graduates as they transition to adulthood. The participants in this study exemplified the notion that they did not perceive themselves as adults while in college and were instead imbedded in the process of becoming adults during the post-college transition. As a result, I used the term transitioning adult to refer to recent college graduates situated within the developmental

process of moving from college and transitioning to adulthood. Although the phase of transitioning adult constructed in this study has distinct similarities and differences to both young adulthood and emerging adulthood, it is not meant to be a new and distinct stage on the transition to adulthood. Regardless, based on the findings of this study coupled with the recent belief that young people are taking longer to reach adulthood (Henig, 2010), one primary implication for theory development is the need to further explore the transition to adulthood.

It was not the intention of this study to characterize the transition to adulthood as either a stage or a process. However, the findings surrounding the theory of college to post-college transition for recent college graduates can provide a better understanding of the transition to adulthood – as a stage or a process – to help inform developmental theorists in future theory development about the transition to adulthood. Also important to future theory development is the realization based on the experiences of the recent graduates that the actual post-college transition and corresponding phase of transitioning adult is a temporary phase. An understanding of the temporizing stage of transitioning adults can be useful to future theory development on the transition to adulthood. Finally, the findings from this study can also provide higher education administrators, college students, and recent college graduates with a better understanding of transitioning adulthood encountered by recent graduates as they move through the process of the post-college transition.

The findings from this study also have implications for social identity development. It was not the intention of this study to explore or understand the college to post-college transition experience for any particular demographic or social identity.

Regardless, it is important to recognize that varying social identities will impact each of the participants' experiences differently. However, the findings from this study suggest that even experiences that occurred during the transition as the result of racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, gender, religion, socio-economic status, or ability differences contributed to the series of realizations (managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and searching for purpose) that were experienced by all recent graduates. For example, Anne was torn between her responsibility to provide for her family as a result of her Filipino heritage and her desire to focus on her poetry and self. Although her social identity influenced her process of *figuring it out*, she was still establishing priorities and focusing on self. In addition, Razac talked about his inability to find a sense of belonging with other African American men. His experience as a Black male contributed to his transition, but the diminished sense of belonging after graduation fell within the transition realization of managing loss. As a result, I suggest more research surrounding the college to post-college transition experience in relation to social identity development, specifically the different ways in which recent graduates across various social identities experience the post-college transition.

In addition to implications for identity development theory, theory on developmental approaches to adulthood, and the relationship of social identity development to the post-college transition, this study also informs career development theory. This study did not specifically explore or seek to understand career development theory. However, the participants' reflections on the transition from college into the workforce can be useful in understanding the experiences facing recent graduates as they search for and enter jobs; in turn this provides implications that inform career

development theory. Although the experiences and stories of the participants have implications for personality/trait theories of career development, the knowledge from this study provide implications for both developmental lifespan and social cognitive career theories. Developmental lifespan theories of career development (Hackett & Lent, 1992; Super, 1957, 1980) view career development as a process throughout the lifetime. Specifically, Super's (1957, 1980) theory of career development found that individuals in their mid-20s through mid-40s are in the developmental career stage of "establishment."

This study has specific implications for that aspect of Super's theory given the key category of establishing place. Further theory development should look at the relationship between establishing roles, responsibilities, goals, and priorities to individual career development. However, in addition to the concept of establishing place, the stories from the participants in this study also revealed that recent graduates are navigating other realizations including realizations about personal values and passion while focusing on self and negotiating internal and external supports. Understanding the overlapping and interacting post-college realizations will also help to inform social cognitive career theory that looks at the interaction of individuals, their behavior, and their environments to shape career choice and behavior (Lent, 2005).

### **Implications for Practice**

In addition to informing future career development theory, the findings that emerged as part of this study also inform career development practice and other practices within the field of higher education and student affairs. By understanding the experiences of recent college graduates and the way in which they make meaning and approach their professional life during the post-college transition can provide practical

knowledge to enhance practice for higher education institutions and administrators. Colleges and universities make a deliberate effort to provide resources and support services to help college students adjust to college and be successful once there, however, except for career development offices and a few senior year experience programs, few resources exist on college campuses to aid the transition to post-college life. This realization from the participants was most powerful as they told their transition story and reflected on the availability and absence of experiences in college that impacted the transition. For example, the presence of work experiences smoothed the transition, while the lack of financial preparation hampered the transition. Through understanding the experiences of recent college graduates, and particularly how college experiences impacted the post-college transition, institutions can provide opportunities and implement practices to better prepare students for life after college.

One primary implication for future practice surrounds the importance of understanding the key category of managing loss and providing opportunities to reduce the amount of loss faced by recent graduates. This category was most prevalent for all of the participants as they repeatedly reflected on experiencing and managing immense loss and the aspect of facing unexpected challenges as they moved from college to post-college life. Most of the loss was the result of unexpected challenges and change. This characteristic of the post-college transition highlights the importance for college and university staff to provide services for students preparing to graduate about what they should expect to face following graduation. This could include discussions with students from staff in offices frequented by college seniors including career services offices, academic advisors, senior capstone coordinators, and student organizations advisors. In

addition to general programming for college seniors to discuss life after college, structures throughout campus that have a concentration of senior students such as residence halls, Greek organizations, leadership programs, and athletic teams, could offer senior specific programming to prepare students for what could be expected after college. Although senior specific programs and senior capstone courses are ideal for imparting conversations surrounding the post-college transition to undergraduate students, this can be best conveyed if integrated in courses throughout the curriculum. As a result of the findings from this study, it is the recommendation that faculty across disciplines integrate elements within the curriculum to help prepare students for life after college and the post-college transition. Specifically, topics surrounding establishing roles, responsibilities, goals and priorities could be woven into the course content.

More specifically, specific programming and conversations on post-college experiences, particularly financial implications after college, should be provided for college students preparing to graduate. Many of the graduates talked about how regardless of the current state of the economy, they were unprepared to manage the financial aspects of post-college life. As Eric stated, even with a good job no one ever told him how to balance his expenses. Emily specifically referenced her desire to have had financial counseling while in college. The difficulty resulting from a difference in availability of resources between college and post-college life combined with minimal financial preparation and understanding prior to the transition provides justification for financial counseling to take place at the college level.

One reason why the unexpected challenges and feelings of loss were so powerful during the transition, according to the participants, was a result of the perception of

college as a bubble. As Karen stated, in college “you are living in a bubble.” Bobby went on to reference how after leaving the bubble of college he was “not prepared for the hardships. It took an emotional toll on me.” Many other participants also specifically used the term “bubble” to refer to their college experience. The participants relayed stories about how college provided numerous intentional communities that provided a sense of belonging and shaped identity, that were then lost upon graduation. As a result, transitioning out of college and leaving the bubble resulted in hardship and difficulty.

As colleges focus on recruiting and retaining students, the increased number of services provided for students creates the “rosy, bubble-like atmosphere” that Bobby mentioned. Sonia talked about how she never needed to work at establishing a sense of belonging while in college because it was established for her. Karen echoed this sentiment and talked about how in college others would make decisions for her. Connor specifically talked about how college provided an opportunity to make mistakes and allowed him to delay a sense of responsibility because it was a “safe bubble.” Therefore, one important implication that emerged from this study is the need for higher education administrators to provide opportunities to help break students out of the comfort zone. Providing opportunities for students to leave their comfort zone will reduce unanticipated challenges and loss while also encouraging college students to begin how to figure it out while still in college. According to Pizzolato (2003, 2005) providing intentional opportunities for students to be “at a crossroads” while still in college will help to encourage responsibility, decision making, and holding oneself accountable before graduation.



Similarly, this study also revealed how the presence of meaningful prior experiences helped ease the transition to post-college life. For example, Eric reflected on how his professional experience working in the corporate sector throughout college prepared him for his job following college. He referenced how holding an off-campus job during college allowed him to “step outside of the bubble-like environment that others existed in.” Eric’s experience indicated that one way to take students outside of their comfort zone while providing a challenging and meaningful experience is through encouraging off-campus employment opportunities. Aside from off-campus employment opportunities, this study suggests that higher education practitioners provide more opportunities for college students to participate in high-impact practices. High-impact practices, as defined by Kuh (2008) include educational practices that allow students to gain economic, civic, and personal benefits while in college that also result in meeting essential student learning outcomes. High-impact practices, including learning communities, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, internships, service-learning, and capstone courses allow for students to engage in meaningful experiences outside of their comfort zone. They lead to increased exposure to diverse experiences and people, provide opportunities both on and off-campus to apply what they have learned, and deepens student learning while raising awareness about one’s values and beliefs.

Several findings from this study recommend providing increased opportunities for involvement in high-impact practices while in college in order to remove students from the secure constructs of college and provide opportunities for students to start figuring it out prior to leaving college. Not only might these experiences help to ease the transition,

but involvement in high-impact practices might also reduce the number of beginner-like situations during the post-college transition. Faculty should also provide more opportunities for students to experience high-impact practices through curricular based learning including student research, service-learning, and experiential education. As described within the findings of this study, such opportunities will enable undergraduate student the opportunity to gain experience in direct relation to post-college life.

In addition, campuses are encouraged to provide more opportunities for students to take capstone courses during the final year of college. Capstone courses provide intentional experiences for students to bridge a variety of concepts incorporating both the college experience and post-college life. These courses would also provide an opportunity to illuminate and discuss the characteristics of the post-college transition that were salient to the recent graduates including managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, searching for purpose, and developing coping strategies. Furthermore, in addition to providing experiences for high-impact practices, capstone courses, and other opportunities that allow students to step outside of their comfort zone, faculty and staff should make intentional connections between these opportunities and the treatment of college students as adults. This could help encourage college students to view themselves as adults prior to the post-college transition.

Another powerful implication of this study surrounded the support networks that the participants had during the post-college transition. Specifically, the presence of mentors and the availability to find stabilizing forces during the post-college transition inform practice. College campuses provide numerous opportunities for college student to find mentors while only a few of the participants had mentors in post-college life.

Similarly, as college students, the participants had stable friendships and activities during college that were lost upon graduation. The recent graduates in this study had varying levels of ability for seeking out shared experiences and/or stabilizing forces during the transition. College campuses could encourage students to maintain involvement with both mentors and college activities following graduation. This could involve having specific young alumni mentor programs and young alumni activities and involvement opportunities. In addition, this also informs job providers. For example, career development staff could use this study to inform potential employers and human resources professionals to think about having intentional mentorship programs and young professional activities and opportunities to help new professionals become involved with others in a shared experience.

In addition to suggesting that employers and human resources professionals provide opportunity for intentional mentorship and new professional experiences, career development offices could also use this study to inform potential employers about the transition characteristics faced by recent college graduates. For example, it could be helpful for employers, and recent graduates, if employers understand the loss faced by recent graduates while recognizing the desire from recent graduates to be reassured and recognized in their work. This study has implications for job providers to aid the transition from college to the work place for recent graduates, including making available different opportunities to contribute, volunteer, and/or make a difference. For example, understanding that recent graduates want to make a difference and contribute both to the workplace and society, employers could provide some intentional opportunities for volunteerism or service. As the participants illustrated in this study, there was a strong

interest in, and value placed on making a difference. However, unless service was part of the job, recent graduates were taking little action to fulfill this interest.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The sections above emphasize implications for future theory development and student affairs practice as the result of the emergent theory of college to post-college transition. The implications for theory and practice described above should also inform future research. In addition, the findings from this study particularly inform future research in the following three areas: student outcomes assessment and higher education accountability, expectations of college graduates, and further development of recent graduates approaches to transition.

Institutions of higher education are facing increased standards of accountability surrounding student learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). As a result, college campuses are increasingly placing emphasis on the significance of outcomes assessment and the need to demonstrate student success. College campuses must show that they are “doing what is necessary to ensure that the full cognitive, affective, and social development of students is realized” (Bresciani et al., 2009, p. 12). However, according to Bresciani et al., most of the existing higher education and student affairs literature looks at student learning outcomes while the student is still enrolled in an institution, not after they have graduated. Bresciani et al. asserted:

Outcomes-based assessment of student learning is often geared toward determining what students learn in a particular situation or how they develop over time as a result of participation in a specific activity or experience. Moreover, it is completed most often with the intention of intervening while the student is still

enrolled in the institution in an effort to enhance the overall learning and development. (p. 5)

By assessing outcomes *during* college, the overall assessment of student learning and development is incomplete since the assessment typically takes place prior to college graduation. Although this study does not specifically address college outcomes or the importance of accountability on student learning, it is one of the few studies that seeks to understand the immediate post-college experience for recent graduates through a reflection of the college experience. The stories from the participants surrounding college and the post-college transition can help guide practice and provide direction for further outcomes assessment following graduation.

Future research related to assessing student learning outcomes at a point of time after college graduation is encouraged. The higher education research that studied student outcomes following graduation typically looked at either the impact of college attendance on individuals, or career choice, preparedness, and satisfaction. As stated in chapter two, college environments literature has found that college attendance has a positive impact on individuals (Astin, 1993; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pace, 1979; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991/2005). Due to the fact that all of the participants in this study were college graduates, it was not important to look at the impact of college attendance versus non-college attendance. Instead, this study informs higher education to how particular aspects of the college experience impact the post-college transition. It is suggested that future research explores how different college experiences specifically impact college graduates in the areas of managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, and making a difference. Knowing these four characteristics of the post-college

transition are the most prevalent characteristics for recent graduates during the transition, it is encouraged that future research focuses on which college experiences play significant roles in easing the transition in each of these four areas.

Understanding college outcomes from the perspective of college graduates is also recommended in order to conduct a more comprehensive assessment of institutional accountability. It is important to assess outcomes following graduation to better understand expectations of learning outcomes from actual college graduates. The second recommendation for future research is to assess student learning outcomes and higher education accountability from the perspective of college graduates. This research helps to decrease disparities between expectations of higher education institutions and expectations of college graduates. At the time of this study, outcomes-based assessment is a prominent area of discussion for higher education and student affairs professionals with documents such as the *Student Learning Imperative* (ACPA, 1994), *Learning Reconsidered* (ACPA & NASPA, 2004), and the *Commission Report on the Future of Higher Education* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) taking a focus. Additionally, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2005/2008) stated that higher education should prepare students to gain knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative learning. However, although these documents have become seminal works within the field of higher education and student affairs, none of these documents look at institutional accountability or student learning outcomes from the perspective of recent college graduates. It is recommended that learning outcomes

and accountability measures be assessed from the viewpoint of recent college graduates in addition to institutional and external constituent perspectives.

The results of this study also inform higher education educators about a discrepancy between what recent graduates expected post-college and what recent graduates experience post-college. The participants talked about how certain expectations originated in college that were not met following graduation. As a result, another recommendation for future research is to research the discrepancy between expectations established in college and actual experiences post-college. For example, the participants talked about expected post-college experiences that were not achieved including: career success, love, obligation to religion, and the commitment to make a difference. One major discrepancy that could be further explored was the discussion by participants surrounding the intention of wanting to do good and actually doing good post-college. This study highlighted that one of the key concepts of the post-college transition was searching for purpose, and within that category was the desire to make a difference. Although there was a strong intention from the participants to volunteer and give back to the community, the participants were not actually volunteering or giving back to the community. The elements of “doing well” and “doing good” (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 135) that were present in college carried on into post-college life for the participants, however this did not necessarily translate into actions taken. Doing good and making a difference post-college was a priority of value but was not a priority of action. In addition to conducting research looking at expectations of college students for post-college, this study informs higher education as to the importance of exploring how

college students' expectations of post-college life are actually realized in the years following college graduation.

Finally, more research should be conducted to better understand both the college to post-college transition process as well as individual approaches to transition. First, I suggest that in a future study, another sample of recent graduates is sought out to revisit the theory of college to post-college transition. By seeking out another sample and conducting a similar study, it will be possible to re-examine the interpretations of this study and see if a similar constructed theory of the college to post-college transition would emerge based on the stories and experiences of the participants. Further research could further explore similarities and differences in terms of post-college realizations and transition approaches within and between various social identities, kinds of students (traditional versus non-tradition, full-time versus part-time), and types of colleges.

Specifically in terms of the findings surrounding the approaches to post-college transition, more research should be done to further explore and understand the five approaches to post-college transition. Although I used the language of “navigational approaches” to understand individual approaches to the post-college transition and the process of figuring it out, both Schlossberg’s (2004) research on the transition to retirement and Josselson’s (1987) research on pathways to identity helped inform the theory of college to post-college transition. Specifically, in an effort to better understand the process of post-college transition, I followed Schlossberg’s direction and looked at whether or not the transition is identifiable (yes), as well as what college students preparing to graduate can expect as they negotiate post-college transition. It is recommended that future research could be conducted looking at both overlap between



various life transitions and whether or not an individual maintains a similar approach to various transitions regardless of transition situation.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Intentional efforts to establish trustworthiness and goodness resulted in few limitations; however, as with any research study limitations did surface during the study. It is important to consider these limitations before using this emergent theory of the college to post-college transition to guide theory, practice, or research. It is particularly important to understand that this study is not generalizable to all recent college graduates. However, any attempt to conduct a study that was generalizable would not have kept with the purpose of the study or with grounded theory methodology. This study was conducted with 13 participants, all graduates from a single institution. The purpose of this study was to provide a thorough and representative illustration of the transition experience for these participants; their stories and experiences are not intended to represent all recent college graduates. Other participants might construct slightly different findings; for example, graduates from another institution may encounter different experiences that were not explored in this study.

I was not seeking to discover a transition theory for all recent graduates, nor was I seeking to discover a transition theory generalizable for any specific demographic group of recent graduates. Although this study employed maximum variation sampling and included a variety of social identities (e.g. race, gender), it should be emphasized that these perspectives are not representative of others with a similar social identity. It was important to have participants from various backgrounds and current life situations that experienced both commonalities and differences in the transition process. Maximum

variation sampling allowed for results to “indicate what is unique about each situation as well as what is common across these diverse settings” (Mertens, 2005, p. 318). When looking for emergent themes, it was imperative to the study to have common themes that spanned across participants with both a variety in background and current experience. However, it should be noted that it was not the intent of this study, or of maximum variation sampling, to generalize findings across all groups or people but to instead reveal common patterns and themes among various people (Patton, 1990). Additionally, in an effort to bound the study, this research only included traditional aged college graduates; therefore, the theory should not be used to represent the post-college transition of non-traditional aged graduates.

Furthermore, as with qualitative research, my role as the researcher impacted the process of this study. How I structured the study, conducted the interviews, and coded and analyzed the data influenced the study and findings. I had to remain aware of my own insider positionality; specifically, my familiarity with seniors and senior year programs at the institution from which the participants graduated, and my own experience with transition. However, by the time I conducted the first interview, I was no longer working at that institution. Additionally, though I would not be considered a recent college graduate, I was experiencing life transitions of my own during this study including an inter-state move and a job change. It was essential in this study for me to explore my own relationship to both the participant group and the focus of the study throughout the entire research process.

In addition, I needed to examine my role as the researcher due to taking a constructivist approach to a grounded theory study. It is important to note that the post-

college theory that was generated is based on meaning that was co-constructed as a result of my interactions with participants. In an effort to assure that my interpretations represented the experiences and interpretations of the participants, I employed thick description, member checks, and peer debriefing. Although based on the experiences of the participants while also employing techniques used to establish trustworthiness, the emergent theory was ultimately constructed as the result of my interpretation of the participant's interpretation. Therefore, my interpretation might differ from readers or other potential researchers attempting to recreate the study. Although an inquiry auditor was used to help limit this possibility and confirm the findings, it is important to note that another researcher would likely conclude different results.

Another limitation of this study was the constricted time frame in which it took place. It was intentional to this study to have participants in the process of undergoing the post-college transition; therefore, the participants had all recently graduated from college. Even though the participants constructed the end of the post-college transition to be achieved adulthood, this study did not explore the end of the post-college transition or achieved adulthood. Instead, the participants in this study were well immersed within the process of transition, even mentioning during the final member check that the post-college transition had not yet ended. Therefore, a limitation could be that the research did not follow the participants' experiences beyond the end point of the post-college transition.

Following the first interview, however, I purposefully waited six months to conduct the second interview to better understand the transition process for recent college graduates. Although this was not my original intention, I realized while analyzing the

first round of interviews that conducting interviews closer together would have resulted in a lack of understanding about the transition experience for recent college graduates. Furthermore, although saturation was met after the second round of interviews, additional life changes occurred as part of the transition between the second interview and final member check for many of the participants. Even though they did not impact the findings, more relationship changes, job changes, and moves occurred during the transition. As a result, if not for time limitations, I could have continued to interview participants through their self-declared end of the post-college transition.

### **Strengths of the Study**

The strengths of this study are primarily the result of following methodological procedures for a constructivist grounded theory study while working to establish trustworthiness. First, this study paid close attention to follow the flexible yet guided processes of a constructivist grounded theory study. In an attempt to understand the experiences and interpretations of the post-college transition process for recent college graduates in order to construct a theory of college to post-college transition, I employed research methods that enabled participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and the eventual construction of a theory based on a constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). I used various purposeful sampling techniques including theoretical, intensity, maximum variation, and confirming and disconfirming cases to select participants who could provide information-rich cases regarding the process of college to post-college transition. The constant comparative method of data collection and data analysis, including the careful and thorough process of coding, allowed me to develop categories, themes, and eventually a grounded theory based on the experiences of the

participants. The participant stories were captured during two in-depth interviews that I conducted with each participant over a prolonged period of time. In addition, the final member check with the participants ensured that my interpretations that guided the emergent theory of college to post-college transition accurately represented the experiences of the participants.

In addition to member checking, I incorporated other strategies of trustworthiness to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As mentioned above, I employed prolonged engagement with each interview taking place six months apart, illustrated participant stories and experiences through rich, thick description, and conducted member checks with each of the participants. In addition, I used a peer debriefer to confirm my interpretations and the concepts that emerged as a result of the analysis while remaining aware of my own researcher positionality throughout the study. Finally, I used an inquiry auditor to verify that I was properly following the methodological procedures of a constructivist grounded theory study. Following the appropriate grounded theory methods and working to establish trustworthiness helped to establish confidence in the study.

The participants themselves contributed to the strength of this study. As stated before, the participants represented a variety of post-college graduate experiences and demographics. However, more important was the willingness to participate in the study throughout the entirety. Though I worked to establish rapport with each of the participants, I was surprised by the commitment to this study on behalf of the participants. The time elapsed from the initial interview to the final member check was 18 months, yet each of the participants remained within the study. Additionally, their

willingness to be open, available, and thoughtful throughout the process was a strength of the study. The participants were interested in the study; some even referenced the benefits to them in that it was “therapeutic” in some ways. As a result of the participants’ open and honest contributions, this study also provided important and timely perspectives into the post-college transition and to the experiences of recent college graduates. Not only has little research been done on this topic or population, but this study provided insight at a time when higher education and external constituents are focusing on both college outcomes and recent college graduates/“twenty-something’s” within society.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reviewed the findings of the study in relation to both the original research questions and existing literature while also providing implications for theory development, practice, and future research. Finally, both limitations and strengths of the study were discussed in this chapter.

I began this study with the hopes of understanding the college to post-college transition process from those recent graduates experiencing the transition. Thirteen diverse recent college graduates representing a variety of post-college experiences were actively navigating the process of the post-college transition as part of this study. As the result of 26 in-depth and information rich interviews, the participants provided me with an understanding of the post-college transition for recent college graduates. The participants in this study were trying to figure it out as they actively navigated the post-college experiences of managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, searching for purpose, and negotiating support systems. The participants openly shared their experiences and stories about how they experienced an end of expectations, lost a sense

of identity, faced unanticipated challenges, established newly uncovered responsibilities, roles, goals, and priorities, prioritized and redefined self, explored passions, and desired to contribute to something purposeful. The participants also shared the ways in which they negotiated support systems and coping strategies during the post-college years.

As the recent graduates transitioned to post-college life, they actively navigated a series of realizations about self and what mattered while immersed in the process of transitioning to adulthood. Additionally, they talked about their individual approach to their post-college transition. Some of the participants navigated the series of realizations by initiating most elements of their post-college transition while others were instrumental in their approach to only specific aspects of the transition. Meanwhile, others were more likely to adapt to the various components of the transition while some simply waited out the post-college transition and observed what was happening around them. Finally, some of the participants shared how they took a more traditional approach to navigating a series of realizations about self and what matters during the transition.

The experiences and stories of 13 thoughtful and reflective graduates resulted in information-rich cases that provided an understanding of what the post-college transition is like for recent graduates, what experiences were most salient during the post-college transition, and how recent graduates made meaning of their post-college life. Our mutual interpretation of these experiences resulted in the co-constructed theory of college to post-college transition for recent college graduates. It is important to understand the process of the post-college transition and the corresponding characteristics and varying approaches to the transition. I encourage additional theory development, future research, and actual practice to evolve as the result of the emergent themes and theory of college to

post-college transition illustrated in this study combined with existing literature. It is hoped that any understanding about the college to post-college transition process as a result of this study will provide meaningful information for both college students preparing to graduate and recent graduates experiencing the transition, as well as for college administrators, employers, parents, and any one working with soon-to-be or recently graduated college students.



## APPENDIX A: ELECTRONIC LETTER TO NOMINATORS

March \_\_\_\_, 2009

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am writing to solicit nominations of recent University of Maryland graduates for my dissertation research. The purpose of the study is to understand the transition experience for recent college graduates as they move from college to post-college life. I hope to learn how graduates make meaning of their post-college life and what experiences have been the most salient during their time of transition.

Specifically, I am looking to interview former University of Maryland undergraduate students who graduated from Maryland within the past three years (May 2006 or later). I am seeking a wide range of transition experiences and hope to generate different perspectives regarding the process of transition to post-college life. The capacity in which recent graduates spend their time (e.g., work, graduate school, unemployment, etc.) is not important. What is important is that they are recent graduates likely to reflect on the process of undergoing a major life transition.

Please take a moment to think of a recent graduate who has shared with you a story or experience about their life since college. I am seeking a wide diversity of graduates both in social group memberships (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability, religion, etc.) and status since leaving college (e.g., moved home, enrolled in graduate school, switched jobs, stayed local, etc.). In an effort to attain a variety of transition experiences, I plan to conduct the interviews in various geographic locations, particularly in the mid-Atlantic, northeast, east coast, and mid-west. It does not matter (in either your opinion or their opinion) whether or not the transition experience appears seamless or challenging. Again, what does matter is that these students would be willing to discuss how they make meaning of their transition experience.

If possible, please send the **names** and **email addresses** of recent college graduates who come to mind by Friday, March 27. You can provide this information to me via email at: [kfox2@umd.edu](mailto:kfox2@umd.edu). Unless you would prefer otherwise, the recent graduates will be informed of who nominated them.

I would be happy to discuss this research project with you further. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Susan R. Komives at [komives@umd.edu](mailto:komives@umd.edu) with any questions, comments, or concerns.

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Kirsten Freeman Fox  
Doctoral Candidate, College Student Personnel Program

## APPENDIX B: ELECTRONIC LETTER TO NOMINATED PARTICIPANTS

March \_\_\_\_, 2009

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Hello! My name is Kirsten Fox and I am a doctoral student at the University of Maryland. I am conducting a research study on the transition experience from college to post-college life of recent college graduates. [Insert nominator's name] nominated you as someone who would be thoughtful and reflective about your own transition experience. It is my hope that you will consider being a part of this study!

I am seeking recent graduates currently undergoing a variety of post-college experiences (e.g., live at home, work in a new city, enrolled in graduate studies, job searching). The study will consist primarily of three individual interviews, each approximately one hour long, taking place from spring throughout the early fall of 2009. In an effort to capture the experiences of student living in a variety of geographic locations, I will be traveling to various cities and states throughout the United States to conduct the interviews.

During the interviews, we will discuss your transition experience and how you make meaning of your post-college life. In addition, I hope to find out what experiences have been the most salient for you during your transition. If you are interested, I would be happy to send you some of the initial questions in advance.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may choose to no longer participate at any point of time. There is a potential risk of breach of confidentiality, however, we will do our best to maintain confidentiality and you will only be identified through a pseudonym that you select for the study. Additionally, recordings will only be stored on an encrypted password protected data storage drive and kept in a locked cabinet.

If you are interested in participating, please complete the attached interest form and return it to me via email. (Please let me know if you would prefer to return the form via fax or U.S. Mail). I will select participants based on the completed and returned forms and then be in touch with selected participants about scheduling an interview.

I would be happy to further discuss this research project and your potential involvement. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Susan R. Komives at [komives@umd.edu](mailto:komives@umd.edu) with any questions, comments, or concerns.

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Kirsten Freeman Fox  
Doctoral Candidate, College Student Personnel Program

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INTEREST FORM

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_ Alternate Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Street City State Zip

Permanent Address (if different): \_\_\_\_\_  
Street City State Zip

Will you be available for interviews during the:  
Spring of 2009? (y/n) \_\_\_\_\_ Summer of 2009? (y/n) \_\_\_\_\_ Fall of 2009? (y/n) \_\_\_\_\_

---

*Participants in this study will be selected to represent a wide range of social group identities, college experiences, and post-college experiences. Any information you can provide with regard to the areas below will be helpful in identifying participants for this research study.*

---

**UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND INFORMATION:**

Graduation Date: (Month, Year) \_\_\_\_\_

College Major(s)/Minor(s): \_\_\_\_\_

College Involvements: \_\_\_\_\_  
(e.g., student groups, fraternities/sororities, athletics, resident assistant, etc.) Please list all.

**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION:**

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Birthdate (Month, Day, Year): \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Religion: \_\_\_\_\_ Sexual Orientation: \_\_\_\_\_

Disability: \_\_\_\_\_ Socio-economic status (Class): \_\_\_\_\_

**CURRENT STATUS:**

Are you currently enrolled in graduate school? (y/n) \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, for what type of program? \_\_\_\_\_  
Starting Date: (Month, Year) \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently employed? (y/n) \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, what best describes your current employment? \_\_\_\_\_  
Starting Date: (Month, Year) \_\_\_\_\_

**TRANSITION EXPERIENCE:**

Thinking about your transition since college, how would you briefly describe your experience?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Page 1 of 3  
 Initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**CONSENT FORM**

<b>Project Title</b>	<i>College to Post-College Transition: A Grounded Theory.</i>
<b>Why is this research being done?</b>	<i>This is research project being conducted by Kirsten Freeman Fox and Dr. Susan R. Komives, at the University of Maryland. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are at least 18 years old, and have been nominated by a faculty or staff member at the University as someone who has recently graduated (within the past three years) from the University of Maryland. The purpose of this research is to understand the transition experience for recent college graduates.</i>
<b>What will I be asked to do?</b>	<i>The procedures involve two to three one-on-one in-depth interviews as the primary research method. Each interview will last approximately one hour. The interviews will be guided open-ended conversations rather than a formal question and answer format. During the interview, you will be asked to discuss your transition experience from college to post-college life as well as how you make meaning of your post-college life. In addition, I hope to find out what experiences were the most salient during your transition. All interviews will be conducted at times and locations convenient for you. In addition, all interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. You will have the opportunity to review a summary of your interviews and comment prior to the third interview.</i>
<b>What about confidentiality?</b>	<p><i>We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect confidentiality, all information will be reported anonymously and no individual will be identified in the report at any time. This research involves making digital recordings of the interviews to provide a complete record of our interviews. Excerpts of the interviews will be used in the written report of this study. A pseudonym you select will be used in your interview tapes, transcripts, and research report. Only the researchers will be able to link the research materials to a specific person. All transcripts and digital recordings will be kept in a locked file at the home of the student researcher. Your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible in any report or article based on this research. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</i></p> <p>____ I agree to be audio taped during my participation in this study.</p>

<b>Project Title</b>	<i>College to Post-College Transition: A Grounded Theory.</i>		
<b>What are the risks of this research?</b>	<i>There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.</i>		
<b>What are the benefits of this research?</b>	<i>This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about the transition experience for recent college graduates. This process may allow you the chance to reflect on your own transition and help inform future personal and professional decision. We also hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through an improved understanding of experiences and issues facing college graduates in transition.</i>		
<b>Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?</b>	<i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you do decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you would otherwise qualify.</i>		
<b>Is any medical treatment available if I am injured?</b>	<i>Not Applicable.</i>		
<b>What if I have questions?</b>	<p><i>This research is being conducted by Kirsten Freeman Fox and Dr. Susan R. Komives from the Counseling and Personnel Services Department at the University of Maryland. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact one of the investigators:</i></p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"><i>Dr. Susan R. Komives Professor, CAPS Department <a href="mailto:komives@umd.edu">komives@umd.edu</a> 301-405-2870</i></td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"><i>Kirsten Freeman Fox Doctoral Candidate, CAPS Department <a href="mailto:kfox2@umd.edu">kfox2@umd.edu</a> 202-607-0608</i></td> </tr> </table> <p><i>If you have question about your rights as a research participant or which to report a research-related injury, please contact the following office:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Institutional Review Board Office University of Maryland College Park, MD 20742 <a href="mailto:irb@deans.umd.edu">irb@deans.umd.edu</a> 301-405-0678</i></p>	<i>Dr. Susan R. Komives Professor, CAPS Department <a href="mailto:komives@umd.edu">komives@umd.edu</a> 301-405-2870</i>	<i>Kirsten Freeman Fox Doctoral Candidate, CAPS Department <a href="mailto:kfox2@umd.edu">kfox2@umd.edu</a> 202-607-0608</i>
<i>Dr. Susan R. Komives Professor, CAPS Department <a href="mailto:komives@umd.edu">komives@umd.edu</a> 301-405-2870</i>	<i>Kirsten Freeman Fox Doctoral Candidate, CAPS Department <a href="mailto:kfox2@umd.edu">kfox2@umd.edu</a> 202-607-0608</i>		

<b>Project Title</b>	<i>College to Post-College Transition: A Grounded Theory.</i>	
<b>Statement of Age of Subject and Consent</b>	<i>Your signature indicates that:          you are at least 18 years of age;          the research has been explained to you;          your questions have been fully answered; and          you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.</i>	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME OF SUBJECT</b>	
	<b>SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT</b>	
	<b>DATE</b>	

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### **Interview Overview (repeated each time):**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date, Time, and Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Other Observations: \_\_\_\_\_

### FIRST INTERVIEW

#### **Interview Process:**

1. Welcome participant.
2. Introduce myself and the research study.
3. Explain the interview process.
  - a. The interview will take approximately one-hour.
  - b. The conversation will be kept confidential.
  - c. I will be tape recording the interview and taking notes, but individual identity will be kept confidential.
  - d. Participant will be provided with a transcript of the interview in order to clarify, add, or edit our interview.
  - e. Participant should select a pseudonym to keep this as confidential as possible.
4. Have participant review and sign the informed consent form.
5. Clarify and review if they have any questions.
6. Begin interview.
7. At end of interview, stop recorder.
8. Thank participant and confirm next steps (review of transcripts, next interview).

#### **Interview Purpose:**

- To establish trust and rapport with the participant
- To introduce the topic and get initial thoughts on their transition experience.
- To incorporate dimensions of the literature that inform the study (e.g. the four s's: situation, self, support, strategies, identity crisis and commitment, social cognitive career theory).

#### **Potential Questions/Topics:**

- Introductions/describe the study.
- Discuss and clarify the demographic information the participant provided.
- Please talk about how you have been spending your time since graduation.
  - Follow-Up: Ask about current work, graduate school, etc.
- What was the process like of graduating and leaving college?
- What significant people, places, or events (good and/or bad) have been critical in your life since graduation?
- How did you choose where you are currently living and working?
  - Follow-Up: What other factors or people influenced your career/school decision?
- Outside of work and/or school, how do you spend your time?

- Follow-Up: And with whom do you spend your time?
- Follow-Up: Ask about social life and hobbies.
- What is the role and influence of your family on your current situation? Friends?
- What are the various roles you assume?
  - Follow-Up: How have these changed since graduating from college.
  - Follow-Up: What roles are new? What roles have you given up/left behind?

## SECOND INTERVIEW

### **Interview Purpose:**

- To review and clarify questions from the first interview.
- To focus on the research questions in greater depth.
- To explore the participants' reflections and experiences since the first interview.
- To engage participants in a self-reflection regarding the achievement of learning outcomes that did not arise as a result of the first interview.
- To introduce new questions based on the emerging themes discovered in the data analysis process after the first interview.

### **Potential Questions/Topics:**

- Review transcript from first interview. Reflect on this interview, is there anything you would like to clarify or add?
- Ask follow-up questions that arose as a result of the first interview.
- What has the transition process been like since we last talked?
- What experiences have been the most salient during the transition?
- How have you make meaning of your transition to post-college life?
- How do you define who you are?
  - Follow-Up: What gives your life meaning?
- How has the transition process been similar to what you expected?
- How has the transition process been different from what you expected?
- Would you describe your transition as successful?
  - Follow-Up: How? How not?
- How would you define a successful transition?
- What would you do differently?
- Is there anything that surprised you about your transition?
- What college experiences prepared you for your transition?
- What concerns are you currently faced with?
  - Follow-Up: Current stressors? About your future?
- Additional questions will be developed as a result of the themes that emerge after the first interview.

## THIRD INTERVIEW

### **Interview Purpose:**

- To review and clarify questions from the previous interviews.
- To follow up on any remaining topics to be explored.



- To review their responses and emergent themes as a means of member checking.

**Potential Questions/Topics:**

- Confirm the themes and categories that emerged as a result of analyzing the data and interpreting concepts and themes from the first two interviews.
- Were there other events, experiences, or meanings that we have not previously discussed?
  - Follow-Up: Ask remaining questions that arose from the previous interview.
- What has it been like for you to participate in this study?
- Have you learned anything about yourself through our conversations? If so, what?
- How would you describe your college to post-college transition?
- What questions do you have?

## APPENDIX F: KEY CATEGORIES GENERATED DURING CODING PROCESS

1. Approach to Transition
2. College was Expected
3. Coping Strategy
4. Decision Making Process
5. Establish Priority
6. Establish Responsibility
7. Establish Roles
8. Figuring it Out
9. Finding Purpose
10. The First Time
11. A Focus on the Future
12. Focusing on Right Now
13. Focus on Self
14. Lack Knowledge/Skills
15. Make a Difference
16. Need for Recognition/Reassurance
17. Not According to Plan
18. Outside Influence
19. Prior Experience
20. Seeking Shared Experience
21. Sense of Belonging
22. Sense of Loss
23. Sense of Stability
24. Unexpected

## APPENDIX G: LETTER FROM INQUIRY AUDITOR

March 15, 2011

Susan R. Komives  
Professor, College Student Personnel Program  
University of Maryland  
3214 Benjamin Building  
College Park, MD 20742

Dear Dr. Komives:

I served as the inquiry auditor for Kirsten Freeman Fox's dissertation, which focuses on the way in which recent college graduates experience and make meaning of the post-college transition. Following a constructivist approach, Kirsten utilizes grounded theory methodology in this qualitative study. Her research analysis results in an emergent theory of college to post-college transition.

My process for auditing the dissertation involved first reading Chapters 1 – 5 of the dissertation to ensure that I had a thorough grasp of Kirsten's entire research process, including the existing literature and its gaps, the purpose of the study, the research questions that emerged from the literature, the epistemology and methodology, and the results and analysis of the data. Following this reading of the dissertation, I returned to Chapter 3 to review Kirsten's research design. In doing so, I compared her design to the entire data corpus, including interview transcripts, codes, and memos. My comparison confirmed that Kirsten adhered to the process of data collection and analysis outlined in Chapter 3. Kirsten's extensive coding of the interview transcripts (including line by line codes, focused codes, theoretical codes, etc.), coupled with the memo-writing that she did throughout this coding process, reflect a thorough and exhaustive analysis of the data.

In addition, Kirsten's interpretive findings remain true to the constructivist epistemology introduced early in the dissertation. Not only do the findings represent an accurate interpretation of the students' experiences within the context of the chosen epistemology and methodology, but they also result in a dependable theory of college to post-college transition. All of these factors, in particular Kirsten's thoroughness in data collection and subsequent analysis, establish the confirmability of the research study, analysis, and emergent theory.

If you have further questions about the auditing process or my conclusions, please feel free to contact me. I may be reached by phone at 614-292-3951 or via e-mail at [krabacher.4@osu.edu](mailto:krabacher.4@osu.edu).

Sincerely,



Anne C. Krabacher, Ph.D.  
Associate Director, University Honors & Scholars Center  
The Ohio State University

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