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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

PORTRAITS OF TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Department of Leadership, Policy and Development:  
Higher Education and P-12 Education  
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership

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This Dissertation by: Christine P. Braun

Entitled: *Portraits of Transformation in Higher Education*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Leadership, Policy and Development: Higher Education and P-12 Education, Program of Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The purpose of this qualitative, constructivist study utilizing portraiture methodology was to explore the experience of transformative learning from three perspectives: the learner, the educator who helped to create or support the experience, and a significant individual in the learner's life. For this project, transformative learning was defined as learning that creates a shift or change in a person's way of knowing, thinking, and being in the world, as well as how that person views one's self and others within that world. A total of 12 individuals participated in the study: four learners, four educators, and four significant others. Data were collected through a total of 16 interviews: two individual interviews with each learner, one individual interview with each significant other, and a paired interview between learner and educator. The themes that emerged centered around characteristics of the learner, characteristics of the educator and learning environment, and the relationship between learner and educator. Additional themes included the learners finding a sense of voice and place, their desire to pay their transformative learning experiences forward to others, and the ways in which their relationships and perceptions of self changed. Implications for educators, including both faculty and student affairs professionals, as well as students, and directions for future research are discussed. Through this study, support is given for more widespread use of transformative teaching and learning practices in higher education.

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, Valerie, and my father, Paul

I lost them both during the process of completing this dissertation - my mother within a month of my proposal defense, and my father less than nine months later.

All I ever wanted was to make them proud.

This is for you, Mom and Dad. I love you and miss you.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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And finally, to the participants of this study, thank you for sharing your amazing stories with me and allowing me to share those stories with others. There were times I wondered if I would ever finish this project. What pushed me forward was knowing I could not let your stories go untold. Words cannot fully express my gratitude for your time, your openness, and your courage. Your transformative learning journeys re-ignited my own desire to help other first-generation students - like us - achieve success while in college, and I will continue to pay this work forward.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the trend in education has been to move away from teaching practices that rely on “mass transmission of knowledge” (Paris & Combs, 2006, p. 571) and toward more learner-centered practices. While these practices may not yet be widespread, a shift is being made (Alkove & McCarty, 1992; Fried & Associates, 1995, 2012; Inderbitzin & Storrs, 2008; Keeling, 2004). In a constructivist or learner-centered environment, active participation is encouraged and leads to students feeling more invested in the learning process and more committed to its outcomes. This type of learning environment fosters both independence and interaction (Paris & Combs, 2006). Students are taught to identify challenges, explore their options, and decide upon the most fitting responses (Generett & Hicks, 2004). They also learn to value multiple perspectives and seek collaboration with others. With trust from faculty and student affairs educators to appropriately select and engage in tasks that are meaningful to them, students feel a sense of ownership in the learning process and are more likely to exceed expectations because of their interest and involvement in the creation of knowledge (Freire, 1970/2000; Moore, 2005; Paris & Combs, 2006). These environments can foster transformative learning, a process explained by a theory of adult learning which over the past three decades has gained increasing support and informs a growing body of research (e.g., Cohen, 2004; Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; Fisher-Yoshida, Geller, & Schapiro, 2009;

Generett & Hicks, 2004; Glisczinski, 2007; Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009; Storrs & Inderbitzin, 2006).

Transformative learning involves deconstructing previously held beliefs and developing a newfound openness to diverse perspectives. While more recent studies have investigated transformative learning in locations outside of academia, including the workplace, professional and community organizations, and the visual and performing arts (e.g., Fisher-Yoshida et al., 2009; Mezirow et al., 2009), institutions of higher and adult education are still the primary settings for transformative learning. As such, “an enormous potential exists for universities to be leaders in questioning the status quo, challenging paradigms, and openly practicing new ways of living, thinking, teaching, and learning” (Moore, 2005, p. 78). If used constructively, transformative education can create a shift away from limiting knowledge production to the elite and empowering those from marginalized groups to have a voice in the creation of scholarship (Moore, 2005).

Central to the practice of transformative education is the idea that adult learners are capable of critically reflecting on the information they take in, both inside and outside of the classroom. The primary goal of this practice is to empower learners to make more fully informed choices by considering multiple perspectives and examining previously unquestioned beliefs (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007). Additionally, transformative education is about social justice and change. It aims to extend what has been experienced in the classroom or other learning environment to additional areas of students’ lives, so they may share their learning with others throughout a variety of contexts (Paris & Combs, 2006). While the impact of a transformative, learner-centered curriculum can be

far-reaching for one individual, with more widespread use such practices could inspire positive change within an entire classroom, campus, or community. The path is unlikely to be a smooth one and will almost certainly create discomfort or frustration in those who travel it. However, for the learners willing to work through those feelings, to continue beyond their discomfort into the realm of the unknown, the rewards of the experience are plentiful and the foundation for a new way of knowing—a transformed life—can be built.

Although transformative learning is the most researched theory of adult learning (E. W. Taylor, 2007), there is still much we do not know. Unfortunately, because of this, a number of misconceptions exist concerning what transformative education actually involves. As a result, educators and administrators may be hesitant to utilize it in their classrooms and learning communities. In E. W. Taylor's critical reviews of empirical research concerning transformative learning in higher education, he analyzed 39 studies conducted between 1980 and 1996 (1997) and an additional 41 studies conducted between 1999 and 2005 (2007) and pointed to a number of areas still in need of investigation. These include looking at the actual process of transformative learning, gaining a better understanding of how this type of learning can best be fostered, and examining how one person's transformation affects others, all components this study sought to address. Despite the proliferation of prior research, continuing inquiry and assessment are necessary to further legitimize transformative learning as a preeminent approach to higher and adult education. Until a greater understanding is gained regarding the experience of both transformative teaching and learning, more prevalent use of these practices in today's academic institutions remains unlikely.

### Statement of the Problem

An examination of historical trends in adult and higher education reveals how traditional models of teaching and learning are limited in their influence on and benefit to students. When the focus of a class is to memorize information well enough to perform acceptably on an exam, what Freire (1970/2000) referred to as the “banking system” of education, the likelihood is small that students will retain a great deal of that information once the class has ended (Paris & Combs, 2006). This is true of learning that takes place outside of the classroom, as well, if the educator is the one holding all of the power and deciding what information is valuable to the learners. In addition, without being afforded the opportunity to question dominant ideologies or critically reflect upon what they are learning, students are more likely to accept what they learn as the truth and less likely to apply both *what* they learned and *how* they learned in their daily lives and interactions with others. In teacher-centered learning environments where educators make all of the decisions concerning both content and methods of evaluation and provide students with the information they believe most important, the students lack a sense of control or power over their own learning (Moore, 2005). Students in these settings may even feel voiceless or consider their own experiences to be unrelated or unimportant when compared to the material being taught.

This lack of connection to content is even greater in today’s diverse learning environments, where students may not see themselves reflected in what they are reading and hearing (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). Also, when delivery of content and assessment of learning is limited to one method (i.e., only one way of knowing is valued), the variety of learning styles represented gets ignored and students’ needs go unmet. One

element of transformative education, culturally responsive teaching, incorporates the “cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students” (Gay, 2002, p. 106) in order to make learning more effective and personally relevant. Without this form of teaching, students who do not represent the dominant culture may feel further marginalized and overlooked. Additionally, by viewing students’ experiences as separate from content and allowing dominant narratives to go unquestioned, those with privileged identities are not challenged to consider other perspectives or examine their roles in the oppression of others (Dhillon & Halstead, 2003). These problems point to a new way of teaching and learning, one that can be addressed by transformative education.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of transformative learning from three perspectives: the learner, the educator, and a significant individual in the learner’s life. In this study, transformative learning was defined as learning that creates a shift or change in a person’s way of knowing, thinking, and being in the world, as well as how that person views one’s self and others within that world (Lange, 2004). Furthermore, educators were defined as any individual who was concerned with student learning (Fried & Associates, 1995), and included faculty and other types of instructors, as well as student affairs professionals. Examining the experience from multiple viewpoints was important in order to gain a fuller picture of transformative education and how it touches lives differently. I believe the knowledge generated by this study will create new insights to better inform higher and adult education practices and extend transformative learning to student affairs professionals, who serve as educators both in and out of the classroom.



In this study, I utilized qualitative portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) in order to illuminate the vibrant and varied experiences of transformative education. Understanding the experience from both the learner's and educator's perspectives helped eliminate some of the mystery that shrouds transformative teaching practices. In addition, exploring the viewpoint of a significant person in the learner's life shed light on a secondary issue: when individuals transform their ways of thinking, behaving, and interacting, this often leads to changes in their relationships. As a result, the learners may not fit as well with previous social support systems and may not know how to handle the rejection or misunderstandings that could ensue (Cohen, 2004; Moore, 2005). By studying these relational changes, educators can learn how to best support their students throughout the transformative learning process.

The following research questions framed this constructivist study:

- Q1 How do students make meaning of their transformative learning experiences in higher education?
- Q2 How can educators best create and support transformative learning opportunities?
- Q3 What are students' perspectives regarding the changes they made as a result of these experiences?
- Q4 How does transformative learning influence key relationships in the learner's life?

### **Significance of the Study**

The benefits of transformative education are many. Although its practices are not to be undertaken naively, the effectiveness of its informed and caring use transcends disciplines and settings. Of perhaps greatest importance is the fact that all of those present in the learning environment are considered both learners and educators. It is a

process of growth for all (Freire, 1970/2000), a holistic approach to education that makes use of the learners' unique viewpoints, talents, capacities, and experiences. Generett and Hicks (2004) shared, "For a curriculum to be transformative, it must encourage a symbiotic relationship between hope and action" (p. 187). But this holistic approach is not limited to the classroom, as it is also valued by student affairs practitioners wishing to create more opportunities for transformation across all learning contexts (Rhoads & Black, 1995). Knowledge is co-created and the learning environment is a collaborative one, in which everyone present shares in the responsibility of teaching and learning with and from one another. However, in order for transformative teaching and learning practices to become more common in adult and higher education, a greater understanding of what these processes look like and how they are experienced is necessary.

Educators, including faculty and student affairs professionals, and students are interested in transformative teaching and learning for a variety of reasons. First, educators and students, alike, desire learning that is meaningful and long-lasting (Hart, 2004; Lange, 2004). Those who are committed to social justice and change want to engage in education aimed at eliminating oppressive hierarchies and challenging dominant ideologies. They also seek learning that values multiple perspectives and involves collaboration and constructing knowledge together (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007).

Educators dedicated to culturally responsive curriculum aspire toward teaching practices that are inclusive and account for a wide variety of learning styles and diverse ways of knowing (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). Their goals include developing critical thinkers and engaged citizens, in addition to designing learning environments where all feel welcome. These educators are interested in learners who can apply their

knowledge to other areas of their lives and use it for the greater good. They also seek to foster individual growth and development, autonomous thinking, and empowerment of their students. They want students to feel that their voices matter and will be heard in the learning context, whether inside or outside of the classroom. Students, too, desire to be heard, valued, and appreciated (hooks, 1994).

Transformative learning benefits learners wishing to define and create their own learning experiences, who are ready to step outside of their comfort zones and be challenged to examine their own perceptions, values, and beliefs (Berger, 2004; Mezirow, 1997). These are students dedicated to creating a more just and equitable society (Moore, 2005). They are willing to confront and dismantle privilege and are interested in better understanding their multiple and intersecting identities to build greater self and cultural awareness (Mezirow, 2000). They are engaged learners who are driven toward action. All of these goals are ambitious, and both educators and students must take into account the potential challenges to meeting them.

Through this study I sought to better understand transformative learning as experienced by learners; their friends, partners, and family members; as well as the educators who have supported and inspired them. Having this knowledge will benefit both faculty and student affairs practitioners who strive to use transformative learning as a tool because it will provide confidence in their teaching methods by increasing the probability that the content of what they are teaching will be retained (Paris & Combs, 2006) and, as a culturally responsive form of education, will allow them to reach a greater number of students (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). In turn, students will reap the benefits this form of social justice-oriented teaching promises, through their abilities

to think critically and engage with their communities (Lange, 2004; Mezirow, 2000). If transformative teaching and learning becomes more widely used in higher and adult education, educators may finally reach a time where they can honestly say that their classrooms and campuses are equitable, inclusive, and just.

### **Researcher Perspective: My Portrait**

As a first semester doctoral student, my life was transformed. For what felt like the first time in my education, I was a member of a classroom where power was shared between the professor and students, and knowledge was co-created. Learning took place through critical reflection and dialogue, and a safe space was created allowing a multitude of perspectives to be shared and valued. We, the students, were encouraged to raise questions regarding the class readings and critically analyze what we had learned in the past, as well as what we were currently exploring. As a result, I became more adept at evaluating various aspects of my life, including the many roles I served; examining society as a whole; and questioning tradition, injustice, and oppression.

In talking with one of my professors about this experience, she asked what I thought led to my transformation. Was it something about the way my program was structured, the culture, or the curriculum? As I thought about it, I answered a resounding “yes” to all three. First of all, the structure of my doctoral program was different from anything else I had ever encountered. My previous educational background is in psychology, specifically clinical psychology, and my classroom experience fit the more traditional model of learning, where the professor was looked to as the expert who held the knowledge that needed to be transferred to us students in order to become successful

clinicians. My program also took a deficit approach to counseling, where people seeking therapy were viewed as individuals with problems or disorders that needed to be fixed.

I identified, after a year toward pursuing a Psy.D. in Clinical Psychology, that I did not want to spend the rest of my life in this field and decided to leave school to pursue another path. At the time, I was not sure what that path would be, but I knew it was not going to be as a psychologist. It was an agonizing decision, as I had never quit anything I had started before. The overachiever in me felt like a failure, a quitter, and the planner in me was completely lost, as I had focused the last eight years of my life on becoming a psychologist. However, after working with adult clients for the first time in a community mental health center, I discovered that counseling was just not a good fit for me. I believed that, based on my sensitive personality, it would be too difficult to deal with people in emotional pain every day, as it seemed I could not adequately separate myself from their pain. That may have been true. But what I realized several years later, in looking back, is that I did not like viewing my clients as being broken. Instead, it is more my nature to view the goodness within people and the strengths they possess and to help them grow by maximizing upon those strengths. I do not think I would have made this reflection, however, had I not entered my current graduate program.

The cohort structure of my program and the fact that there were only three faculty members were two factors that contributed to the safe environment that was created, one where I could learn and stretch myself outside of my comfort zone and not feel petrified doing so. We were assigned readings and engaged in discussions but were never lectured or talked down to, and the faculty, while clearly knowledgeable, did not present themselves as knowing more than we did. They established an environment where we

made meaning of what we were learning together so that, in a way, we all were both teachers and learners simultaneously. We shared relevant experiences from our personal and professional lives to provide context for what we were learning, and we grew close as a group of eight students as we spoke of heartaches and triumphs, frustrations and successes.

We also spent the majority of our first semester discussing theoretical paradigms, starting with positivism versus constructivism. I began to recognize positivism in the classrooms in which I had spent the majority of my life. This experience prompted me to reflect on all of my prior years of education. I realized one of the reasons I had always succeeded in school was that I knew what teachers wanted, and I rarely, if ever, challenged the status quo. The message I received in the traditional, positivist classroom was that teachers expected their students to show mastery of the material being taught through rote memorization and recall. It appeared to me that teachers also preferred students who were well behaved and did not question authority. While I always fit in with this environment and was successful according to standardized methods of evaluation, as I progressed through my undergraduate and Master's programs there was always some sense that something was missing.

It was a refreshing realization to discover that teachers do not always have all of the answers and that it was acceptable to disagree with their views and form opinions of my own. Being in a doctoral program with a strong social justice emphasis, I also began to notice how unjust the North American system of higher education could be. As I learned more about social justice, as well as the deeply embedded systems of power, privilege, and oppression, I began to recognize the many injustices that played out in my

everyday life and in the world around me. It became next to impossible, once I knew they were there and understood what they were about, not to see inequity everywhere. It was like my eyes were open for the first time.

With this new perspective, while excited that I was seeing the world in a new way, also came a lot of pain. I felt guilty for the oppressions in which I had been an integral part, whether actively or more often passively, by simply choosing to go along with the system, a system that afforded me privilege as a White, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, highly educated person. While it was easier in my previous life, the life before my eyes were open, to “follow the path of least resistance” (Johnson, 2006), I knew I could no longer follow that path and be okay with it. I had always thought of myself as an open-minded and accepting person, free of prejudices. However, after taking a multiculturalism class, I knew I had a long way to go. So at school, work, home, and social settings, I started voicing my perspectives more frequently, pointing out injustices when I recognized them, and raising what I hoped were thought-provoking questions to people when it seemed fitting.

While working as an academic advisor, one of my students asked to interview me for a class project. The assignment was to present multiple perspectives on a university policy, and he had chosen the college’s foreign language requirement. He wanted to know why it was necessary for students to learn about another language and culture. In our discussion, I asked the student if he was familiar with the term “ethnocentrism” and suggested he research its meaning. I was hoping he would gain an understanding of seeing beyond himself to recognize that all cultures have value. But I wanted him to

make that meaning for himself. I did not want to tell him what I thought he should believe, much in the way I had been taught my entire life.

For me, it was so different to begin my journey as a doctoral student in a program that encouraged me to ask questions, to question traditions, to even question authorities! I learned how to critically analyze the world around me. This program and the people in it made me feel like what I had to say was valuable, and I was encouraged to be authentic and share what I was feeling and thinking, even if it was not always positive, even if my emotions were uncomfortable. In this constructivist environment, knowledge was created collaboratively and everyone's perspectives were valued. My worldview shifted from thinking I needed to always do what others expected of me, even at the cost of being true to myself, to embracing a self that asked questions and expressed emotion and admitted to not always having the answers.

Through my transformative learning journey, I came to value equity, accessibility, inclusiveness, connectedness, and authenticity, above all else, and I worked to incorporate those values into my everyday personal and professional lives. I was transformed as a result of my experiences in the classes I took and the relationships I made during my doctoral program, and I was driven to study others who had similar transformative experiences to better understand the changes they made and how those changes may have impacted their relationships.

In looking back over the years of my doctoral coursework, it amazes me how much *I* changed. I view teaching and learning in an entirely new way. I am more aware of my various social identities and how they intersect. I am beginning to understand the unearned privileges I have been afforded as a result of some of these identities, as well as



the ways in which, as a woman, I have been oppressed. I have found a voice I never knew I had. I have made a concerted effort to learn more about political and social issues and to use my newfound voice to express how I feel about these issues and to speak up for those who may not be able to do so. My ideas concerning the career I want to pursue have shifted, more than once. While some individuals in my life have been excited and supportive of the growth I have made (and continue to make), others have appeared confused by or indifferent toward this seemingly new me. My transformative learning experience has been totally life-altering, and although I see the changes I have made as being for the better, this (unending) process has been challenging and one that I would not have wanted to go through without the caring support and encouragement of my teachers and colleagues.

In the spirit of qualitative, constructivist research, it is essential that I am forthcoming with this story and my interest in the topic under investigation (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). In doing so, I am providing readers with a more complete picture, enabling them to construct meaning concerning transformative learning, based on both the participants' and my perspectives. Throughout the study, I reflected on my past and present experiences, comparing and contrasting them with those of the participants. I also examined my interactions with these individuals and the feelings that arose, keeping a journal throughout the research process. By providing my researcher stance, I can ensure that the findings accurately portray the perspectives and voices of the participants, while acknowledging my own place amidst the story that unfolds.

### **Study Overview**

This qualitative portraiture study utilized a constructivist research paradigm in order to explore the lived experiences of individuals who have undergone transformative learning. The study also investigated this experience from the perspectives of the educator who helped to create and foster the transformative learning environment, as well as a significant individual in the learner's life who could speak to the changes observed in the way the learner interacted with others. With a greater understanding of the transformative learning process from a multitude of perspectives, faculty and student affairs professionals charged with creating transformative learning opportunities will be better equipped to support students during these life-changing journeys. This type of learning has the potential to reach a greater number of students with diverse backgrounds, interests, and learning styles and to have positive, long-lasting effects on both the learners and educators who experience it. As the researcher, I believe an increased body of knowledge concerning transformative teaching practices will lead to more widespread use across a variety of educational contexts and disciplines, which in turn will inspire change across classrooms, campuses, and communities.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In order to understand the need for and value of transformative learning, it is important to investigate its origins. Without the work of some notable educators and theorists, it is possible this form of education may never have come to fruition. As such, this chapter first addresses the field of adult education, from which transformative learning theory was derived. Included is the development of adult education and the historical trends that shaped it. Critical pedagogy, which was formed to address many of adult education's pressing needs and goals, is then described. Next, traditional approaches to teaching and learning are compared with contemporary ones. This is followed by an overview of transformative learning theory, as well as its outcomes and associated teaching practices. Approaches to transformative learning from a student affairs perspective are explored next. Then, some criticisms of transformative higher education and responses to those criticisms are shared. The chapter proceeds to a discussion of the potential challenges those individuals most interested in addressing the problems of traditional teaching practices may encounter. This is followed by recommendations to best prepare both the educators and learners who desire change in today's educational institutions for addressing those challenges and concludes with areas in need of further research.

## **Adult Education**

The term “adult education” first began to appear in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Stubblefield & Rachal, 1992). However, the topic did not gain impetus until after World War I when the World Association for Adult Education was created and the Carnegie Corporation became actively involved in establishing adult education as a professional field (Peters, Jarvis, & Associates, 1991). This field was greatly influenced by the work of John Dewey (1916, 1938) and his ideas concerning pragmatism and democratic education, specifically, that education should: focus on the needs and experiences of the learner, as opposed to specific subject matter or content; utilize active participation, problem-solving, and experiential learning; and serve as an “instrument of social action and social change” (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 36).

A plethora of definitions for adult education can be found. These definitions vary depending on the intended goals and outcomes (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). In general, the short-term goal of adult education is often viewed as self-improvement or individual development or fulfillment, with the long-term goal being social change. These objectives, however, are frequently debated in the field of adult education (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Perhaps one of the broadest definitions refers to adult education as “a process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values, or skills” (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 9). These changes sometimes involve perceptions learners have about themselves or the environment in which they live and may entail the acquisition of new information or the elaboration and revision of existing information (Cranton, 2006b).

In considering adult education, it then becomes necessary to define who is an “adult.” One of the most common benchmarks would be those learners age 25 years or older (Maehl, 2000). However, this quantitative definition may not capture all of the learners who could be deemed adults. It then becomes appropriate to consider, in addition to age, variables such as social roles, self-perception, maturity, independence, economic autonomy, and social responsibility (Cranton, 2006b; Maehl, 2000; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Taking into consideration these factors, all of the student participants in this study were adult learners.

Some characteristics used to distinguish adult learning from other types of learning include it being voluntary, self-directed, experiential in nature, collaborative, and participatory (Cranton, 2006b; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Peters et al., 1991). It is not essential that all of these components be present in order for the learning to be considered “adult learning,” and whether any of these factors are necessary is questioned by some adult education theorists (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). However, one undeniable element of adult learning is the fact that adults bring “rich experiences and resources” (Cranton, 2006b, p. 5) to the learning environment.

In general, adult education supports learning that involves individuals sharing their experiences and understanding in order to make meaning and create knowledge together. This shared experience is not always valued by all of the learners involved, but is a common characteristic of adult education (Cranton, 2006b). The idea of the self-directed learner is frequently used in adult education to refer to learning in which “the learner chooses to assume the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating [the] learning experiences” (Caffarella, 1993, p. 28). Additionally, *facilitator*

tends to be used in adult education, in place of *teacher* or *instructor*, to reflect its more student-centered, collaborative approach (Mujtaba & Preziosi, 2006). Adult education also takes into consideration a variety of learning styles (Cranton, 2006b).

Numerous models of adult education exist, including those based on human resource development, distance education, psychological theories of learning, community-based learning, and social action (Maehl, 2000; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Peters et al., 1991). The purposes and goals of each model tend to vary depending on the context of the learning situation. In general, while moral and religious goals characterized adult education in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, informed citizenry became the focus by the late 1800's (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Bryson (1936), one of the first to write extensively about adult education, developed a typology defining the purposes and goals of adult education as: liberal, occupational, relational, remedial, and political. A majority of the typologies developed since Bryson's model have incorporated similar concepts and proposed outcomes (Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

Originally, *liberal* adult education referred to the study of the humanities and social and natural sciences, known collectively as the *liberal arts*, with the goal of becoming "an educated person" (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 18). Today the focus would be more generally on intellectual development. *Occupational* refers to career development or training, with the goal typically to gain specific skills. The human resource development model of adult education fits these aims (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). *Relational* adult education most often refers to a focus on personal growth and development and building effective interpersonal relationships. *Remedial* is associated with programs geared toward helping adults gain or improve certain basic skills, such as

reading, writing, or language development (e.g., English as a Second Language [ESL] courses). Finally, *political* refers to “adult education activities related to citizenship responsibilities in a democracy” (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 21) and is aimed at learning geared toward civic and social responsibility. More recently it has included educational efforts that empower adults to challenge the status quo and focuses upon cultural criticism and social transformation. The idea of both confronting and changing social structures drives much of the field today (Cranton, 2006b).

Trends in adult education have been influenced by a variety of factors, including a shift from industrialization to a more service-based, information-driven economy; developments in technology; changing population demographics reflecting greater ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as a greater number of older adults; and recognition that learning is multidimensional, and not purely cognitive (Merriam, 2008; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Two dimensions inform current thinking about adult learning (Cranton, 2006b). The first dimension looks at learning along a continuum, ranging from a focus on individual development and change at one end to social transformation at the other. Whereas the humanistic approach—which characterized adult learning in the 1970s and 1980s—tends to center on the individual’s learning experience, the approach informed by critical theory—which has become more prevalent in recent years—takes its aim at social reform (Cranton, 2006b).

The second dimension looks at “the interests that drive the learning process and the type of knowledge that results from the learning” (Cranton, 2006b, p. 10). A framework developed by Habermas (1971), a prominent critical theorist, conceptualizes the three types of knowledge as technical, practical, and emancipatory. Technical

knowledge, a rational and objective form of knowledge, finds its basis in empiricism and is gained through observation and measurement of the natural world (Cranton, 2006b). This type of knowledge is associated with instrumental learning, a goal-oriented approach to problem-solving (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). Practical knowledge, which is “based on our need to understand each other through language” (Cranton, 2006b, p. 12), is also referred to as communicative competence (Habermas, 1971). This form of knowledge involves individuals collaborating to share and make meaning of their experiences to develop new understandings. Finally, emancipatory knowledge is based in self-determination and self-reflection. It is increased through critically examining ourselves and the socio-cultural structure of our environment. Emancipatory knowledge requires us to question the validity of current scientific and social theories and accepted truths or realities to uncover possible distortions and aspects of knowing that may constrain us (Habermas, 1971). The development of this form of knowledge often serves as the overarching goal of adult learning (Cranton, 2006b) and informs the findings of this study. It also informs critical pedagogy, the foundation for much of today’s adult education, which is described next.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Pedagogy refers to teaching practices grounded in a specific philosophy (Walker, 2006). Critical pedagogy, which is guided by critical theory and emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, involves teaching aimed at social justice and change (McLean, 2006; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Its practices are based in an “altruistic desire for securing equitable educational environments and opportunities” (Trifonas, 2003, p. 1) for all individuals, regardless of their race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, or



ability. It encourages students and educators to examine the relationships between culture, ideology, and power (Tejeda, Espinoza, & Gutierrez, 2003) and points to education being understood in its historical, political, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts (McLaren, 1989; McLean, 2006). Critical theorists assert that “a fundamental objective of pedagogy should be to empower the oppressed and contribute to the transformation of the social relations and formations that produce social inequalities and injustices” (Tejeda et al., 2003, p. 32).

Paulo Freire, an influential and internationally renowned educator, is considered one of the founders of critical pedagogy (Fishman & McCarthy, 2007; Mayo, 1999). His efforts to empower peasant workers in Brazil through literacy served as the foundation for his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970/2000). In this work, Freire advocated for adult education to facilitate acquisition of critical consciousness, or what he referred to as “conscientization” (Fishman & McCarthy, 2007, p. 37). This can be achieved through critical reflection and dialogue - elements I utilized in this study through my discussions with the participants - and involves learners becoming aware of those forces that exert influence over their lives and being empowered to overcome their oppression to take back control (Freire, 1970/2000).

Freire viewed this form of learning as a collaborative and inclusionary process, whereby adults work collectively to confront dominant ideology and challenge hegemony (Brookfield, 2005; Mayo, 1999). He also highlighted educators’ responsibility to assist students with deconstructing and rejecting oppressive hierarchies and deemed their role in the learning process a political one (Fishman & McCarthy, 2007). As such, his body of work “emphasizes giving voice to learners who have been marginalized or silenced by

society” (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 157). In addition, he believed in adult education’s ability to bring about a more egalitarian culture through social, political, and economic change.

Critical pedagogy in the U.S. has also been strongly influenced by the North American educational theorist, Henry Giroux (Blake & Masschelein, 2003; Mayo, 1999). He, too, sees education as being irrefutably political and recognizes the potential of educators to provide opportunities for emancipation and transformation of their students (McLean, 2006). In addition, Giroux considers capitalist systems to be alienating, exclusive, and oppressive, particularly in how they are reproduced in today’s educational institutions (Blake & Masschelein, 2003), and criticizes higher education for becoming an increasingly “corporate” culture (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001). He advocates for colleges and universities to stand firm against inequality and instrumentalism by playing a revolutionary role in challenging privilege-based ideologies and critiquing social structures (Blake & Masschelein, 2003; McLean, 2006).

Other theorists and educators have conceptualized critical pedagogy in a variety of ways (Apple, 2012; Brookfield, 2005; McLean, 2006). While there is a lack of homogeneity in its underlying ideas, one unifying element of critical pedagogy is its goal to uncover hidden inequities and oppression (Blake & Masschelein, 2003). These can be found in mainstream education, which usually serves to protect the power structures used to uphold the status quo (Fishman & McCarthy, 2007; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Critical pedagogy demands questioning the assertion that injustice results from merely temporary, easily solvable problems or from the “personal inadequacies of those who suffer through their own fault” (Blake & Masschelein, 2003, p. 52). These false

narratives serve to maintain the authority of those from the dominant culture, to blame and further marginalize those with subordinate identities, and to minimize the longstanding injustices and inequities that have plagued our society.

Critical pedagogy also reminds us that knowledge produced and professed by some groups is legitimized, while the knowledge of other groups is nullified. Therefore, curriculum can never be considered neutral or apolitical (McLean, 2006), which points to a need for the systematic “unveiling” of truth and greater transparency in education (Blake & Masschelein, 2003). In addition, the unequal power relations that silence the voices of many highlight the need for change in how we approach adult teaching and learning (Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001). A critical-cultural approach to student affairs is also advocated for by educators concerned with social justice work and making student learning more holistic, collaborative, egalitarian, and inclusive (hooks, 1994; Keeling, 2004; Rendón, 2009; Rhoads & Black, 1995). Critical pedagogy framed the type of learning the students in this study experienced. With this pedagogy focused on the process and experience of learning, it becomes necessary to explore instructional practices centered around the learner compared with more traditional teacher-centered approaches.

### **Comparisons of Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to Teaching and Learning**

Classrooms of the past 80 years have followed a positivist model of education (Alkove & McCarty, 1992). This model focuses on the acquisition of technical knowledge and a rational-empirical approach to learning, the rational characterized by calculation, investigation, and description, and the empirical coming from the use of the senses in both observation and measurement (Hart, 2004; Mezirow, 2000). Positivism is

also based in the science of behaviorism, whereby learning only takes place in situations where appropriate conditions have been established (Alkove & McCarty, 1992). In this model, students are passive recipients of knowledge (Freire, 1970/2000). The teacher provides the knowledge and determines, either arbitrarily or based on standardized guidelines, what types of student responses are acceptable. Appropriate behavior is reinforced through rewards, whereas inappropriate conduct results in consequences and even punishment (Alkove & McCarty, 1992). This model is punitive and focuses more on negative behavior and controlling the classroom rather than on positive interactions and creating an environment of collaboration.

“Conformity, standardization, and assimilation” (Generett & Hicks, 2004, p. 188) are typical of traditional classrooms. Here, teachers serve to regulate the knowledge that students receive (Freire, 1970/2000), similar to a gatekeeper deciding what information can “enter” the student and what cannot. This form of education minimizes student creativity (Freire, 1970/2000), denies individuality (Generett & Hicks, 2004), and makes it difficult for students to retain information (Paris & Combs, 2006). In this model, teachers are often rewarded for standardizing their teaching methods (Generett & Hicks, 2004).

Freire (1970/2000) termed this form of education a “banking” system (p. 72), where students act as vessels in which information is deposited by “all-knowing” professors. This method of teaching can be seen as oppressive in nature, as it establishes a hierarchy in which the professor holds most or all of the power in the classroom and the students possess little to none. Assessment of learning is determined by whether students can respond appropriately to what is asked of them by the teacher (Alkove & McCarty,

1992). As a result, students may become skilled at reciting or summarizing information, but not with analyzing it. Such a regimented environment can be monotonous for both students and teachers, alike, and overall, very little learning may actually take place (Paris & Combs, 2006).

A constructivist classroom, on the other hand, involves students in the creation of the classroom atmosphere, as well as the construction of knowledge (Alkove & McCarty, 1992). Students may also be involved in the establishment of class rules, decisions regarding material to be covered, and forms of assessment to be used. Consistent with critical pedagogical practices, constructivist teachers usually do not view test scores as adequate indicators of learning, as such methods are viewed to be based upon how one individual has “internalized another person’s knowledge” (Alkove & McCarty, 1992, p. 18). Therefore, alternative modes of evaluation, such as portfolios and observation, may be deemed more practical. In addition, teachers view their role in the classroom as a facilitator of learning rather than a transmitter of knowledge (Vega & Tayler, 2005). A community is created whereby students feel like they are an important part of the classroom and are safe to share their perspectives, express their uncertainties, and take risks (Alkove & McCarty, 1992).

While not yet a thing of the past, teaching practices that rely on “mass transmission of knowledge” (Paris & Combs, 2006, p. 571) are gradually being replaced by more learner-centered practices. In a constructivist or learner-centered environment, students are encouraged to more actively participate, which leads them to feeling more invested in the learning process and more committed to its outcomes. A confluence of independence and interaction are cultivated in these types of learning environments (Paris

& Combs, 2006). Students situated here are taught to identify challenges, explore their options, and decide upon the most fitting responses (Generett & Hicks, 2004).

Furthermore, they learn to value multiple perspectives and seek collaboration with others.

In one qualitative study examining the perspectives of 12 elementary teachers, four secondary teachers, and two teacher educators from across the U.S., all of whom were members of an organization created to support self-identified “learner-centered” instructors, three common elements of learner-centeredness were revealed (Paris & Combs, 2006). First, students are the starting point for curriculum design. Second, teachers and students are partners in the learning process. Third, a teacher’s goal should be “intense student engagement” (Paris & Combs, 2006, p. 576) with the curriculum, evidenced not only through physical activity, but also through intellectual and emotional involvement.

Learner-centered educators (which describes all of the educators interviewed for this study) also display trust in their students to appropriately select and engage in tasks that the students find meaningful, which often leads to students exceeding expectations because of their interest and involvement in the creation of knowledge (Freire, 1970/2000; Moore, 2005; Paris & Combs, 2006). These educators can foster student transformation, a process explained by a theory of adult learning, which over the past three decades has gained increasing support and informs a growing body of research.

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

To transform is to “change in character or condition” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 2003). To add another layer to the definition, transformation takes place when a person’s way of making meaning changes. It occurs when people alter not

just *what* they think, but *how* they think (Berger, 2004). Transformative learning theory developed from the practice of critical pedagogy and adult education in Western Europe and North America and “depends ultimately on faith in informed, free human choice and social justice” (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. xiv). Transformation in higher education involves developing new roles, experiences, and approaches that allow students to discover their voices (Generett & Hicks, 2004). It can occur gradually over time (incremental) or suddenly and unexpectedly (epochal) for individuals, organizations, as well as entire systems (Cranton, 2006b; Mezirow, 2009; Moore, 2005).

Transformative learning not only creates a shift in people’s knowing and thinking about the world, it also creates a shift in their being in the world, their realities, and how they relate to others (Lange, 2004). Mezirow (1991, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2009), a seminal theorist of transformative education, provides the following definition:

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experiences of others to assess reasons justifying [our] assumptions, and making an action decision based on the resulting insight. (2000, pp. 7-8)

The belief that adult learners are capable of critically reflecting on the information they receive, both inside and outside of the classroom, is central to transformative learning theory. One of the fundamental goals of transformative education is to empower learners to make more fully informed choices through the examination of previously unquestioned beliefs and the consideration of multiple perspectives (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007).

Transformative higher education involves teaching that poses problems and encourages students to find solutions. However, the process cannot end there; action

must be taken (Hicks, Berger, & Generett, 2005). Praxis is essential if true change is to occur (Lange, 2004; Tejada et al., 2003). As Freire (1970/2000) explained, “The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” and “feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge” (p. 81). This form of education is holistic and aimed at peace, diversity, and social justice (Moore, 2005). It also helps learners better understand the biographical, historical, and cultural underpinnings of their beliefs, perspectives, and values (Mezirow, 2000).

Transformation is prompted in response to cognitive dissonance or what may also be thought of as a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1994, p. 224). A disorienting dilemma takes place when a person discovers that something once considered to be true may not be true after all. The conflict between previously held beliefs or assumptions and emergent information leads the person to look for answers and try to make sense of the new knowledge. Transformative teaching practices, which involve classroom educators, as well as student affairs practitioners, can assist students in this phase of learning to critically examine their thoughts, values, and feelings, determine which of these have been assimilated from others without previous examination, and use this new information to become more clear-thinking, socially responsible decision-makers (Mezirow, 1997, 2000). This is most often achieved through critical reflection and discourse (Mezirow, 2000; E. W. Taylor, 2009), two processes Mezirow considers central to transformative learning (Cranton, 2006b).

Critical reflection involves questioning long-standing viewpoints and attitudes and is often provoked when people’s ideas, emotions, or behaviors no longer seem to fit for them (E. W. Taylor, 2009). It also requires an examination of the premises



underlying one's thoughts (Cranton, 2006b). Closely tied to the concept of critical reflection is discourse, the dialogue people engage in to help them better understand and evaluate their questioned perceptions (E. W. Taylor, 2009). In transformative learning, the goal of discourse is to learn from each other's experiences in order to gain insight and greater understanding (Mezirow, 2000). This helps learners move from a right-wrong mindset to one of collaboration centered in empathic listening, compassionate communication, and critique (Mezirow, 2000; E. W. Taylor 2009).

Whereas Mezirow's theory of transformative learning focuses primarily on cognitive processes, additional contributors to the field have included other domains and dimensions. For example, one view of transformative learning, originating from Jungian psychology, is centered in the affective dimension of learning (Dirkx, 2006). Proponents of this perspective assert that through the experiencing of emotions, adult learners can be helped in revealing and exploring the meanings behind their unconscious feelings and motivations. Other researchers have concentrated on the roles creativity and spirituality play in the transformation process and take a more holistic approach to learning that recognizes multiple ways of knowing (Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl, 2006; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). A race-centric view of transformative learning deconstructs issues of power, race, and culture (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). It centers the experiences of people of color and focuses on the socio-political dimensions of learning.

Finally, similar to Mezirow's conceptualization, structural developmental approaches focus on cognitive functioning, but differ in that they view learning as a progression through a series of stages, with transformative learning occurring at the highest level (e.g., Kegan, 2000). Three theories of student development (Baxter

Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; King & Kitchener, 1994) fit this approach and have been linked to transformative learning by Mezirow (2000, 2003) and others (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Cranton, 2006b; Kegan, 2000; E. W. Taylor, 2008). In King and Kitchener's (1994) Reflective Judgment Model, the seven stages of the model describe "a developmental progression that occurs . . . in the ways that people understand the process of knowing and in the corresponding ways that they justify their beliefs about ill-structured [or ambiguous] problems" (p. 13). People exhibiting reflective judgment, which is characteristic of those in the final stages of the model, utilize critical thinking and discourse to assess their assumptions and beliefs and help make meaning of their experiences (Cranton, 2006b; Mezirow, 2000, 2003).

The model proposed by Belenky et al. (1986) concerning Women's Ways of Knowing includes five "epistemological perspectives from which women know and view the world" (p. 15), but which may also be found in men's ways of thinking. An integration of connected and constructed knowledge seems to best describe those learners who have undergone transformation. Connected knowing is an empathic approach that involves entering another person's perspective in order to gain greater understanding, and constructed knowing utilizes an integrative approach that includes evaluating and choosing from a number of possible perspectives in order to construct meaning for oneself (Belenky & Stanton, 2000).

In Baxter Magolda's (1992) Model of Epistemological Reflection, ways of knowing are seen as socially constructed, fluid, and influenced by gender. In the fourth and final stage of the model, which is demonstrated only rarely among traditionally aged college students (typically not taking place until a learner's mid to late twenties),

knowledge is determined contextually, is supported by evidence, and is centered in the authority of the learner. The shift of authority for knowledge construction from educator to learner is part of the process of self-authorship, “the internal capacity to determine [ones’s] beliefs, identities, and social relations” (Baxter Magolda, 2014, p. 26). Self-authorship is a primary student development goal and has been discussed in relation to making student affairs practice more transformative (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Keeling, 2004). Despite knowledge construction being central to the learner, self-authorship is considered a “mutual, reciprocal, dynamic of relations with others” (Baxter Magolda, 2003, p. 234) and involves the exploration of multiple perspectives and connecting with various aspects of identity, both of which are components of transformative learning.

### **Outcomes of Transformative Higher Education**

One of the possible outcomes of transformative learning is the alteration of one’s frames of reference or “meaning perspectives” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16) through critical reflection upon both habits of mind and points of view. Whereas habits of mind are broad, consistent, durable, and difficult to shift, points of view are more flexible and accessible (Mezirow, 1997). Our meaning perspectives are shaped early in life by our primary caregivers and teachers, as well as our environment and culture (Mezirow, 2000). They are also influenced by our experiences with various emotions, ideas, values, reactions, and associations (Mezirow, 1997). Transformative education allows students to learn from others’ perspectives and reflect upon how well these may fit with their own (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007). Research in higher education shows how these critical reflections allow students to examine their own biases and assumptions to gain greater understanding of themselves and the world (Cohen, 2004; Moore, 2005). As a result,

they may experience increased self-confidence, creativity, and compassion and empathy for others (Cohen, 2004; Hart, 2004; Moore, 2005).

Critical pedagogy, in a broad sense, and transformative education, specifically, are designed to create active citizenry by helping students gain greater awareness of their place within existing social, political, and economic frameworks. The goal is both personal and social transformation (Lange, 2004). This transformation creates more far-reaching interests and concerns; a sense of belonging and connectedness to others; and a greater focus on character, on *who* the students are rather than on *what* they do (Hart, 2004; Lange, 2004). These goals address some of the concerns of contemporary educators (Hart, 2004). One such concern is the lack of depth of knowledge (i.e., students' inability to apply what is learned inside the university to experiences and contexts in other aspects of their lives), what Glisczinski (2007) refers to as "richness of information" but "poverty of understanding" (p. 318). Another concern is that students are being turned into obedient, rather than engaged, citizens (Glisczinski, 2007; Hart, 2004).

As demonstrated through a study examining social justice issues in a graduate program for practicing teachers, transformative education helps bring students to the edge of their current understanding and beyond (Hicks et al., 2005). It enables learners to identify issues and options unforeseen to them in the past. Sometimes this can create dissatisfaction with previously held beliefs and patterns of thought. It can also be scary to step away from what is familiar and comfortable (Berger, 2004). However, it is not the educator's role to remove this uneasiness or solve students' problems. Instead, they should help students stay at the threshold of their understanding to fully experience the

discomfort so they may grow (Generett & Hicks, 2004). By supporting the learner, acknowledging the distress they are feeling, and when necessary, pointing to patterns that have kept them stuck, students can better appreciate where they are at, how they got there, and where they want to go next (Berger, 2004). At times, as one study concerning the relationships between transformative learning, civic engagement, and sustainability revealed, beliefs may not be transformed, but actually restored, confirmed, and given newfound support to grow and flourish (Lange, 2004). It is the job of the educator to encourage students in these novel spaces to explore and try on new ways of knowing (Moore, 2005). To understand how learning facilitators in higher education can do this, the focus now turns to transformative classroom practices.

### **Transformative Classroom Practices**

As discussed, traditional models of education focus upon mastery of a particular subject and utilize the gathering of information, skills, and facts. The lecture format used in most university classrooms is consistent with subject-oriented learning. Typically in this setting, one person (the professor) talks about a particular subject and oftentimes does not allow much opportunity for discussion (Moore, 2005). This traditional lecture format keeps professor-student contact to a minimum. Although this may be more cost effective, particularly at larger institutions, it sets up a hierarchy where the elite (e.g., graduate students or those attending costlier institutions with smaller classes) are more likely to have one-on-one time with professors (Shor & Freire, 1987).

In the transformative classroom, however, the environment is a collaborative and dialogical one (Cohen, 2004; Shor & Freire, 1987). The dialogical method of teaching is meant to create “illumination” not “manipulation” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 13). Students

in this setting are viewed as becoming; they are active, growing, and examining, as opposed to passive, static, and unquestioning (Freire, 1970/2000). In these spaces, educators believe in the “inherent worth and potential of each of their student learners” (Generett & Hicks, 2004, p. 190), and an environment is created to help foster feelings of trust, connectedness, safety, and empathy (Mezirow, 2000). This allows students to feel comfortable disclosing personal thoughts and feelings and provides opportunities for feedback and self-assessment (E. W. Taylor, 2000).

Generett & Hicks (2004) found some common practices used in transformative higher education, in addition to engagement in critical dialogue and reflection, included the establishment of learning communities, examination of identity (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, etc.), and active listening. Even in content-laden courses, transformative curriculum can be employed. For example, in one study, the successful teaching and learning practices of 30 educators participating in a university leadership program were examined (Vega & Tayler, 2005). The individuals surveyed consisted of public school teachers, as well as university faculty in the arts, sciences, and teacher education. The study found that methods such as peer evaluation, small-group learning, and communities of inquiry resulted in greater class participation, increased student-to-student interaction, better retention, fewer failures, as well as students taking more initiative and displaying greater creativity. Improved performance on both classroom and standardized tests was also found, but to a lesser degree (Vega & Tayler, 2005).

In another program, the pedagogical practice of intergroup dialogue was utilized to create transformation across a variety of disciplines (Clark, 2005). Intergroup dialogue

is a “collaboratively structured form of group conversation characterized by participants’ willingness to ‘listen for understanding’ ” (Clark, 2005, p. 51). This differs from the conversations that usually take place in the classroom, which include “serial monologuing” (Clark, 2005, p. 51), where students share their views on a particular subject one after another, and debate, where students “listen to gain advantage” (Clark, 2005, p. 51) over another’s point of view. In these more traditional forms of classroom conversation, students rarely engage in an interactive dialogue in order to better understand and appreciate alternative perspectives or to bridge a gap between cultures. Therefore, the point of intergroup dialogue is to create an environment in which participants engage in discourse with a diverse group of people to address problems related to issues such as privilege and oppression (Clark, 2005).

One factor of utmost importance in any transformative classroom is a strong student-teacher relationship, one that is nurturing and supportive while also offering a healthy amount of challenge (Moore, 2005; Sanford, 1966). Teachers and students must both be willing to take risks (E. W. Taylor, 2000) and ask thought-provoking questions (Wiessner & Mezirow, 2000). The student-teacher relationship, in and of itself, can be transformative (Berger, 2004; Stillion & Siegel, 1994). Here, curriculum is situated in the lived experiences, language, culture, and relationships of the students (Shor, 1989), as well as in their unique interests and goals (Estes, 2004; Paris & Combs, 2006). Students are involved in the process of deciding how to demonstrate their understanding. Research reveals that this helps students learn more and retain what they learn (Alkove & McCarty, 1992; Paris & Combs, 2006).

In order to be effective facilitators, it is important that educators get to know their students well and to be “as informed as possible about the realities that will influence the success or failure of transformation in the classroom” (Shor, 1989, p. 35). This means educators must be aware of the strengths and capabilities students bring with them, as well as the difficulties and obstacles their students may face (Shor, 1989). They must be cognizant of their students’ orientations toward transformation and be willing and able to support them at whatever levels they are currently situated (Berger, 2004). This includes being mindful that some students may come from cultures that do not value critical reflection and discourse (Mezirow, 2000). It is also essential for educators to consider the learners’ objectives, which may involve personal, social, or organizational development (Mezirow, 2000).

To engage a class in critical dialogue and reflection, educators should model these and other practices characteristic of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Some educators believe it may even be necessary “for one to undergo some form...of transformation in order to teach transformation” (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006, p. 55). Transformative educators must be authentic, which involves self-awareness and the ability to reflect upon their own beliefs, values, realities, preconceived notions, and experiences with transformation (Berger, 2004; Cranton, 2006a; Stillion & Siegel, 1994; Storrs & Inderbitzin, 2006). Becoming comfortable with and appreciating silence is important for educators in such spaces (Shor, 1989). Of equal importance is an educator’s ability to notice changing relationships in the classroom, as well as evidence of similar change outside of the classroom (Shor, 1989).



In addition, transformative teaching must involve a willingness to empower those from marginalized groups and an awareness of the impact of doing so (Generett & Hicks, 2004). Educators should also be willing to transfer authority to the learners (Mezirow, 2000), viewing themselves as “coequals in the learning experience” (Wiessner & Mezirow, 2000, p. 340). By representing hope, courage, and conviction, educators can model how to stand against oppression (Generett & Hicks, 2004). They can face criticism, however, from those who may not understand the value of such experiences, one of the many challenges transformative educators may encounter.

### **Transformative Learning in Student Affairs**

Just as significant in the transformative learning process as classroom educators, student affairs professionals may also be viewed as teachers because of their primary focus on student learning (Fried & Associates, 1995). Much attention in student affairs scholarship has been directed toward the link between transformative education and the goals of student affairs practice (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Fried & Associates, 2012; Keeling, 2004; Rhoads & Black, 1995; Shushok, Henry, Blalock, & Sriram, 2009). For example, Rhoads and Black (1995) discussed how a critical-cultural approach to student affairs work is consistent with transformative learning because both emphasize inclusion of multiple perspectives, cultures, and voices; collaboration, egalitarianism, and the elimination of hierarchies; and practicing from an ethic of care. Fried (2013) made a case for creating increasing opportunities for emotional engagement and meaning making in working with students in order to construct learning that is more personally meaningful and relevant, elements consistent with transformative learning. She defined meaning making as “an activity of composing a sense of connections among things: a sense of

pattern, order, form and significance” (Fried, 2013, p. 5) and ties the roots of student affairs practice to the pragmatism and experiential learning proposed by Dewey (1916, 1938). She also discussed shifting practices away from traditional, positivist ones and toward more holistic, integrative learning aimed at educating the whole student and connecting both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning.

Another important concept in student affairs work is that of creating learning partnerships. In order to create learning that lasts and is transformative for students, partnerships must be formed between academic affairs and student affairs (Keeling, 2004; Shushok et al., 2009). This is important to help students connect what they are learning in the classroom with what they are learning and experiencing beyond the classroom. In research examining the successful collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals in a residential learning community at Baylor University, such partnerships were shown to create experiences that were “complementary, mutually interdependent, and critically important to the growth, development, and learning of students” (Shushok et al., 2009, p. 10).

Baxter Magolda’s (2014) concept of learning partnerships involves collaborations between educators and students and are equally important. These partnerships also include connecting learning with thoughts, feelings, and experiences, where educators trust learners’ capabilities and share authority with them. In addition, educators engage in mutual learning from and with their students, another commonality between this type of work and transformative learning. Such partnerships are also meant to prompt student action. As Baxter Magolda (1999a) explained, educators have a “responsibility to help

young adults make the transition from being shaped by society to shaping society” (p. 630).

Finally, in *Learning Reconsidered*, Keeling (2004) provided an integrative view of teaching and learning that also stressed the importance of partnerships between faculty and student affairs professionals. It called for a thorough examination of learning processes across all campus contexts - looking at the “entire campus as a learning community” (Keeling, 2004, p. 13) - in order to develop learning outcomes that are practical, measurable, and attainable. It also emphasized the development of student affairs practitioners who are advocates and change agents, which fits perfectly with the idea of transformative learning as a critical pedagogy, and who serve as appropriate mentors and role models for transformed learners. Some of the educational goals proposed by the authors of this document that are consistent with transformative learning include critical thinking, engaged citizenship, social justice, cultural competency, and participatory involvement. They also called for innovative assessment methods to be used for learning outcomes that may be difficult to measure. The present study was able to accomplish that through the use of portraiture methodology, which will be described in Chapter III.

### **Criticisms of Transformative Higher Education**

Many people, both inside and outside of academia, may be skeptical of the use of teaching practices that do not resemble the established norms. They may even attempt to discredit or devalue such practices. There is a “general human tendency to privilege that which is familiar as the best way (or sometimes the only way) to be” (Berger, 2004, p. 344). As such, transformative educators may be labeled as radical or subversive and

must be prepared to persevere through such disparagement in order to effectively serve their students.

Another criticism of learner-centered environments is that educators in these settings are viewed as absent or passive in the learning process, allowing students to explore without guidance or purpose. On the contrary, transformative educators play an active and engaged role in the construction of knowledge, the anticipation of student needs, and the establishment of classroom goals (Paris & Combs, 2006). While these educators collaborate with the students to determine the process for learning, they may still have control over the content of what is taught. Additionally, learner-centered educators are proactive, model initiative, listen to their students, and involve students in the assessment and evaluation process (Estes, 2004; Paris & Combs, 2006). One important consideration, not to be overlooked, is that students should decide the direction of their own transformation. They must be allowed to determine which of their own beliefs should be questioned and examined. Otherwise, transformative learning can be criticized as being biased or coercive (Moore, 2005).

Because transformative learning can lead to emotional upheavals for some, social support and confirming life experiences are necessary in maintaining the positive changes that may take place during this time of upheaval (Cohen, 2004; Moore, 2005). As such, it is important that students are prepared, both mentally and emotionally, for these types of experiences. Equally important is that academic institutions are able to foster and nurture this form of learning (Moore, 2005). During times of transformation, alienation can occur when one's views no longer fit with those around them or when one recognizes that current relationships are oppressive. These students may seek out new relationships with

those who hold similar views or have undergone similar experiences and should be supported in doing so (Cohen, 2004; Moore, 2005).

One challenge institutions of higher learning face is how to assess whether students can critically reflect upon complex ideas and evaluate information from a multitude of perspectives (Glisczinski, 2007). An additional concern is that many faculty are not trained as teachers, and therefore, should exercise caution when engaging in transformative teaching practices. These educators may feel uncomfortable relinquishing their positions of power, authority, and control in the classroom (Moore, 2005). Others argue that students may not be skilled, mature, or creative enough to engage in self-directed learning and critical reflection. Shifting one's underlying assumptions can leave students feeling uncertain and insecure (Moore, 2005). Students may also be resistant or unwilling to critically examine their beliefs (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007). However, discomfort must be present in order for transformation to occur. As Berger (2004) aptly stated, "Comfort is rarely transformative" (p. 346). Educators and students, alike, must be willing to venture beyond the spaces of security and certainty in order to be able to stretch and grow (Stillion & Siegel, 1994).

### **Challenges for Transformative Learners and Educators**

Although not insurmountable, there are a number of barriers to more widespread use of transformative teaching practices as identified through research on transformative learning in higher education. For example, some educators do not value transformative teaching or find it to be rigorous enough when compared to more traditional approaches (Moore, 2005). There is also a misperception that transformative educators try to coerce their students into thinking in certain ways or believing specific things (Tisdell, Hanley,

& Taylor, 2000). It can also be difficult to break from tradition or challenge the status quo, especially when the dominant culture reinforces competition and individualism and devalues collective thinking and collaboration (Mezirow, 2000). Therefore, getting buy-in from educators who adhere to more conventional teaching methods may prove challenging. In addition, teaching in a transformative way requires a great deal of skill and creativity, as well as a willingness to take risks and be open and authentic in the learning environment (Cranton, 2006a; E. W. Taylor, 2000). This can leave educators feeling vulnerable and uncertain of their own skills and may limit the number of individuals amenable to engaging in such practices.

Because of the ways students are accustomed to learning in typical K-12 settings, they may be uncomfortable with less structured, more student-centered learning environments upon entering higher education (Generett & Hicks, 2004). Students skilled at determining what is expected of them from learning facilitators, and doing just that, may feel lost in a space where they can make choices about their own learning and decide what information fits for them and what does not. These students may actually prefer being told what to do rather than make those decisions for themselves. This fear of autonomy and the unknown may lead to students' unwillingness to delve more deeply into their own beliefs and perspectives and engage in the transformative learning process, especially those who have difficulty performing critical reflection and analysis (Cranton, 2006b; Ettlign, 2006). In addition, the discomfort associated with challenging one's own assumptions and trying to understand the resulting desire to change can be an "intensely threatening emotional experience" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 6). These reasons explain why many students are resistant to the transformative learning process.

There are also some systemic challenges that may impede more widespread use of transformative teaching and learning practices in higher education (Moore, 2005). These include the large class sizes, advisee rosters, and student caseloads often unavoidable at institutions with large student populations and limited budgets. In addition, the voluminous lecture halls often characteristic of college classes are not conducive to creating the more collaborative, dialogue-driven spaces necessary for transformative learning to take place. The limited amount of time that traditionally-formatted courses meet may also pose constraints for the transformative learning process, as topics may not be able to be explored as deeply and discussions may need to be cut short during, for example, a 50-minute class session. Additionally, with hundreds of students on their caseloads, student affairs professionals may also be limited in how much time they can spend with each student.

### **Recommendations for Overcoming Challenges**

There are a number of ways both educators and students can prepare to meet the challenges that transformative education can sometimes pose (E. W. Taylor, 2006, 2007). For educators, it is important to provide clarification as to what transformative teaching actually involves and how it can benefit students to clear up any misperceptions people may have (E. W. Taylor, 2006). The information shared should be supported by well designed and executed research that demonstrates transformative learning's utility and value (E. W. Taylor, 2007). It is also imperative to provide, for both faculty and student affairs professionals, ongoing training sessions in transformative teaching practices that include how to handle the potential difficulties that may arise during the transformative

learning process (e.g., resistance, painful or uncomfortable emotions, students losing support from significant others, etc.).

Teaching in a culturally responsive way also necessitates that educators understand and explore the issue of privilege, as well as their own dominant and subordinate identities (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). Utilization of a variety of assessment methods also demonstrates a respect for multiple ways of knowing and learning styles. For those new to this pedagogical approach, providing opportunities to try out transformative practices in other settings (such as meetings, trainings, and professional development workshops) can prove beneficial in bolstering confidence and removing some of the fear and uncertainty that accompany attempting something for the first time. Support from colleagues is also essential.

To help students feel more at ease, educators should work to build strong student-educator relationships and to create safe and supportive environments where students can gain comfort in trying out new behaviors and ways of knowing (Moore, 2005; E. W. Taylor, 2006). This setting should be one characterized by trust, empathy, collaboration, and respect for multiple voices and perspectives. Educators can model the behaviors they wish students to try, such as critical discourse and analysis (Mezirow, 2000). It is also important to acknowledge the discomfort students may be experiencing in order to normalize their feelings. Encouraging strong peer relationships and providing opportunities for self-authorship have been shown as additional ways to support students in the transformative learning process (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Eisen, 2001).

Assessing students' readiness for transformation and developing a strong awareness of their learners' needs are critical responsibilities of ethical practitioners



(Snyder, 2008; E. W. Taylor, 2007). Building student self-awareness is also essential (Lange, 2004). One way to do this is through journaling, which can be a powerful experience during the transformative learning process and can help students sort through their feelings and new understandings (Burk, 2006; King, 2004). Educators should also be mindful that they cannot simply expect transformation to happen; they must often provide a catalyst (E. W. Taylor, 2009).

In order to counter the criticism that transformative learning can be coercive, ethical educators must constantly assess whether the methods they are using and the resulting outcomes are appropriate (Ettling, 2006). They need to equalize responsibility and authority in the learning environment, focusing less upon task completion and more upon open and trustful dialogue (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; E. W. Taylor 2007). They should also give students a choice of whether or not to engage in the transformative learning process, which is one way to minimize the power differential. Some examples include providing an option to observe but not participate in an activity and always allowing students to decide what and how much they want to disclose about themselves (Tisdell et al., 2000). Ultimately, the goal is to provide students with the tools they need to apply their learning to other areas of their lives.

There are several ways to address some of the constraints that traditional learning structures may pose. For example, classes could be offered that meet for greater lengths of time and that follow more of a seminar style. Utilizing other settings (e.g., the outdoors, an art studio) is another novel approach to eliminating the confines of a classroom or office (Fisher-Yoshida et al., 2009). Reconfiguring the learning environment so that the educator is not the focal point (for example, by forming a circle

of chairs) helps to shift authority, open communication, and allows everyone to be on a level playing field (Paris & Combs, 2006). In addition, the greater use of living-learning communities and thoughtful, well planned service-learning can also provide new venues for transformative education (Keeling, 2004). The overall aim is to create more opportunities for meaning-making and collaboration.

### **Deficits in Current Literature**

The fostering of transformative learning in higher education has been widely researched, yet there are still many unanswered questions (Cranton, 2006b; Snyder, 2008; E. W. Taylor, 2000, 2006). For example, what conditions need to be present in order to create a space for transformative learning to occur? Do certain topics or subjects lend themselves more to transformative learning than others? Additionally, little research has been conducted applying or analyzing transformative learning in student affairs work. Moreover, while much of the existing research focuses on *what* is needed to promote transformative learning, an explanation of *how* to do so is often missing, such as, how do relational components such as trust and empathy get built within this type of environment? Previous studies have also pointed to a need to demonstrate the connection between critical reflection and affective dimensions of learning (E. W. Taylor, 2000, 2007). As such, it would be useful to learn how educators can most effectively and appropriately engage emotions in the transformative learning process.

Another topic that has not been addressed is how the transformative learning experience of one person affects those around them, such as teachers, classmates, family, and friends (E. W. Taylor, 2008). It would be useful to interview the people whose lives or relationships may have changed due to another person's transformative learning

experience in order to gain a greater understanding of their perspectives. This knowledge could prove valuable in helping learners who may have been rejected or ostracized as a result of their newfound beliefs and behaviors (E. W. Taylor, 2000). The role and nature of relationships in the transformative learning process has received increasing attention (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; E. W. Taylor, 2007). However, there is still much that is unknown, for example, how the formation of friendships or cohort groups can be used to foster this form of learning.

A need has also been demonstrated to better understand the actual process of transformative learning (Snyder, 2008; E. W. Taylor, 2007). Snyder's (2008) analysis of 10 qualitative studies utilizing Mezirow's conception of transformative learning revealed that while these studies examined whether or not transformative learning occurred as the result of a particular course or workshop, they did not explore the learners' actual experience of transformative learning. Some suggestions have been made to focus future research on one specific component of the learning process (such as critical reflection or perspective transformation) or to utilize longitudinal methods and field observation to help triangulate the data (Snyder, 2008; E. W. Taylor, 2000, 2007). One problem with a longitudinal design is the possibility that transformation does not take place during the period of observation. This design may also present difficulty in determining whether transformative learning occurred as the result of the observed class or some other factor, such as individual development or socio-cultural influences (E. W. Taylor, 2007). Regardless of the method used, exploring the process from the learner's perspective will provide a greater depth of understanding about both the experience and theory of

transformative learning, as well as help educators improve their practice and make more informed curricular decisions (Snyder, 2008).

### **Summary**

Adult education frequently involves learners revising existing perceptions of themselves and the world around them. The process of learning is usually collaborative in nature, where everyone in the classroom is seen as both teachers and learners, and all involved share their experiences in an effort to learn from one another and create knowledge together. Critical pedagogy, which frames much of today's adult education, is aimed at social justice and change. Its goals are to empower adults, challenge the status quo, and transform society. Transformative learning is a theory of adult learning that meets these objectives. Its outcomes are more long-lasting, and it has the potential to serve a greater diversity of students. However, there is still much we do not know or fully comprehend about transformative learning. Current literature reveals a need to better understand the actual process and experience of transformative learning from both the educator's and learner's perspectives, as well as the relationship between them. Additionally, it would be useful to know more about how the transformative learning experience of one person affects those around them. As learners' views of the world change, so do their interactions and relationships with others. In order to best support students during this process, educators need to be equipped with as much knowledge about the transformative learning process as possible. This study sought to address those needs.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

There are four elements essential to a well planned research endeavor. The first, the research paradigm, involves the theoretical and philosophical beliefs guiding the entire research process (Mertens, 2010). The research paradigm also sets the tone for the study and informs the other three components. Next, the methodology delineates how the research will be conducted and the findings displayed (Jones et al., 2006). Methods, the third aspect, determine participant selection, data collection, and analysis (Crotty, 1998). Finally, rigor concerns those steps that are taken to ensure the quality of the research (Creswell, 2007). In turn, I will now provide a detailed description of each of these four elements as they pertain to this study.

#### **Research Paradigm**

Theoretical paradigms provide a framework for understanding education and social science research. Researchers utilizing a constructivist paradigm assert that multiple truths and realities exist and consider the research process to be a collaborative one where both the researcher and the researched together create meaning (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010; Mertens, 2010). One key component of theoretical paradigms, epistemology, concerns the nature of knowledge (English, 1994) and addresses the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Crotty, 1998). Constructivist

researchers contend that the nature of knowledge is not fixed in one universal “Truth” (Guido et al., 2010, p. 8), but in many truths, which may vary depending on the specific context. Knowledge, therefore, is both subjective and created (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), and the researcher and researched are seen as interconnected and influencing one another (Mertens, 2010). Because this process is interactive, researchers must be explicit in stating their values, assumptions, and role, as they view it, in the research process (Mertens, 2010).

Another aspect of theoretical paradigms, ontology, concerns the nature of reality and how reality is experienced (Crotty, 1998). Relativism best describes the constructivist view of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). From a relativist viewpoint, multiple realities exist and are socially constructed. Constructivist researchers do not believe in the idea of a single objective reality, but instead are concerned with making meaning of and understanding multiple realities (Mertens, 2010). Constructivist researchers look to the research participants to provide meaning for their own individual experiences (Guido et al., 2010). Finally, axiology defines what is valued within a given framework or paradigm (English, 1994). From a constructivist lens, value is placed upon relativism, subjectivity, and meaning-making, as well as research that demonstrates collaboration and community (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of transformative learning in higher education from three perspectives: the learner, the educator, and a significant individual in the learner’s life. Gaining a greater understanding of transformative learning from these three distinct groups helped to create a thick, rich description of the experience, which is one of the primary objectives of qualitative research (Merriam,

2009). For this study, transformative learning was defined as learning that creates a shift or change in a person's way of knowing, thinking, and being in the world, as well as how that person views self and others within that world. Specifically, I addressed the following research questions:

- Q1 How do students make meaning of their transformative learning experiences in higher education?
- Q2 How can educators best create and support transformative learning opportunities?
- Q3 What are students' perspectives regarding the changes they made as a result of these experiences?
- Q4 How does transformative learning influence key relationships in the learner's life?

This study was inspired by my own transformative learning experience. As such, I actively collaborated with the participants to define and understand transformative education as we, both the researcher and researched, experienced it. A constructivist approach served the research focus particularly well, as both the participants and I all had unique constructions of what transformative education means to us. Together, through multiple interviews and member checking, we made meaning of the research questions under examination and discussed patterns and themes within the data to better understand the realities of transformative experiences in higher education. This co-construction was achieved by bringing my initial impressions regarding themes from each interview to the learners during subsequent interviews to elicit their feedback and own impressions of themes.

Consistent with a constructivist paradigm, I also involved the learners in developing interview questions for their significant others and asked them how they

thought the findings from the study could best be used and what they thought others should know about their transformative learning experiences. Finally, to ensure goodness of the findings, I was transparent in my motives and intentions with regard to the research and worked with the participants to make sure the findings accurately portrayed their perspectives and voices. I accomplished this by having the learners review the portraits I wrote to make sure they recognized themselves and their own stories within them.

Although this study involved exploring the experience of transformative learning, I chose to utilize a constructivist, as opposed to transformative, research paradigm (Mertens, 2010) for several reasons. Some primary goals of studies using a transformative paradigm include transforming systems of oppression, studying the experiences of marginalized groups, examining power differentials within relationships, and having the participants take action based on the research (Mertens, 2010). While some elements of these goals can be found within the individual portraits and themes of this study, they were not my primary focus. Instead, the purpose of my study was to better understand the experience of transformative learning from multiple perspectives and the participants' meaning-making around that experience. I believe constructivism, with its focus on "the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge" (Mertens, 1998, p. 11) best captures and describes the spirit of my study. Additionally, as a broader and more encompassing paradigm, constructivism still allows space for change to take place, and I hope through sharing my study and the participants' stories with others, transformative teaching and learning becomes more widely practiced in higher education.



### **Methodology: Portraiture**

Methodology deals with how one goes about obtaining the desired knowledge and understanding. It can be looked at as the actual process of research and “links the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). In a constructivist study, the methodology employed allows for an interactive approach to the research and enables the research questions to “evolve and change as the study progresses” (Mertens, 2005, p. 16).

For this study, I chose to utilize portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As a narrative methodology, portraiture involves gathering the stories of participants and viewing the participants as “story-tellers” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture is a melding of the creative with the empirical, combining the “aesthetics of various art forms (music, literature, visual art) with the rigor of science” (Chapman, 2007, p. 157), a “painting with words. . . . to create a narrative” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 6). It was originally developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) to describe the elements of effective high schools in a holistic way and has been used primarily in education research (Hackmann, 2002).

Portraiture seeks to demonstrate the goodness within a given setting, as well as how the participants conceptualize that goodness (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). It is similar to case study research in that it is bound to a specific context and employs a variety of informational sources to provide an in-depth and detailed description of a particular case (Creswell, 2007). It differs from case study, however, in that it is used to illustrate identifiable strengths and successes within that particular context.

Rather than focusing upon deficits and failures, as is customary in many approaches to social science research, through portraiture the researcher seeks to show how those in a specific setting demonstrate perseverance and resiliency (Hackmann, 2002). As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explained:

Portraiture resists [the] tradition-laden effort to document failure. It is an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections (p. 9).

In doing so, the portraitist does not overlook potential challenges, but instead considers them areas for improvement.

I believe portraiture methodology best suited the research questions at hand because of my intent to make a case for more widespread use of transformative education in college and university settings. Through portraiture, I was able to demonstrate the strengths and effectiveness of transformative education, as well as its ability to enhance learning and transform lives. In addition, portraiture enabled me to reveal the goodness and resiliency of the participants, discussing the challenges they overcame, as well as the special nature of their relationships with the educators.

As a student who has experienced transformation, portraiture allowed me to compare my own story with that of the participants in order to create a full and vivid picture of what transformation looks like in higher education. As such, it was important for me to reflect upon my values, personal beliefs, and experiences, in essence to “know thyself” as both a researcher and a student in order to “counter personal bias and sustain rigor” (Chapman, 2007, p. 161). This provision of my researcher stance (also known as reflexivity), which I included in Chapter I, is consistent with constructivist research (Jones et al., 2006).

Portraiture methodology was also useful because it places a strong emphasis on relationship building with participants and their active collaboration in the creation of the portrait. Such active participation is congruent with constructivism, which seeks to eliminate the distance between the researcher and the researched. I was able to build these relationships by sharing my own transformative learning experience with the participants and pointing out commonalities between our stories. Being transparent about my passion for transformative education and being authentic in my discussions with them was also important. By sharing my interpretations of emerging data during subsequent interviews with the participants, I was able to collaborate with them in the formation of the portraits and themes. Additionally, I provided each participant with their individual portrait and asked for their feedback to ensure that I reflected their voices and stories accurately. These two components of the member checking process will be discussed again in the section concerning research rigor.

Portraiture is also viewed as being more accessible to both academic and non-academic populations, alike, as it involves speaking in “a language that is understandable, not exclusive or esoteric . . . a language that encourages identification, provokes debate, and invites reflection and action” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 9). I value this approach, as I hope to demonstrate to individuals in the field of academia and beyond the power of transformative education and what this experience can look like both inside and outside of the classroom. In addition, the inclusive, strengths-based nature of portraiture, along with its focus on centering the lived experiences of the participants, made it a good fit for this study.

Regarding data representation, with portraiture as the chosen methodology, I created individual portraits of each student participant, interweaving the perspectives of their chosen significant other and educator, as well as a larger portrait examining both the commonalities and differences in the experiences of transformative learning across all of the data. This idea of a larger portrait formed the framework for the thematic discussion. Participant quotes were utilized throughout both the individual and larger portraits to highlight the participants' unique experiences and stories, as well as illustrate specific themes.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) likened the creation of a portrait to the weaving of a tapestry, whereby the themes that emerge during the data collection and analyses processes are seen as colorful threads that when woven together reveal a complete and vibrant picture. The intent is to create a cohesive whole, while maintaining the integrity of individual voices and the complexity of experiences. Likewise, it is important not to preclude stories that do not fit with the prominent narrative unfolding, allowing contrast to add richness to the portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Through the sharing of stories that were both illustrative and evocative, I lend strength and support to the case for more widespread use of transformative learning in higher education.

### **Methods**

Methods are the specific data collection activities and techniques utilized to answer a research question or examine a hypothesis (Crotty, 1998). Methods also influence how the findings will be analyzed and interpreted and include sampling and measurement procedures (Crotty, 1998). As is customary with qualitative research,

purposeful sampling was used to locate participants for the study (Merriam, 2009). The data collection methods included a total of 16 interviews - four semi-structured interviews (three individual and one paired) for each trio of participants - as well as researcher journaling. In addition, the Zoom Model framed the analysis of the data (Pamphilon, 1999).

### **Setting and Participants**

With portraiture being similar to case study, the bounded context within which the research was conducted was a mid-sized, 4-year, public university in the western United States. During the fall of 2013, graduate students comprised approximately 20% (2,374 students) of the student population, while undergraduate students comprised approximately 80% (9,710 students). Of the total number of enrolled students, 25% identified as ethnic minorities and 36% of all undergraduates were the first in their families to attend college.

Because transformative learning theory focuses on adult learning, specifically, individuals pursuing graduate study were selected as the student participants for this project. However, upon interviewing these participants, it was discovered that their transformative learning experiences actually occurred while a graduate student for only one of the participants, and while undergraduate students for the other three. In order to gain a greater range of perspectives, it was my intent to interview participants who reflected diversity in gender, age, race, ethnicity, and academic major. While there was some diversity reflected in the identities of the participants (described below), future research should be directed toward an even more diverse sample.

Prior to commencement of participant recruitment, Institutional Review Board approval to conduct the research was sought and granted (see Appendix A). Purposeful sampling, which involves the selection of “information-rich cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 169), was used to locate participants for the study. Specifically, the method of intensity sampling enhanced the likelihood that a variety of experiences within these rich cases were found (Patton, 1990). The key informants (also referred to as “gatekeepers”), both faculty and student affairs professionals known by the researcher at the institution under investigation, were asked in person or via email to identify students they believed to meet the sampling criteria: students who had undergone a transformative learning experience, one characterized by a shift or change in the student’s way of knowing, thinking, and being in the world, as well as in how that student viewed the self and others within that world. (See Appendix B for a copy of the call for participation email sent to gatekeepers.) Both faculty and student affairs professionals were utilized in order to identify students who had experienced transformative learning in a variety of contexts, not just the classroom (e.g., through employment in a particular campus office or participation in a student group or program). Additionally, potential student participants were contacted via the University’s graduate student listserv. (See Appendix C for a copy of the call for participation email sent to graduate students.)

Once a minimum of four students were identified, I contacted them to explain the purpose of the research, determine if their experiences fit with the study’s definition of transformative learning, and inform them of the time commitment required. If the individuals fit the selection criteria and were interested in the study, I requested their participation. Sampling continued until saturation, a reoccurrence of themes and stories

revealed throughout the interviews, took place (Jones et al., 2006). Of the four student participants selected, three were identified by gatekeepers and one self-identified.

The student participants were each asked to designate an educator who helped create or support their transformative learning experience, as well as a significant individual (such as a friend, family member, or partner) who could speak to changes the learner made as a result of the experience. These individuals were contacted to determine their ability to discuss their understandings of the students' transformative learning experiences (after being provided with the study's definition of this concept), as well as their interactions with them. Once I communicated with them, if it appeared these friends and family members were aware of the transformations that took place and were willing to speak about them, they were asked to participate in the study. (For purposes of clarity and consistency, the three groups of participants will be referred to as "students," "educators," and "significant others" for the remainder of this chapter.)

There were a total of 12 participants - four students, four educators, and four significant others. All of the students were pursuing graduate degrees in a field related to either education or behavioral science, but had undergraduate majors ranging from the humanities and social sciences to the behavioral sciences to the natural and health sciences. Additionally, they all identified as being first-generation college students, meaning that neither of their parents had earned a college degree. Table 1 provides additional demographics for the 12 participants.

Table 1  
Participant Demographics

Student Name	Student Sex	Student Ethnicity	Age at Time of Interview	Educator Name	Educator Sex	Educator Role	Significant Other Name	Significant Other Sex	Significant Other Role
Reneé	Female	Latina	38	Rebecca	Female	Graduate Professor	Jack	Male	Husband
Zach	Male	White	22	Eric	Male	Fraternity New Member Educator	Jane	Female	Mother
Sarah	Female	Bi-Ethnic	31	Jeff	Male	Undergraduate Professor	Joel	Male	Friend
Elias	Male	Latino	35	Jana	Female	TRIO Advisor	Laura	Female	Wife

Participation in the study was voluntary and limited to adults over the age of 18. Prior to their participation, the researcher obtained informed consent from all participants, detailing their rights and responsibilities within the study. (See Appendices D, E, and F for the informed consent forms used for learners, educators, and significant others, respectively.) Participants were given the option to use their real name or to select a pseudonym in order to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality. If a pseudonym was selected, information deemed potentially identifying was either omitted or intentionally vague in that participant's portrait in order to further maintain confidentiality. At the final interview, the student participants received a \$25 gift card to a retailer of their choice in appreciation for their participation in the study.

### Data Collection

As is characteristic of qualitative research, in general, and portraiture methodology, specifically, multiple data collection methods were utilized (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This ensured the data gathered reflected both breadth and depth with regard to the topic being studied and the



perspectives revealed (Merriam, 2009). What follows is an explanation of the procedures involved for each of the selected data collection techniques.

**Semi-structured individual interviews.** Once I located a sample of participants, I first conducted a semi-structured individual interview with the students to explore their transformative learning experiences. When interviewing, the semi-structured format enabled me, as the researcher, to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). This was accomplished by changing the wording of questions, as necessary, developing new questions, and pursuing an entirely different line of questioning based on the participant’s lead. The flexibility semi-structured interviews allow is congruent with a constructivist framework.

The initial interview included questions that encouraged an investigation of the types of changes the student participants went through as a result of their experiences, including changes in their relationships with the significant other they designated, as well as how their experiences were influenced by the educator they identified. Interview questions and prompts included:

1. Tell me about your transformative learning journey. (A conversation took place before the first interviews commenced to ensure that all participants understood the definition of transformative learning being used in this study.)
2. How do you think this journey shaped the person you see yourself as today?
3. How do you think the person you are today differs from the person you were prior to beginning this journey?

4. Was there a specific event or series of events that triggered your transformative learning experience, or was it a more gradual, less immediately noticeable process? Please explain.
5. How was this process different from other learning experiences you've had?
6. How do you feel (educator) contributed to your transformative learning experience?
7. How important was that educator's support during this process?
8. What role did other relationships (e.g., with teachers, classmates, significant others, etc.) play in your transformative learning experience? Tell me about relationships that were supportive, as well as those that were not.
9. How did your relationship with (significant other) change during or following your transformative learning experience?
10. What types of changes do you think your significant other noticed in you?
11. When challenging previous assumptions and beliefs, what was your reflective process like?
12. What types of feelings or emotions did you experience, and how were they significant to your learning?
13. How do you think your cultural beliefs and values or prior learning experiences affected your transformative learning process?
14. How do you think aspects of your identity (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, etc.) influenced your experience?

After these initial interviews, the significant others were individually interviewed to explore their perceptions of how both the student and their relationship with the

student changed as a result of the transformative learning experience. The questions asked during this interview evolved from the initial interviews with the students, who assisted in the formulation of interview questions for their significant others. Prior to conducting the interviews, the student participants were provided with the interview protocol to ensure they were comfortable with the questions being asked of their significant others. Interview questions included:

1. As (student's) transformative learning experience was occurring, what was its influence on you? (Again, a conversation took place at the start of these interviews to ensure that all participants understood the definition of transformative learning being used in this study.)
2. What changes did you see taking place in (student)?
3. How would you describe these changes? (For example, were the changes subtle, gradual, immediate, dramatic, etc.?)
4. How did you find yourself relating differently with (student)?
5. How do you feel about the changes that (student) has made as a result of her/his transformative learning experience?

After the two interviews involving the students took place, they completed a final individual interview. During this interview, they were asked about their reactions to the paired interview (see "Semi-structured paired interviews" below). Interview questions included:

1. What are your reactions to the interview you completed with (educator)?
2. What did (educator) share that surprised you?
3. What have you learned about yourself during this process?

4. If there is anything you could change about your transformative learning experience, what would it be?
5. How has this experience changed the way you view learning? How has it changed your life?
6. What do you think would be useful or helpful for others to know about your experience?
7. How do you think the findings from this study can best be used?

Additional questions for the final interview emerged from the previous meetings. This final interview also provided the students with an opportunity to share any clarifications they wanted to make with regard to the prior interviews.

**Semi-structured paired interviews.** Following the initial individual student interviews, paired interviews took place with both the student and educator. This allowed an opportunity for the students to share their perspectives of the transformative learning experience with the educator who helped to create and support that experience. For all of the students, it was the first time such a discussion had taken place between the two. The purpose of this interview was to encourage dialogue between the student and educator concerning transformative learning. Interview questions included:

1. (To Student) Please describe your transformative learning journey.
2. (To Student) How was this process different from other learning experiences you've had?
3. (To Student) How do you feel (educator) contributed to your transformative learning experience?

4. (To Educator) What was the experience like for you as the teacher (or student affairs professional)?
5. (To Educator) Was transformative learning a goal of the class(es)/interactions? If so, how was it created? If not, what do you think contributed to transformation taking place? (What aspects of the nature of the course/content/interaction, for example?)
6. (To Educator) What are some of the challenges students encounter when faced with transformation?
7. (To Both) What do you see as some of the obstacles in using transformative teaching practices?
8. (To Both) What are the benefits to more widespread use of transformative teaching and learning in higher education?

While I utilized most of the aforementioned questions to help facilitate the discussion, in the spirit of constructivist research, it was my hope that a conversation would naturally emerge between the two participants without the need to impose many predetermined questions. This proved to be the case. These interviews helped to shed light on the nature of the relationship between educator and student in transformative learning environments.

The individual and paired interviews took between 45 to 90 minutes to conduct and were digitally recorded with the participants' consent. Once completed, the interviews were then transcribed verbatim by the interviewer and housed in a secure location. A total of 16 interviews were conducted and resulted in close to 13 hours of interview time and 384 pages of transcription.

As is consistent with portraiture methodology, it was important during all of the interviews to listen *for* a story, rather than *to* a story. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explained:

The method of listening *for* a story rather than *to* a story is at the heart of the process of co-constructing narrative. When listening *to* a story, the researcher records the account that the actor is sharing and structuring entirely on his or her own. When listening *for* a story, the researcher plays a more active listener role in the actor's storytelling. Through the dialectic between interviewer and interviewee, voice as interpretation contributes to the determination of the direction and shape of actors' responses (emphasis in original, p. 120).

Therefore, as the researcher, it was my responsibility to listen closely to not only the words of the participants and what was said, but also to what was not said, to subtext, and to note silences, changes in inflection and emotion, as well as non-verbal behaviors. All of this assisted in the creation of the portraits.

### **Reflexivity: Researcher Journal**

Throughout the data collection phase, I engaged in both written and audio-recorded reflective journaling, a method of reflexivity, to explore thoughts, feelings, and experiences surrounding my own transformative learning journey, as well as my interactions with the participants and the research process, itself (Jones et al., 2006). In this way, I was able to share my views concerning my roles as both insider (or transformed learner) and outsider (or researcher). As is customary with constructivist research, I reflected upon the assumptions and values I brought to the study and was clear in explicating to the participants my intentions behind pursuing the topic, as well as for utilizing the findings. It was also important for me to reveal, through my journal, any emotional reactions I had to the participants or their stories, either in empathy or opposition (Pamphilon, 1999). As an ethical researcher, this allowed me to acknowledge

my own feelings while taking care not to let them overshadow the voices of the participants.

In addition, my journal contained a detailed account of each of the steps and decisions I made throughout the study regarding both data collection and analysis, what is known in qualitative research as an audit trail (Merriam, 2009). With regard to analysis, this included how I determined the particular groupings and themes used to describe the data. The researcher journal was also utilized to more fully inform the study's findings and ensure the trustworthiness of the research. I used all of the information gathered, collaborating with the participants, to create a portrait of transformative learning experiences in higher education based on the emergent themes and patterns evident in the data collected.

### **Data Analysis**

Data in the form of interview transcripts and my own research journal were analyzed throughout the data collection process to assist in the development of themes and the determination of subsequent interview questions and areas where further examination was needed. This was an on-going process whereby one set of data informed the collection of the next, with each set being compared with subsequent sets (Merriam, 2009). This ongoing analysis allowed for new information to emerge, focuses to shift or intensify, and research questions to be reshaped, as necessary (Jones et al., 2006; Merriam, 2009).

Once collection concluded, all forms of data were reviewed again and coded with descriptive phrases that summarized each unit of data. I then began to organize the data according to the common threads woven throughout them, narrowing in on two broad

thematic groupings. Consistent with portraiture methodology, I looked for relationships and patterns among the emergent themes, further grouping them where necessary. In describing the themes, I first wrote a summary of each one. Next, I went back to the relevant literature, looking for support for each of the themes, which I then wove throughout the discussion in order to help explain and make sense of the findings.

The coding process was framed by the Zoom Model of data analysis (Pamphilon, 1999). This model is analogous to looking through the lens of a camera and choosing to focus on certain aspects of that view at various times depending on the context, but all the while keeping the full picture in mind. In data analysis, taking into account both the individual parts and the whole of each participant's story helps the researcher make sense of seemingly contradictory perspectives within the narrative to form a more accurate and complete portrait of the phenomenon being studied (Pamphilon, 1999).

There are four levels of analysis with the Zoom Model (Pamphilon, 1999). The first, the *macro-zoom*, focuses on the socio-cultural aspects of the narrative, as well as historical events that may have influenced the participants' experiences. This includes dominant discourses, which examine social relationships and social practices based on cultural patterns and beliefs. It also looks at narrative form, or how the participants choose to situate themselves within their stories. For this study, I used the macro-zoom to examine the data for stories concerning the challenges students faced when their transformative learning experiences were questioned for not being as valid as more traditional or dominant forms of education. This level of analysis was useful in examining the relationship between the students and their significant others. The



macro-zoom also helped me to uncover early messages the students received regarding what learning “should” look like.

Next, the *meso-zoom* concerns individual dimensions of the narrative, such as the process and flow of the story-telling. This lens helped me to listen for the key themes participants used to construct their own stories and the repeated phrases occurring throughout each account. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) referred to these as resonant metaphors and repetitive refrains. The meso-zoom level of analysis can also assist in making sense of the silences, as sometimes what participants do not say can be as important or powerful as the words spoken. While the focus here is on the individual’s own story, it is important that I am able to zoom back out using a wider lens, to place that story within its socio-cultural context (Pamphilon, 1999).

Third, the *micro-zoom* concentrates on the oral features of the narrative, such as the pauses made and the energy and inflection behind the story-teller’s voice (Pamphilon, 1999). It becomes essential during and following each interview, as well as during the transcription process, to make note of such features in order to accurately capture the participants’ voices. The micro-zoom allowed me to focus on the emotions the participants displayed as they shared their perspectives. As I listened to their stories, it was also important to examine any incongruence between words and affect and to look for patterns of such across the whole.

Finally, the *interactional zoom* acknowledges the researchers’ place within the story, in addition to their relationship with the researched. This level of analysis involves both transaction, as we work together to co-construct the narrative, and reaction, as I respond to what I hear and experience during the research process (Pamphilon, 1999).

The use of the interactional zoom is consistent with both a constructivist paradigm, as well as portraiture methodology. Through this lens, I was able to share my own perspective of transformation and situate myself within the larger story, all the while being mindful of centering the experiences of the participants.

A list of codes for each participant was made according to the four levels of the Zoom Model, and the codes were then merged into groupings that best summarized and described the data. A portrait of each participant was created based on the themes most salient to their stories. Additional groupings were created to elaborate upon broader themes, and codes continued to be collapsed until six overarching themes remained. An interpretation of these themes is provided to explain the phenomenon of transformative learning as both the researcher and participants have experienced it (Jones et al., 2006). Participants' involvement in the data analysis process is characteristic of constructivist research and was used to establish trustworthiness and authenticity, as explained in the following section concerning research rigor.

### **Research Rigor**

Both trustworthiness and authenticity criteria are utilized to ensure the rigor of qualitative research. Whereas trustworthiness refers to our ability to rely on and have confidence in the research findings, authenticity deals more with the outcomes of the study and the potential influence of the research on others (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). What follows is an explanation of the four elements of trustworthiness, as well as the five components of authenticity, and how I established each.

## **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were developed for qualitative research as correlates to the quantitative constructs of internal validity, reliability, objectivity, and external validity, respectively (Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2000). According to Jones et al. (2006), “establishing the trustworthiness of a study . . . ensure[s] continuity and congruence among all the elements of the qualitative research process” (p. 99). This occurs through carefully planned and ethical behavior on the part of the researcher (Jones et al., 2006; Merriam, 2009).

**Credibility.** Credibility demonstrates the research findings accurately reflect the participants’ views and are consistent with the theoretical framework employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation, or the use of multiple sources of data, which for this study came in the form of two individual interviews with the student learner, a paired interview with the student and educator, an individual interview with a significant other designated by the student, as well as a researcher journal, was used to enhance credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Repeated and extensive contact with participants in an effort to get to know them well is another method of providing credibility (Shank, 2006) and was accomplished through four separate interviews (three individual and one paired) with each participant trio.

As I established interpretations of the emerging data, I shared these preliminary findings with the participants during our subsequent meetings to determine their accuracy, what is referred to as member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). I also provided the student participants with their individual portraits to ensure I was

reflecting their stories and voices accurately. In addition, I utilized a peer reviewer, another method to further strengthen the study's credibility. This entailed having a colleague familiar with the research topic review both the interview transcripts and my research findings to determine if similar conclusions regarding the data could be reasonably drawn by others (Merriam, 2009).

**Dependability.** Dependability pertains to “our ability to know where the data in a given study comes from, how it was collected, and how it was used” (Shank, 2006, p. 114). Additionally, it refers to the ability of another person to evaluate and replicate the study (Lincoln, 1995). Dependability was also demonstrated through the use of triangulation and peer review, as well as an audit trail that provided explanations of the decisions I made while conducting the research and collecting and analyzing the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Providing my researcher stance served to further increase the study's dependability (Merriam, 2009).

**Confirmability.** Confirmability involves researchers being forthright in disclosing their values and interest in the research topic (Lincoln, 1995). It also entails providing enough details of the methodologies used so that consumers of the research can make their own evaluations of the data collection and analysis methods (Shank, 2006). The intent is to *confirm* that the “data, interpretations, and outcomes are rooted in contexts and persons apart from the researcher” (Mertens, 2005, p. 15). This, too, was established through my use of an audit trail and the provision of my researcher stance in Chapter I, as well as my reflections in my researcher journal (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

**Transferability.** Transferability refers to the readers' ability to apply some or all of the findings to their own lives. In order for readers to determine if the findings

resonate for them, a context must be provided to serve as a comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rich, thick description allows the readers to experience the stories of the participants and extrapolate these findings to their own situations as they see fit (Merriam, 2009). I believe portraiture lends itself well to transferability, as each individual portrait provided a detailed account of the culture, characters, and setting framing that portrait.

### **Authenticity**

Authenticity, which addresses the ethical components of research and treatment of the participants, is revealed in five ways (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). First, fairness ensures that multiple voices and realities have been represented and in a balanced way, which this study achieved through the use of three distinct groups of participants - students, educators, and significant others. Providing readers with the questions used to gain the participants' perspectives, as well as collaborating with the participants as to the best ways to make use of the findings, also contributed to the concept of fairness (Mertens, 2010). Utilizing both educative and ontological authenticity, I framed transformative learning in its socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts and raised awareness of the powerful and life-changing impact transformation can have upon both the learner and educator. These forms of authenticity were garnered through use of member checks and an audit trail. Lastly, through catalytic and tactical authenticity, this research aims to inspire social change by demonstrating how to create more learner-centered, culturally responsive, and transformative learning environments in higher education.

### **Summary**

Framed by a constructivist paradigm and portraiture methodology, the purpose of the proposed study was to explore the experience of transformative learning from three perspectives: the learner, the educator, and a significant individual in the learner's life. In doing so, I contributed to the current literature on transformative learning in order to bring attention to this form of education and encourage its more widespread use in both higher and adult education. By illuminating the voices of the participants, their stories are likely to inspire both students and educators, alike, to advocate for transformative learning on their own campuses. Those outside of academia may be driven to seek out and create transformative learning opportunities in their communities. Through greater understanding of this inclusive and culturally responsive form of teaching and learning, including its ability to touch the lives of all of those within its reach, a catalyst for social change may ignite.

## CHAPTER IV

### PARTICIPANT PORTRAITS AND THEMATIC DISCUSSION

I entered my doctoral program having no idea what topic on which to focus my dissertation research. This was particularly frustrating for me, as it felt like everyone else knew what they wanted to study, that I was the only one who had no clue where I would be focusing the bulk of my time, energies, and brain power for the next several years. However, by the end of my first semester, I became aware of some dramatic changes taking place in the way I was thinking and the way I was viewing the world and myself. In talking to my advisor about it, she provided language for this experience I was having - transformative learning - and recommended I read bell hook's (1994) *Teaching to Transgress* over the winter break. This book forever changed the way I viewed education, and as a result, the idea for this dissertation was born.

What follows is a description of four individuals' transformative learning journeys in higher education. These stories include three perspectives - the learner, the educator, and a significant person in the learner's life. Literature concerning transformative learning, critical pedagogy, and adult learning theory is then used in a discussion of the emergent themes from this study. Self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999b; 2003; 2014), which has been linked to transformative learning in student affairs scholarship, is another theory used to discuss the findings.

### Reneé

Sharing the struggles she faced leading up to and during her transformative learning journey, Reneé told a story laced with both emotion and humor, seemingly in contrast to her matter-of-fact delivery. Immaculately dressed with brightly hued eyeglasses that always matched her outfits, Reneé arrived to each of our meetings with her neatly organized school bag in tow. Her open and friendly manner led to lengthy conversations, and although on the surface we appeared to come from very different backgrounds, we grew close over the course of the study bonding over similar experiences and common interests.

A Latina who grew up in a large city in the Southwestern United States, Reneé spoke of feeling like she didn't "fit in" after moving to the small college town where her doctoral program was located:

When I came to [this town], it was definitely a culture shock in many, many, many, many aspects. So, from day one of coming here, I had felt I had to fit in. I had to change who I was to convince somebody I was worthy, worthy of this club, of academia, that I had to change my ways, my thought processes, or my thoughts were wrong, incorrect, not valid. So, I need to figure out how to get those changed, quickly, because everybody else already thinks that way, so it's me. I'm behind. And I have to figure out when and how to make all these masks fit and what person I had to play or act in different situations to fit in, to convince them I'm worthy of being in this club, which at the same time pisses me off. Why would I want to be part of a club that makes me do that?

When asked whether there were other times throughout her life she felt different or like she had to change who she was to fit in, Reneé explained that she considered herself the "weird" one in her family and while working on her previous degrees was "*always* the only Hispanic woman in the room." There were even times when she was "the only *woman* in the room or if there were other women, they were international women."

However, in her doctoral program, her faculty's blatant dismissal of her experiences and



direct attacks on her writing abilities led to feelings of inadequacy and the need to conform. She was also left questioning her own identity:

There's been lots of times I've been different or felt I did not fit in, but this was probably the first time I felt constrained or bounded by some system that I had to fit into. I had to mold myself into convincing them. And then what level am I doing that completely? Or am I just coming to [the university] and doing that? Am I being authentic to myself? I'm this person from 9 to 5 at [the university]; at home I'm totally not that person. . . . Where do I stop and start? But I knew that I had to fit in. I knew my language wasn't correct. I knew my writing wasn't correct. I knew my physique wasn't correct. And this was because I was told this in the . . . department. I mean, blatantly, you know, "You should say it like this," or "Your writing is not—I don't care about your experience for this. You need to just write about this." So, I was being told left and right that this is not acceptable. So . . . it was the first time I felt like I had to figure out . . . how do I change myself to fit into this? And how do I make sure I convince them that I look like this or I am this, so they'd let me in their club?

Reneé felt very judged and demeaned by the faculty in her program. Despite having completed her undergraduate and Master's degrees in academically rigorous departments and teaching college level courses, she also described feeling "stupid" when compared to a few particular students in her cohort, with whom she felt she had to compete:

There was always a right or wrong for the instructor[s] . . . this is my perspective; they might disagree. There's always a right or wrong and then there [were] three people in the cohort that were, I have to say "smarter," and I'm saying that sarcastically or with a quote, I don't know, that I felt we were in competition with constantly. So, if we didn't agree with these three people, we were wrong. And that was in the class' eyes, the instructors' eyes, their eyes, I don't know, *my* eyes. I just felt that not only did I have the instructor to please or be correct for, I also had to figure out how these other three people's minds worked so I could learn how to think the way they did. And that was something that I was okay with at first, but then I started realizing that I don't have to think this way.

Reneé's realization was sparked after taking a class outside of her own department where she felt like her instructor, Dr. Rebecca Martin, created an environment where everyone, herself included, had a voice and all perspectives were

valued. And thus her transformative learning journey began. It was there she recognized her “education didn’t have to be torture” and that being “verbally abused” and “belittled” in the classroom, which created a great deal of anxiety for her, no longer had to be a part of her experience:

I think that was the first place I, finally, I wasn’t demeaned, I wasn’t bullied for an answer. There [were] lots of different answers, and lots of different perspectives were respected and accepted by everybody. So I think that this was the moment that I realized . . . this is the first time I felt I belonged or fit in, this is where my calling or my place was, in my Ph.D. career, because I was actually at the point of considering quitting. But I also knew I had something to contribute, I just didn’t know how or where.

Reneé had never experienced a class like this before. Her learning up until this point had been “very, very traditional” where the students sat in rows and frantically took notes as the professor lectured. This class, however, was small, and the instructor and students sat in a circle, the majority of their class time spent in discussion. Reneé also talked about how different it was to have an instructor share personal stories about herself. This helped to create a sense of community, where the students felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences, as well:

I felt a community in that class, and I also watched her build that community I think through the story-telling and also allowing other people to give *many*—there [were] eight of us and all eight of us had different perspectives, and all eight of us were heard.

Reneé enjoyed this class and Rebecca’s teaching style so much that she decided to ask if she could co-teach with her. Rebecca agreed, and they ended up co-teaching several graduate level courses together. During her time co-teaching, Reneé felt extremely supported by Rebecca, who treated her as an equal and encouraged her to have a voice in the classroom, to even disagree with her if Reneé had another point of view. Additionally, Reneé shared how Rebecca would admit during class when she made a

mistake or did not know something and would ask the class what they thought. Rebecca welcomed the class' feedback and regularly checked in to find out which activities or assignments were working and which were not. Reneé described how amazing and freeing this was for her, as both a teacher and a student. She also experimented with new teaching techniques, explaining how Rebecca's "mentoring" and "letting me . . . just go" gave her the confidence to feel comfortable stepping outside her comfort zone because of the safe environment Rebecca created. "She was always there for me, so I never thought I would fall flat on my face," Reneé elaborated. She talked about observing Rebecca in the classroom in order to learn as much as she possibly could from her. Reneé was also touched by Rebecca's openness and authenticity as an instructor:

So, the first semester I was with Rebecca, she, she pretty much held my hand and was quite generous in sharing what she was doing or why she did it. She was quite open to saying when she messed up or "I don't know." It was, it was just awesome to see such a true person. She wasn't trying to be anything she wasn't, and when she messed up she admitted it.

The classes she took and co-taught with Rebecca had such a profound impact on Reneé she eventually made the decision to switch degree programs. It was an extremely difficult decision despite how miserable she had been in her previous department, but Reneé finally felt like she could be herself and no longer had to conform to anyone else's expectations. "I think it was just that idea that my learning could be different, and I didn't have to figure out how to think like someone else to be right." It changed the way she approached the classes she taught and the way she looked at learning. "I wanted to be a lot more interactive and student-centered in my teaching than I had been before." As a result, she added informal assessments to her courses, recognizing that not everyone

tests well, and found herself more frequently asking her students, “What do you need from me to succeed or to better understand the material we are discussing?”

When it came to her own learning, Reneé explained she always thought she learned best in a more rigidly structured setting because that was all she had known. Then, in her first doctoral program, she learned there were “four distinct learning styles.” However, after her experiences in Rebecca’s classes, both as a student and co-instructor, an entirely new world opened up for her, and she realized teaching and learning were much more complex and individualized than she ever knew. She acknowledged that there were not just four ways of learning, but a multitude of ways as different as each person in the classroom.

Reneé’s identity as a teacher then changed in some dramatic ways, as well. Previously identifying as a “behaviorist” where the teacher was seen as “all-knowing” and only certain student responses and behaviors were deemed as “appropriate,” she admitted that breaking from the tradition and culture of the typical classroom was challenging. But Reneé embraced these challenges and enjoyed shaking things up with her students:

I do know that I rock the boat quite a bit in their thinking and . . . that’s exactly what I want to happen. So, I’m definitely much more excited about cognitive dissonance, definitely much more excited when they don’t know what they’re doing because I think they’re learning it for themselves.

She also came to appreciate that there were many different ways to reach an answer, and it was not so much about being exact or right but the process, itself, that was most important. She admitted that students - even graduate students - were resistant and “usually don’t like it” when given the freedom to do things their own way, often preferring to be told the “right” way. But she found value in trying new things in her

classes, even if they were not successful, because those experiences provided an opportunity to learn. It also allowed her to create a sense of safety in the classroom so students could feel comfortable pushing themselves beyond their own boundaries, much like Rebecca had done for her. Reneé explained:

As a learner, I've just learned how to let go. For example, this is really pushing my ability to use this technology or pushing my thought processes a little bit more . . . so as a learner I think I've just learned how to just jump in there and do it, and I can do whatever I want and whether it works out or not I've made the effort, I've learned something from an experience, and as soon as I present this to the classroom and Rebecca, a great conversation will come out of it, and it might not all be what I had wanted. It might be, "I didn't understand what you were doing" and then I think, "Oh, okay, well that didn't work." But there's never any blatant judgment, so my ability to just kind of play with things has been just amazing, amazing."

Reneé described the relationship she developed with Rebecca, who also became her advisor, as "an integral part" of her transformative learning experience. She firmly believed she would not be where she is today without Rebecca's support and encouragement. Rebecca, however, viewed the situation quite differently. When I asked Rebecca during their paired interview if she was aware of Reneé's transformative learning experience, Rebecca explained that she did not believe she did anything special and that it was all Reneé:

I've never heard Reneé say this . . . so for me when you say, "Was I aware of it?" I don't think that teachers are transformative. I don't think I could be aware of it. I think that I provide the exact same opportunities for all of my students and some of them, depending on where they're at, transform.

Rebecca wondered if maybe the same thing could have happened with a different instructor because of Reneé's readiness, and explained that she sees herself as "facilitating an opportunity" and tries to meet all of her students at their current level of understanding.

For Reneé, though, it was not simply about the skills and abilities she possessed; it was Rebecca's presence and support all along the way:

She was there at a time that I had the tools, but she was there. I could have the tools, doesn't mean I know how to fix the car. I could have the tools and the knowledge, but there's not someone there telling me, "Yeah, you can do it! I think you could do it." She was there.

Reneé was adamant that Rebecca provided much more than "an opportunity" and was simply being modest. Reneé explained, "I can say, 'You're the one who did it,' and she'll say, 'It's not me. It's the place that you're in.' But see to me, it was her." Reneé expressed surprise during our final individual interview over Rebecca's denial of responsibility, emphasizing again how Rebecca had been "an integral part" of her transformative learning experience. She was amazed that Rebecca did not think she did anything special to create that experience, saying, "I think that's one of the things that shocked me the most, that she said, 'Well, I didn't do anything. I just was teaching my normal everyday teaching, and you just happened to benefit.' "

Another integral component of Reneé's transformative learning experience occurred during that first class she took with Rebecca. As part of a class research project, Reneé interviewed other Latina students at the Hispanic cultural center on campus and ended up becoming a volunteer there. Prior to this project, she was unaware there were other Latina students on campus because of the isolation she experienced in her first department, so she had no idea the center even existed at the university. She learned quickly from sharing her experiences with these students that they felt just as isolated, unvalued, and unheard as she did. As a result of her interactions there, Reneé became extremely frustrated by the inequalities on campus. She discovered her own educational

privilege within this group of students and realized she had the ability to make a difference in their lives as both an advocate and role model:

I wanted to make sure they knew I was there, whether, and like I said, there's people that look up to me. I don't even know who they are. But I've been in the house with them . . . so I just knew that with the privilege I had—being first-generation, Hispanic, single mother, female, graduate student—that there was something there that needed to be exploited. I mean, my experiences needed to be shared with people so they know, “Yes, I've been on food stamps. And yes, I've been homeless.” So I wanted them to know that it can be done. And I think . . . it started immediately at the [Hispanic cultural center], that I needed to . . . get as many stories as I could and share them with as many people as I can. So, I think that's where it all started.

Reneé wanted to let these students know they could overcome their obstacles, achieve their goals, and earn a degree, just as she had. She also wanted to give voice to their concerns by advocating for them on campus and sharing their stories through her research project and classes. This experience led to a modification of Reneé's own goals, as she considered the changes she could help make at the university not just as a professor, but also as an administrator.

In their paired interview, Rebecca affirmed her vision of Reneé as a future campus leader: “I clearly can see that Reneé could be, if things work out correctly, a major Latina person in leadership on an academic campus.” She also talked about the ripple effect of how Reneé's transformation had the potential to “transform multitudes of other people” and shared, “Reneé could be in a position to make things much more easy and meaningful for young people or graduate students.” Reneé revealed that regardless of her specific job title, she wanted to bring transformative learning to others by being an authentic educator, valuing and validating all perspectives, and making sure “as many voices are heard as possible.”

In addition to her career goals, Reneé's view of research and writing also changed as a result of her time in Rebecca's courses and her class project at the Hispanic cultural center. Previously, sitting down to write made her literally feel sick due to the anxiety it created. She explained how in her first doctoral program, not only was her *writing* judged, but *she* felt judged based on her writing. She felt like every word was "nitpicked," and she received a lot of criticism for not doing things correctly, yet she never received an explanation of what those things actually meant or how to correct them. (An example she provided was a professor writing "passive voice" on her papers, but never taking the time to explain what that was or how to change it.)

In Rebecca's classes, while Reneé still worried about her writing being "right" the first time, she felt more able to use her own words, tell her own story, and talk about her own experiences. This was very freeing, as she was told what she could and could not write about while in her previous department, and personal stories or anecdotes were never deemed appropriate for academic writing. She came to enjoy making connections through her writing and writing about things that were relatable. Reneé was also surprised at how different research could look. After completing her Master's program, she realized she did not want to sit by herself in a room all day doing research - a realization that sparked her interest in teaching. But she discovered that research did not have to be such a lonely and solitary endeavor, and she was excited about trying new things in her research such as using poetry and photo elicitation.

Reneé's husband, Jack, was also able to see this excitement. He viewed Reneé as being reenergized about teaching again and excited about "giving back to the community." Instead of dreading going to school, she actually looked forward to her



classes and learning new things. This happier, more upbeat Reneé was in stark contrast to how unhappy she had been in her previous department, where Jack said Reneé lacked “support, understanding, and empathy.” Jack described it as a “toxic environment” full of negative energy and explained that once Reneé switched departments not only did she feel better, but he did, as well. Going from a “basically male-dominated” department to one filled with “mostly strong female advocates,” Reneé was finally able to gain the support and encouragement she needed. Although the transition had been difficult for her and laden with emotion, it was “ultimately very rewarding for both of us,” Jack shared.

Reneé expressed a similar perspective regarding how her relationship with Jack changed as a result of her transformative learning experience. A self-described “workaholic,” which she says she inherited from her father, Reneé explained that when she and Jack initially met her work came first and she “had to let him know, ‘Dude, you’re like fifth on the list of priorities.’” She agreed that she was miserable in her previous department, but that once she made the switch she was “happier to deal with” and was not “crying all the time.” She was also better able to set boundaries between her work, school, and family lives, thanks in large part to examples set by both Rebecca and Carmen, another transformative instructor with whom Reneé had worked. Carmen told Reneé, “Learning doesn’t have to hurt.” Reneé took that lesson to heart and also moved Jack up on her list of priorities.

As is customary of transformative learning, Reneé’s experiences in Rebecca’s classroom, as well as her time at the Hispanic cultural center, created a shift in not only how she viewed both teaching and learning, but also in her view of self. She explained that after not speaking Spanish for much of her life, she was now very proud of her

heritage and identity as a Latina and was speaking Spanish again as a way to show that pride. She felt like she could finally embrace every aspect of her identity and history and was no longer ashamed of her past. Being comfortable in her own skin, she hoped to connect with other women and help create that feeling of acceptance for them. The power of her words and her experience were palpable as she spoke:

Now . . . there's not one day I pretend to be anything other than who I am. . . . I don't have to be ashamed of my past. I don't have to hide my past. I don't have to pretend that my Hispanic self doesn't exist. . . . I just don't think I have to fit into anything anymore, that I fit in just fine the way I am and that I want to share that with others and give other women the opportunity to feel that same thing because I know a lot of women are, "Well, I have to do this, dress this way. I have to act this way. I have to take on these roles as a leader to make sure I fit in." So I want to make sure that, I mean, I just don't feel that anymore. I feel that my story, my past, my history, my personality, everything I was, everything I am, is important in this experience as a Ph.D. student and that there is, there's still a mask to what academia looks like, but I don't have to fit into it. I can either accept it, fight it, move on, but I don't have to change who I am now to fit in. Now I'm going to use my brain. I'm going to use my passion. And I'm gonna use all the things I've learned from my family, from my abusive [ex] husband, I mean, use all of those amazing experiences to keep me coming back every day.

After hearing Reneé's story, I found myself inspired by both her resilience and perseverance. As much as her own life has been forever changed, I have no doubt she will change the lives of countless others.

### **Zach**

Describing himself as a first-generation college student from a working class background, Zach had a unique story in that his transformative learning experience took place where most people, himself included, would least expect it. He was the youngest of the four participants in this study, a traditional aged college student who graduated after completing five years of undergraduate studies – not because he had to, but simply because he wanted to continue taking classes. When we began the interview process, he

was gearing up to begin a Master's program in Clinical Counseling on the same campus where he completed his Bachelor's degree.

The university was approximately an hour away from the metropolitan suburb where Zach was raised, along with his younger brother, by a single mother. He began his college journey with five or six high school friends, only one or two of whom were still enrolled by the end of his freshmen year. He recounted living in the residence halls on campus, a requirement of the academic scholarship he was awarded as an undergraduate. He got to know his roommates really well, especially his junior and senior years, and while he enjoyed the social aspects of college, he was very focused on academics.

I found Zach to be articulate and soft-spoken, yet there was no mistaking the passion in his voice when he described the experience that changed his life the second semester of his senior year – the new member education process of the social fraternity, Lambda Chi Alpha. He rushed the fraternity that spring with the encouragement of his roommate, a freshman who had joined the previous fall. Zach credited the fraternity with helping him grow into the person he is today, saying it pushed him to be “a better man.” When asked how he was different prior to joining the fraternity, he explained that although he was a good student, he did not have a strong sense of self:

Instead of being into that whole social aspect, I really focused on academics. And it worked out well for me in terms of grades and all that, but I don't think I really had a lot of understanding of . . . who I was as a person and the core, you know, the values that made me tick and what was important to me.

He conveyed that by the end of the new member education process, “I felt that I had a place and I had a voice, which was nice for someone like me because I'm a very quiet person.”

Coming into Lambda Chi, Zach thought he might serve as a mentor, since he was a senior and most of the other new associates were first and second year students. However, what he discovered through the new member education process was there was much he still needed to learn about himself. He further elaborated that the process was heavily focused on examining one's own core values and gaining a greater understanding of the fraternity's seven core values of loyalty, duty, respect, service and stewardship, honor, integrity, and personal courage. Zach shared that he had rarely ever taken the time to closely examine or even discuss his core values and was surprised at how difficult it was to define or demonstrate them:

It was surprising to me . . . how difficult it is, not only to really vocalize what these core values are and what they mean, but really exemplify what they are. And part of what I really enjoyed about the [new member education] program was this bent on experiential learning, getting out there, understanding what each of the core values mean, and tying what those core values mean to experiences that you have within the city.

One of the many things Zach found unique about his fraternity was the fact that new associates were required to do community service at the recruitment level, which showed him that "service and stewardship" was truly valued by Lambda Chi and enacted by its members. While he had participated in volunteer opportunities in the past, including some projects with his mother while he was in high school, Zach saw the need in this community and was more profoundly affected by the work he did with his fraternity brothers. He was impressed that the focus on service was not just about raising money, but actually having a presence in the community and *doing* something:

It's really about this sense of stewardship and this sense of getting out there and helping with the community, and that appeals to me a lot because [this] community really needs help, you know, there's really not a lot of that outreach, and so I know that we're a relatively new fraternity on campus in comparison to a

lot, but we can make an impact and I like that we can do that. And we have, not only a right, but an obligation, to do that every year.

Zach also realized how much greater of an impact the fraternity could have on the community working as a group, as opposed to what one person could do alone.

While examining the fraternity's core values at a deeper level, Zach discovered that many values, such as integrity, were already integral to the decisions he made. However, through the experiential learning, in-depth discussions, and self-reflection that took place during the new member education process, he was able to integrate the core values "into who I am as a whole." He further explained that he now has a heightened sense of awareness and insight into his own values and what they mean to him. A large part of what made this experience transformative was being able to understand himself better and become "a more aware leader," utilizing the strengths he possessed when taking on several leadership roles within the fraternity, one of which included becoming a new member educator, himself. Although he had held numerous offices and leadership positions in other organizations on campus, he believed the fraternity helped him learn what it truly meant to be both a leader and a mentor:

Our chapter is honored as being one of the, I think it's one of 10 or 15 now that is in this new program . . . that's really focusing on keeping brothers understanding what they've been given in terms of understanding that they're now stewards of these values that they've learned, understanding that you have to lead from character, understanding that in order to be a leader you have to be a follower first, and understanding that mentorship is important. All of those steps are also cool because they keep helping guide me toward that learning. I like learning a lot and so . . . I've really loved the not only growth in my . . . social network and all of that and my social roles, but also really being able to understand myself from a different perspective.

Zach's mother, Jane, commented during her interview how Zach's involvement in leadership within the fraternity differed from other leadership positions he had held because of the genuine caring and concern of the fraternity's members. She explained:

He had people that cared, you know, and were interested and wanted to help and wanted to help him learn and were there for him, whereas, he didn't really have that before in the other roles really that he'd been in. . . . It has been a totally different experience for him. He just grew so much!

The pride Jane felt for Zach was unmistakable as she talked about him. She shared that she and Zach always had a really close relationship, and that Zach had continually been "so incredibly positive" and "a huge support" to her, especially with regard to her recent decision to pursue a college education of her own. Jane noted, however, after joining the fraternity Zach seemed markedly happier and became more confident, outgoing, and open to new experiences. When attending fraternity events with Zach, she would regularly hear how much the brothers loved and respected him and she felt Zach had truly found a brotherhood. She described with enthusiasm Zach travelling on his own to conferences and other fraternity events and becoming more comfortable talking to new people. She believed the growth and changes he had experienced as a result of his fraternity involvement would help him in his future career and viewed these changes as being all positive.

Another person who saw these positive changes firsthand was Eric, a senior member of the fraternity and the new member educator who helped to create Zach's transformative learning experience. In their paired interview, Eric shared how Zach's engagement in and commitment to the learning process shaped the new member education experience, both for himself as the educator and the other group members. He explained that Zach kept the group focused and present during their discussions and was

the most engaged in the learning. He attributed the changes Zach made to Zach's work ethic, leadership skills, and his ability to connect emotionally with the subject matter:

He obviously, you know, exemplified all these core values in one way or another. But his experience, it was definitely putting the emotion behind the learning. . . . He was by far the most engaged in his new member class. I have no problem saying that. He was the most engaged and he really, you could tell that he really took value out of what was being said . . . and he found importance in it, and so I would say that from the beginning to the end, just by him allowing himself to soak up all the information and then apply that information to his life, he was able to grow as a leader, grow as a man, morally, grow in . . . just how to build interpersonal skills, in regards to communication, stuff along those lines. To become part of something bigger than you is one thing that I think Zach noticed, and he wanted to be a part of that and he wanted to be a *major* part of that, which happened. So the new member education process, you know, Zach just soaked up all the information and then after that . . . there was no holding him back.

Zach, on the other hand, credited much of his transformation to Eric, describing him as charismatic, caring, and passionate. This passion helped Zach - and he believed the other new members, as well - become more invested in the process. He said Eric got them "pumped to be involved" and explained that while Eric served as a mentor and guide, he encouraged the new members to take ownership of their own learning and growth, which made the experience more meaningful for all of them. This led to genuine interest in the discussions they were having and experiences they were sharing. Eric also encouraged Zach to "be bold" in making a difference and said Zach "had the ideas, had the drive, and . . . just needed reassurance."

When discussing what made the environment conducive to transformative learning and how it was unique, both Zach and Eric discussed the importance of building relationships and establishing trust. From Eric's point of view, it was important to select new recruits who displayed courage, a willingness to step outside of their comfort zones, and the ability to consider perspectives different from their own. He explained that the

“fear of the unknown” and being set in one’s own ways were obstacles to getting the most out of the new member education process and experiencing transformation. Zach expanded upon the importance of trust by saying, “You’re opening yourself up to being wrong, being different than how you have been for however long. I think that trust is a huge component to that because that’s something that’s very scary.” Eric also elaborated upon the idea that in order to make the learning more meaningful and long-lasting, there needed to be an emotional connection and sense of safety created:

In educational settings, you can always lay out the facts, lecture, all that stuff, but one thing that our fraternity has been so good about and has been so successful at is to then put that emotion behind it and to create an environment where you can really confide in somebody.

Zach agreed that imparting information was not enough and there needed to be an experiential nature to the learning:

I know a lot of fraternities, what they’ll do for their new member ed[ucation], they’ll sit you down and just lecture at you for an hour, two hours a week, and it’s expected that that’s supposed to cause some sort of drastic change in your perspective. And for us, we try and frame each of our experiences through the core values, but there [are] experiences that are tied to that.

In addition, Zach disclosed that the emotional closeness forged between the members of his fraternity was something that set them apart from others. A recent site visit of his fraternity by a member of the national chapter resulted in a similar observation, one Zach was keen to share:

Our educational leadership consultant, basically the person who comes out from nationals who helps assess how we’re doing and make recommendations for how we can improve, and also say what we’re doing well and all that, when he came out he visited us during our rush week and afterwards he wrote a report for us, and one of the sentences that was in the report was, “As opposed to handshakes, there’s an abundance of hugs,” and that seems like something that’s different from maybe some of the other chapters that he had visited that were less, I guess, as emotionally close as ours. . . . We’re all very, very close to one another, and we’re not worried about showing that.



Zach also believed the ability to tie some type of emotion or previous experience to what was being discussed made the learning more permanent, as well as more powerful:

I think the applied nature is a huge part of it, too. Transformative learning itself isn't, again, it's not necessarily just that lecture sort of style. . . . You're actually getting with the material, whatever the material is, whether it's being a good leader, whether it's getting outside and seeing poverty, you know, whatever that is. There's a sense of experience in it, I feel, and it bridges the gap and allows you to connect everything that you've learned into some sort of strong emotion, some sort of strong experience that you have had, and that I feel like that's just a stronger form of memory.

He explained that he could not recall the specifics of much of what he had learned in his classes, but had vivid recollections of the emotionally charged experiences in his life.

This is why he believed his experiences in Lambda Chi had impacted his life for the rest of his life.

Another way in which Lambda Chi was unique, according to Zach, was that they continually focused on personal growth beyond the initiation period. One thing Eric modeled and which Zach now incorporated into his daily life was being cognizant each day of what core value he wanted to work on and exemplify. For Zach, his focus has been on personal courage. He explained:

I really try to push myself because I'm not exactly, like I said, I get nervous . . . in social circumstances and stuff like that, but knowing that and thinking about it, helps me to be able to challenge that belief and push myself to grow like that. So, I think a lot of it is that heightened sense of awareness and understanding, not necessarily that I didn't have it before, but now I know and now I think about it a lot.

Zach had not really considered himself a courageous person before and shared that he was scared of social interactions prior to his transformative learning experience, specifically with regard to talking to people he did not know. This was despite Zach's

years of participation in theatre and choir and his admitted comfort with public speaking and performing. He said the fraternity really shined a “sharp light” which allowed him to examine who he was and challenge misconceptions he had about himself concerning things he did not think he could change. He now pushed himself to talk to new people in classes, within Greek life, and on campus.

When asked how his experience with Lambda Chi differed from other learning experiences he had, Zach explained that he became truly “enveloped” and “engrossed” in the learning and took on a lot of responsibility within the organization. He said both the educational components and the “ritualistic, secret” components were very impactful for him due to the sense of safety and connectedness created. He explained that the experience was the result of a combination of factors, including Eric’s passion, their experiences together, and their investment in the process:

If I had gone to another organization and went through a new member education process, you know, all of the fraternities have core values and they have ritualistic components to them, but it’s kind of the perfect storm of [Eric’s] passion for it and the power that’s behind it and the experiences that we had that all culminated into this one thing at the end. And I doubt that if I had been in other organizations where, you know, they don’t take it as seriously and they aren’t as invested in seeing that sort of stuff and they sit down and watch movies the entire time, you know, that it doesn’t mean the same necessarily.

He expressed that although many events in his life, including studying abroad in the Yucatan, were meaningful for him, they were not transformative. He gave this advice when I asked what he thought would be helpful for others to know about his transformative learning experience:

Engross yourself in whatever you’re doing. I mean, you’re only gonna do it once, and the stronger the emotion, the stronger the experience that is tied to that, I feel like the more that can have an impact on who you are. You know, I loved my study abroad experience, but there wasn’t that deep devotion, that passion like there was in my experience in Lambda Chi, and I feel that if I would have

engrossed myself more in the culture, perhaps, or if I had devoted myself to doing something that I'm very passionate about while I [was] there, that might have caused more of that transformative experience. And so I would say push yourself to really, really engross yourself in whatever it is that you're doing because you never know what is going to be that life-changing experience, but if you don't put yourself, put your 100% into it all, then you won't find that.

Zach described how his own transformative learning experience inspired his desire to bring similar experiences to others. He said he enjoyed seeing people develop and wanted to empower them to make changes to improve their lives. It was one of the reasons why he became a new member educator and was pursuing his current graduate program:

That's probably why I'm going into a counseling program . . . because I like to see people understand, not only what the problem is, but be empowered to make changes and make their lives better, and be the catalyst for that. That, that excites me.

He saw many possibilities when it came to future careers: one as a consultant with the national Lambda Chi organization, helping to make individual chapters stronger; and another in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, assisting organizations with running more efficiently and creating a strong workplace culture where employees are happy and productive. He was also considering counseling, as he felt he had become a better communicator and was more empathetic. Additionally, Zach expressed an interest in leadership development and student development. Wherever his path may take him, I could see how enthusiastic he was to guide others through that journey.

### **Sarah**

Spanning five arduous years of undergraduate studies, Sarah's story reflected a time of tumultuous change and tremendous growth. It was a journey that began when she first entered community college at the age of 23, newly divorced and a single mother to

her 2-year-old daughter. As a first-generation college student, Sarah was unsure of what to expect from this new phase in her life and experienced some difficulty navigating the system at first. However, with the help of instructors she described as both “validating and challenging,” an entirely new world opened up for her, one where she soared academically and personally.

Instead of entering college straight out of high school, Sarah got married, bought a home, had her daughter, and worked at the corporate office of an insurance agency. She disclosed that she never wanted to go to college back then, but wondered now if she would have had an easier time pursuing higher education at the age of 18 because of the challenges she ended up facing as a woman, a single mother, and a non-traditional student. However, she believed the experience would not have had the same impact for her and that things happened just as they should have. She admitted, though, that it was difficult at first:

Sometimes it’s hard to pinpoint exactly what it was, where the paradigm shift was, where that . . . empowering piece was. I remember when I started school I almost flunked out my first semester ‘cause I just had no idea, I mean along that first-gen[eration] kind of stuff, not knowing what to do, where to go. I was still trying to get over my old life a little bit.

At the community college, she started taking some political science classes and really began to apply herself and do well. Not until her first women’s studies class, though, did she begin to question things, gain a growing awareness of social issues, and feel connected to what she was learning. Sarah said this first women’s studies class allowed her the “space to be authentic with my spirituality,” which was very different from how she had been raised. She also felt empowered being in a classroom full of

women. She then realized, “It was like all of a sudden . . . my life had meaning that it didn’t have before,” and made an amazing discovery:

In my women’s studies classes, I felt like I had space to be who I was and figure out who I was, you know, kind of just be me. . . . I became really aware that I could make a difference and I think that’s the first time I ever felt that way, that I was smart enough and talented enough to make a difference somewhere.

Sarah admitted that before her transformative learning journey life was very different, and the experience did more than just alter her path:

I never felt alive and I never felt like I was making a difference and I never wanted to make a difference. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t, and so how did it change my future? It’s like a different trajectory. It’s like, it’s not even a different road I don’t think. I think it was like a different planet that collided.

It was not always easy, though. She recalled writing a paper for one of her first sociology classes, in it stating she did not think she had ever been oppressed because of her gender. She was 24 years old at the time. “I just couldn’t see it. . . . I couldn’t get it.” She conceded that it had not occurred to her to question gender norms and thought they were simply a part of life. “I think for a long time I was caught up in this rhetoric of choices, and also as a woman feeling like this is just the way things are.” As she took more classes, however, she began to see how her life was connected to bigger social issues and found herself memorizing different theories by relating them to events in her own life. She explained:

We were learning a lot about feminist theory and these sorts of things. The way I learned to remember the theories was to go through and say, “This reminds me of *this* part of my life. This reminds me of *that* part of my life.” And so, through those learning techniques and seminar discussion and being able to present in class and that kind of stuff, I really started to see how my life was connected to this bigger social issue and . . . how I’d been disempowered in some places and privileged in other places.

By being able to connect classroom learning with her personal experiences, she was able to more closely examine her own identity and issues related to class and gender. As a result, she gained language to describe her own experiences, which was very empowering for her. In addition, she found a new identity as an activist:

In my sociology coursework, we were looking at systems, social systems. When we were studying theory, it was really exciting to look at some of those historical pieces but also see how those things were playing out in today's world. Then again, going back to that piece of me that, it was during that time that I really became an activist and started working for social justice, even though at that time I wasn't calling it social justice. So I think I was thinking of women's issues. I was thinking of issues of social class *a lot* mainly because that's how I was identifying, right? Me, as a woman who came from a working class agriculture background, my experience was very different, and so what I was learning, the theories that I was learning and the discussions we were having in class was giving me language, and I didn't have that language before and without that language I don't think I could have felt as empowered as I ended up feeling.

Sarah shared that it was both the content and the structure of her women's studies and sociology courses that were so transformative for her. In those classes, she enjoyed the discussions they had and felt respected by her instructors. They differed from her other classes where she described the learning as being "fairly rigid" and she felt intimidated by her instructors, who often seemed more interested in showing how much they knew and how little the students knew. She revealed that she did not feel valued as a person in those classes, nor that what she contributed was valued. Furthermore, her instructors were not open to suggestions, and she did not feel like she had a place to even offer a suggestion.

Sarah completed three years at the community college, earning her Associate's degree, then moved on to the local four-year university where she majored in Sociology and minored in Women's Studies. When asked whether there was one specific class or instructor that led to her transformative learning experience, Sarah had this to say:

It was this amazing confluence. It was coming from women's studies. It was coming from sociology. . . . I had a job as a work study in the sociology office. So, it was coming from the relationship[s] I would have with folks in there. In thinking about things, I was doing nothing other than helping people change their major or making copies of things, like that's really all I did. But it was that constant interaction with my faculty that was so helpful.

Writing for the women's studies newsletter and being recognized for her academic achievements also contributed to Sarah feeling like a part of the academic community. She explained how the mentorship and investment from her professors "really opened up a whole new world that I never thought I would have access to" and she discovered that higher education, as a career field, was where she was meant to be. She described the sense of freedom it created for her:

I remember sitting outside . . . one day and realizing that the academy for me was like Wonderland, like I never wanted to leave here. I loved the freedom here, the freedom to present self in any way you choose, you know, and not really be castigated for it or marginalized, so I thought at the time. I loved the thinking that could happen here, and so it was really in that arena that I really felt like, "Wow! This is where I want to stay," but I didn't really know how to do that.

As a first-generation student, Sarah had never considered graduate school or thought she had access to it until one of her professors asked her about it. There was a part of her, too, that still did not think she was "smart enough" despite winning the "Outstanding Scholar" award in her department two years in a row. That all changed, however, with just four little words, further recognition for her scholarly work and research day achievements.

The professor who spoke those words was Dr. Jeff Houser, the educator whom Sarah thought was most instrumental in supporting her through her transformative learning experience. Sarah chose to take every sociology course Jeff offered and described his classes as "a community of learners." There the students would select

chapters to present to the class, which Sarah said created a sense of responsibility for her peers' learning, as well as her own. The students also created the tests, and the social theories they were learning about came alive as they enacted them in experiments outside the classroom. Even Jeff's statistics courses were different, as Sarah could see herself developing into a "social scientist" and a "researcher." Sarah shared that she could not wait to get to class to discuss what they learning and even went to Jeff's office hours to continue those discussions. She was impressed by his availability, as well as his transparency and openness about his own experiences, which included losing his hearing:

He was always there to talk with us. I mean, his availability I think made him stand out from the other educators and his passion for what he was doing. . . . If we didn't get something done there was never any judgment, you know, there was respect and consideration and . . . it was outside of us being students . . . he respected us as people.

Sarah explained that because of Jeff's own disability, she felt like he never held any of them back because he had so often been told he could not do things, like become a professor. Jeff was open to students' ideas, suggestions, and feedback and never made them feel like they were not smart enough. Sarah recalled:

Sometimes college instructors, especially at the undergrad[uate] level, will treat you like you're not intelligent, almost like they're annoyed to teach you, and . . . I never got that feeling from him, that he was annoyed. I always felt like he was really encouraging and supportive.

In their paired interview, Sarah disclosed that a pivotal moment for her was when Jeff acknowledged her as a scholar. The exchange they shared was a powerful and emotional one:

Sarah: One of the most important things that I think . . . when Christine asked me for an educator, and why I said, "I think Jeff would be a good person to do it" is my senior year after I presented at research day (*sounding choked up*), oh, this makes me so teary . . .



Jeff: Get it out of your system. Alright, here we go.

Sarah: You shook my hand after I got done presenting and you said, “Welcome to the Academy.”

Jeff: Yes, I remember.

Sarah: And that was (*tearfully*) one of the best days.

Jeff then talked about Sarah’s reluctance to make that presentation and explained that it was not that she lacked intelligence, it was a matter of confidence, something she appeared to gain that day. Jeff shared:

Because you [Sarah] didn’t want to do that. You didn’t want to get up there and talk about something that you had spent a lot of time working on and you knew a lot about, more than anybody else in the room. . . . With you it was always a matter, not of intelligence, but of confidence and pushing you to be confident in the things that *you knew* you knew and being able to share those things with other people . . . to show them, “Hey now, I know this. . . . There are things that you can learn from me” . . . and you were up there, you were confident, you were like, “These are the things we found out. This is why this is important. This is why you need to pay attention.” And so that was a very cool moment for me, as well.

This began their discussion of the learning journey they shared, which Jeff admitted was also transformative for him. He elaborated that it was not something that happened with every student; it required those who were willing to invest themselves, to take ownership of their own learning, and who recognized the value of education. Jeff said it was important to allow students to define their own goals and to make the learning applicable to real life so the knowledge gained could be used even after the class ended. He explained that oftentimes good students were so focused on memorizing material to get that “A” and were “not necessarily seeing the practical value or the opportunity that learning this set of ideas makes.” Jeff admitted what was transformative for him when he was a student, was a professor who saw something in Jeff that he did not see. Jeff revealed that his professor said to him “You can do what I do, if you want to,” and that he

had never had that image of himself. As a result he wanted to create that feeling for other students, and he shared that Sarah gave him the opportunity to be the kind of teacher he wanted to be:

It's a student that comes in and you can see that there is that desire and that authenticity and that student is . . . that there's value in what the student's getting beyond just, "Hey, do this, do that, remember this, remember that." So that's the student . . . that lets me be who I wanted to be when I took this job.

For Sarah, what made Jeff's classes stand apart was the fact that they "start out as an exploration and not as a set of learning objectives." She shared that there was also a "freedom to feel" and a "freedom to challenge assumptions" that was unique in Jeff's classroom. Here, sharing a story from one's own life that felt relevant to the learning was acceptable and helped bring deeper meaning. The learning, according to Sarah, came from the interactions they were having in class, not from some "dry book," and she found value in working in groups and making those human connections. For her, it was empowering to be in a place where "true learning" took place, where you could let go of your past and allow your world to change. But it was also filled with many challenges, as she explained:

. . . because it means that you are gonna change and your whole world around you isn't gonna be the same. And there's going to be a transition space. It's maybe just a grey space, and there's nothing to hang on to, and you're just moving forward, and you're trusting your instructor, you're trusting the process, right? You're trusting that what they said on the first day of class will happen because as you look behind you, you get further and further away from everything you know and love. When the learning is happening at such a deep, deep level that your, your core values are changing and who you are as a person is changing, it's terrifying. And it's so hard to trust that, and it's so hard to trust that you're gonna turn into somebody better because there's a chance, right, that you could not turn into somebody better. And that's really scary. And so for me as a student that was the challenge of . . . that transformational experience that I had in undergrad.

Someone who witnessed Sarah's transformation and saw the challenges she faced was her best friend, Joel. They met in a political science class, and although they "didn't like each other all that much" at first, according to Joel, they became dear friends and even dated for a time. They ended up taking several classes together, as they enjoyed continuing their class discussions outside of the classroom, and eventually Sarah joined Joel in his political activism centered around social justice. Joel explained that going through the process together:

. . . really helped me to put myself in situations that were also transformative and to focus on that kind of stuff, and we definitely played off one another and encouraged each other in new directions to explore new things and explore ourselves and it was really cool, and I think that's one of the reasons she's one of my best friends now.

At that time, the biggest change he saw in Sarah, and which he viewed as ongoing, was her "becoming an authentic person." Joel talked about Sarah transforming into "her own style of academic," one who "goes against the grain quite often." He shared that she had "turned into this intellectual and critical thinking powerhouse over the last eight years," and he was excited to see what she would accomplish next. In reflecting back on the early days of their friendship, he revealed:

I think back when we met each other neither of us probably really knew who we were, necessarily. . . . And I watched her start, well, start looking at who she was, as opposed to who she thought she was going to be.

He observed that as a result of the changes she went through and developing new identities, she no longer related as well to some friends from her past, and she found that being around those friends made the changes more obvious. He said it was a struggle for Sarah at times because this new path was so far removed from what she had experienced growing up, yet he was able to "support her and just encourage her to figure out who she

was and at the same time she was able to help me with that.” Joel shared that they continued to push each other forward and tried to stay mindful that they would never be done learning or changing:

It’s easy oftentimes to come back to center and say, “Okay, now I’ve found myself. I’m done.” But I think that’s one of the main roles in each other’s lives now is to encourage us to remember that that’s not the case. “You’re not done. You’re never done.”

Encouragement and support was also integral to the relationship Sarah had with her professor, Jeff, and she discovered during their paired interview that despite how natural this seemed, Jeff was very intentional about the things he did in his classes. That realization was very validating for her and made her feel like what she had experienced was “real.” When asked what surprised her about the paired interview with Jeff, Sarah shared:

I think it surprised me, what seemed like how much thought he had put into it because it always in class felt so natural. To know that he’d been intentional and really thought about things I think was valuable for me. It made my learning experience, now in reflecting back on it, seem a lot more rich, because it felt like he, because knowing how much of himself he put into that and how much time and effort.

Sarah’s experiences in Jeff’s classroom made her think differently and look at the world differently. In addition, she felt more empowered to communicate with other professors. “When I had those positive experiences, I wasn’t scared anymore to approach them.” Doing well in school, along with support from her instructors, also improved her view of self. “I always had a really low self-esteem, and so every ‘A’ I got or every positive feedback I got or when Dr. Houser was supportive or any number of my instructors said they believed in me, it *really* helped.” For the first time she felt smart and discovered value in her learning:

And as I moved down that path, I got further and further away from that girl who grew up in a small town and graduated with 63 people and lived on a farm her whole life, you know? And it felt so good to feel smart and to feel like, “Wow. . . there *is* value! I’m not just here to get . . . a piece of paper and leave. There’s value in my learning,” and that was really exciting.

These experiences sparked Sarah’s own interest in teaching and shaped how she structured her classes. Like Jeff, she wanted to create transformative learning opportunities for her own students and incorporate the things she had found helpful from his classes into her own. “I pull from some of those really foundational experiences I had as a student so I can try and replicate them now as an educator.” Building a sense of community in the classroom was a priority. This meant becoming more aware of the physical environment and constructing a space more conducive to discussion. Although sitting in a circle was initially “weird” to her when she experienced it in those early women’s studies classes, she found it an effective way to bring equity to the classroom and decrease the power differential between teacher and student. In addition, it allowed everyone an opportunity for their voices to be heard. She also strived to create more engaged, hands-on learning opportunities and talked about the importance of putting ownership for learning on the students.

Sarah discussed the value, as the instructor, of taking risks in the classroom and having conversations with her students about what was working and what needed improvement:

I do think that there . . . has to be a willingness to risk and a willingness to fail. I mean I’ve done some things in my classroom that have just completely bombed and not worked at all, but that’s just part of it, right, and so then we can use those as learning experiences so the student knows that I’m also learning and growing. And if it didn’t work out, then that’s an opportunity for them to be empowered in their own learning and really share with me what they didn’t feel worked. And so I think our students can learn as much from our successes as transformative educators, as well as our failures, because it . . . diminishes that power so that it’s

a little bit more egalitarian and really places the student in a role to be empowered by their education and to take ownership of that knowing that the instructor doesn't have all the answers.

She also noted the importance of helping students to see the “bigger picture” and she sought to do this not just as an instructor, but also in her advocacy work with students.

She said educators need to be authentic by sharing their personal stories and giving students insight into who they are, something she sought to do every day. She explained that deep connections with students can be built through this story-telling, which sometimes reveals shared aspects of identity. She elaborated:

It gives my students from the get-go an understanding of who I am and takes some of my power away because I have to be vulnerable. And I think . . . I learned that from my professors who were really open about who they were.

Sarah envisioned herself being an educational administrator one day who also teaches a few classes, “to help students have what I had.” She also dreamed of pursuing another degree once she completed the Ph.D. on which she was currently working, as she wanted to keep learning. She said that one of the greatest ways her view of learning changed as a result of her experience was realizing that “learning happens in the whole self.” She also came to understand that education “gives us the opportunity to see multiple perspectives and to appreciate other people and to value another’s experience and to be able to come to understand that experience without having to live it yourself.”

Although she faced many challenges during her transformative learning journey, Sarah shared that the sacrifices she made were necessary to create a better life for her and her daughter. Her eyes glistened with tears, and she became choked up as she admitted she sometimes had to miss her daughter’s school events and activities in order to complete school work of her own. She even missed her daughter’s first basketball

practice of the season the night of one of our interviews. I felt badly and expressed my gratitude for her taking the time to meet with me. She shared this valuable lesson with me, one she hoped to impart to her daughter: “My philosophy is that I have to model for her how to be a happy person and how to pursue your dreams . . . and it was in higher education where I found that.” Whichever name she chose to call it, “the Academy” or “Wonderland,” in this world of higher education I sensed that Sarah had found her true home.

### **Elias**

With a sparkle in his eyes, a warm smile, and infectious enthusiasm, Elias was a masterful storyteller, and during our time together, the passion he felt for his work reignited my own excitement for working with students. His ability to connect with both parents and students, alike, by sharing his own narrative was also likely one of the reasons he was so successful at his job as a college admissions counselor. His transformative learning journey was a multifaceted one, a realization he made once his story began to unfold. While he intended to talk about his experience returning to college after a 10 year hiatus, during our time together he recollected undergoing transformation beginning in high school and extending through several bold career moves before finally making that fateful return to the world of higher education.

One of 12 children and a second generation Mexican American, Elias and his family moved from Texas to Colorado when he was a teen. During that time, Elias felt like he was straddling a line between two worlds. He witnessed many friends and family members drop out of high school and shared that teenage pregnancies were commonplace in his community. While he had “acclimated to the American culture,” he never felt that

he truly fit in there, due in part to his family living at the “poverty level.” He also felt a strong connection with the influx of Mexican immigrants in his community, and as a result:

There was an identity crisis a little bit where I . . . wasn’t fitting in in any of the two worlds, and that was just creating a really, an isolation, a real isolated place for me where, because of that it would have been, it was easy for me to now see I was a high-risk student that would not make it. And so high school for me, and graduating high school, was a huge *huge* milestone.

Describing himself as a student who struggled to get “C’s,” Elias had not given much thought to going to college. While he had learned the value of hard work from his parents, he revealed that they did not place a strong emphasis on education, rarely attending parent-teacher conferences or asking him about homework. Then during his sophomore year in high school, he was recruited to participate in Upward Bound, one of eight federally funded TRIO programs geared toward helping low income students from underrepresented populations who would be the first in their families to attain a degree apply to and prepare for college (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). Elias shared that because higher education was not valued in his home, he did not have an understanding of what going to college involved or what it took to be successful. All of that changed, however, when Elias participated in Upward Bound’s six week summer program and lived on a college campus, attended classes, and experienced what life as a college student would be like.

One unique aspect of the program was that each evening from 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. students were required to be in their rooms studying with the doors open. At first, Elias wondered why this was necessary and found it frustrating, as it was outside what he considered normal school hours, and he and the other students were “there to have fun.”



But something clicked for Elias one night, as he sat in his residence hall room studying. He identified this as his first transformative learning moment. From that point forward, he became more engaged in his classes and interested in what he was learning, actively participating and asking questions. “I developed this confidence all because of something that simple, of valuing education.” Elias shared that having so much in common with the other students in the program and being taken outside of his usual environment also helped:

When I was taken away from that, I was probably 15, 16 years old, I was then able to really open my mind to some new things and not be distracted by my friends. . . . I was surrounded by people that were identical to me - low income, first gen[eration], knew very little - but yet there we are learning together and understanding what it is to be a college student. And so that changed, completely, *completely* changed my direction.

Elias attended the program again the following summer, but unable to maintain his grades, he was dismissed from Upward Bound before the summer bridge that would have helped him transition from his senior year of high school to college. However, by that point, he had “gotten a taste” of what college life would be like and felt that “the right thing to do is to go to college.” He applied to the local university and “by the skin of [his] teeth” was accepted. It was a proud moment for Elias, as he was only the second in his family to graduate from high school and the first to attend college. By that time, he was living on his own and working full-time. Unfortunately, without the academic and emotional support he so needed and feeling like his job was his priority because he needed to pay rent, he ended up withdrawing after his first semester due to subpar grades. “Access without support is failure,” Elias explained and repeated throughout our time together. And that is exactly what he felt like, “a failure:”

Here I had this great epiphany of what college was like and really changed my life, but then I get there and I didn't have that support and those resources, and it just goes to show you that, man, I was, I failed, I was just, it was just a matter of time. And it was an ugly, ugly feeling. It took a long time, it took me 10 years to get back into the university because I felt like a failure.

In those 10 years, Elias held a number of jobs. Hard physical labor and working up to 70 hours a week in the hot sun were characteristic of his summer job at the pickle dock. He then went to work at a printing press, sometimes working up to seven days a week for four weeks straight during their busy season. His strong work ethic, ability to stay with a company for a number of years, and having a steady income made his father proud, which helped Elias stay motivated despite the long hours and low pay. That hard work, along with knowing everyone in the press room and speaking Spanish, paid off though, as he was promoted to the Information Technology (IT) department. He became a help desk specialist and doubled his pay, now enjoying a salaried position, frequent travel, and a corporate credit card. Elias shared that it was transformative feeling valued for the knowledge he had and not the physical labor he could provide:

When I began to understand that and I began to see that I was valued, I was moved! I was like, "Wow! I'm valued here!" This little Mexican kid comes up into the IT world, you know, I'm being, I'm valued, they need me, they want me, they're offering me this position. . . . Here I'm getting paid to teach people to log into a computer, to change their passwords . . . eventually I began to teach classes in Office and Word and Excel and PowerPoint, and I'm getting paid for this! My world completely was changed, and that was a huge, I guess transformative piece I didn't expect to talk about, but when I discovered that I could get paid for what I knew and not what, not for my back, that was, that was life-changing for me. And I said, "I'm never going back. I'm *never* going back!"

Elias stayed in this position for five years, but just one year after getting married with an infant son at home, he lost his job due to workforce reductions. He again became aware of two identities, two colliding worlds:

It was a tough, tough, probably the most trying time of my life because I had no idea who I was. I had *no* idea who I was. I didn't have an education. . . . I didn't have an Associate's at that time. I didn't have anything. All I knew is I had a little bit of experience, I had discovered this other world. Again I felt a little bit let down. I had somebody that invested in me, showed me this life, and then BAM! I'm going back down to really, well, I guess I am just this. I'll never get out of this poverty.

Feeling discouraged and uncertain of which direction to go, Elias returned to the community college where he began his IT training. He knew he wanted to help people in some way and thought he could do that through a Criminal Justice degree and a position as either a parole or corrections officer "because that's where the hurting were." At that time, he also discovered his faith and became a youth pastor. This position led to a job mentoring high school students and teaching bible curriculum classes at an online Christian school. It was there that Elias discovered his passion for working with young people, specifically troubled high school students. He then decided to return to the university he had left 10 long years ago to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Communication. He did so, however, with great trepidation, as he now had a wife and son depending on him.

In our interview together, Elias' wife, Laura, conveyed that she had to put a great deal of trust in Elias at that time, yet she was "100% supportive" of him. It was stressful, though, due to strained finances and the lack of understanding from family and friends:

It was kind of discouraging to me because they were like, "Well, he's the man of the house. He should be providing. He shouldn't be doing this to the family." And at that time we had my son, who was 2½ years old, and it just put a lot of pressure on me to just strive and continue to be working so he could focus on his studies and at the same time ignore what was going on around us.

Elias expressed a similar sentiment during one of his interviews, saying that in the Latino culture the wife stays home and takes care of the children, while the husband works to

support them, so it was difficult to break out of that and decide how much of that identity they should keep and what to change. The lack of familial support was challenging for Elias because his family did not understand how difficult his return to school had been, and he did not feel like he could talk to them about it. For Elias, however, the desire to give his son the best life and best education possible meant sacrificing those traditional ideals because he believed in the potential higher education could provide.

Upon Elias' return to college, Laura began to see the further development of his passion for working with students, as well as an increase in his confidence and leadership skills. She shared that she had not been to college, herself, at that time and had not even considered it a possibility for her:

Even when I first graduated from high school, I was so close-minded. . . . I remember thinking that I'm not supposed to go to college because I'm a minority and we don't have the money and only the smartest people go to college.

She did not fully comprehend the difficulty of Elias working two jobs, being a full-time student, doing homework at night, and trying to make time for the family - that is, until she became a full-time student, as well, with Elias' encouragement. As a result, their son, who was 7 at the time of our interview, was able to experience college with them by attending classes, campus events, and meetings with counselors, going to the library, and studying together. Laura, also a first-generation student, and Elias both talked about wanting to instill the value of education in their son, even though they did not get that in their own families.

Returning to school as a non-traditional student contained other challenges, as Elias felt isolated, alone, and lacking confidence. But just as he had been recruited to join Upward Bound while in high school, Elias was approached to join another TRIO program, Student Support Services. This program was designed "to provide

opportunities for academic development, assist students with basic college requirements, and to motivate students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Elias described how Julie, the program advisor who recruited him, saw:

. . . past my smile and read past my front and [saw] the hurt and the desperation that I was in, and she told me that I’d be a great candidate for the program. What she didn’t know was that she was really, she saved me ‘cause I would have, I’m sure I would have failed. I would have drowned. I would have, I would have backed out. I would have gave up. So, I said, “Okay!”

Elias does not think he would have been successful returning to college without the program and the support of Julie and his main advisor, Dr. Jana Schwartz, the individual he attributed with creating his next transformative learning experience. He explained that Jana had an amazing gift for seeing “the best in people” even when they could not see it for themselves. He initially was not sure he could relate to Jana, being of different cultural backgrounds and wondering if she would understand his life outside of the university. But she displayed her genuine caring and concern, asking him questions about his home and his family, not just about his coursework. This was a unique experience for Elias. Jana also saw Elias as a leader and recognized he was a hard-worker, yet she cautioned him how working multiple jobs could interfere with his ability to be successful in college. This helped Elias to see that he was not a failure; he was simply trying to take on too much.

Jana’s insight and compassion were apparent in her paired interview with Elias. She shared that she felt like her job was easy and that she was able just to see all the talent and goodness in Elias. Reluctant to take any credit, she said:

I feel like all I did was get to be a part of it. . . . I got to be in a place where all this goodness walked through the door. . . . I mean, just to get to be a part of the

process when somebody comes in that way, and if I can be a place of warmth and a place to help people see who they are, what a gift that is.

Jana considered it a privilege to work with students and viewed her job as helping them see who they truly are. She also wanted to make sure all first-generation students believed by the end of their first year that they belonged in college just as much as anyone else. One way she tried to accomplish that was by bringing out the good in every scenario. When Elias shared that his family did not understand the sacrifices he was making to return to college or its importance to him, for example, Jana was able to reframe the situation reminding Elias that his family loved him very much but did not have access or the context to understand his situation. During their paired interview, Jana pointed out Elias' own ability to see the goodness in others and recalled a story he had shared with her about a transformative moment he had while working in the corrections field:

I can remember you telling me a story about that, at one point, you were holding somebody down, right, whatever restraint you were having to do, but you looked in their eyes and you realized that there was goodness there and you didn't want to be holding him down anymore. Those are the types of things that we would talk about, right? . . . There are few that have the gift that while they're in that moment can think, "Wait a second! Wait a second! This is not what I'm supposed to be doing. Holding you down is not what I'm supposed to be doing. Uplifting you is what I'm supposed to be doing! So I gotta figure out my own life, how to do that." I can remember you talking about that.

During our time together, it was clear to see just how special the relationship was between Elias and Jana. When asked what they believed it was about their relationship that contributed to the transformative learning experience, Jana mentioned the importance of building trust and breaking down walls, particularly in Elias' case as he re-entered college with some distrust of the system after his first experience. Jana believed there needed to be an openness and readiness there, that the learner needed to possess a

willingness to share one's vulnerabilities, in addition to being receptive to all of the many possibilities. Jana agreed that the connection she shared with Elias was special and had been transformative for her, too, because she now gets to send students to him for help. For Elias, the creation of a safe environment where he could share his fears and concerns, as well as his dreams, was pivotal. He also noted that Jana was able to make him feel like he was on "the same playing field" as the many campus leaders to whom he was introduced on campus.

One of those leaders was the Vice President of Enrollment Management, an individual Elias got to know well during an internship in the Admissions office his final semester of undergraduate studies. This professional also saw "the best in me when I did not even see it," Elias exclaimed. Through this internship, Elias was able to tell his own story and show students he understood who they were and where they came from and that they could make college a reality, too:

So, the first thing, my first responsibility was to go into a high school . . . and talk to some kids about higher education. Well, instead of going off my typical script of [university] this and that, I began to share with the students *me*, and I began to tell them, I began to *show* that I knew *them*, that I'm from [this town], that I came through the school systems, that *I am them*, and that this is where I'm at now, and something, I think something that I said went past just, "Oh well, I want to go to [this university] because of the majors," and I began to make college a reality for many, many students. I [saw] the light go on.

Once Elias earned his Bachelor's degree he was offered a full-time position in the Admissions office and was able to realize his dream of creating transformative learning opportunities for other first-generation, low income, underrepresented students like himself. He rallied hard in order to work with the high schools in his own community, ones with "the highest dropout rates, the highest teenage pregnancies, the highest gang-related offenses" saying, "That's where I want to be!" In turn, college enrollment

numbers began to increase for these schools, and Elias found himself helping more and more local students get into college, as well as find scholarship money. He reiterated, though, that “access without support” can be damaging to students and pointed out that programs like Student Support Services were vital in helping low income, first-generation students stay enrolled and achieve success while in college. He circled back to his first experience in higher education, which he felt confirmed his misconception that he did not belong there and which almost prevented him from returning:

I talked about coming [to the university] and failing in the first semester and I really think that that was a life without any support, and I think that’s how drastic it can be. So, if we’re not careful and creating that access without support, I mean that can almost do more damage than good. It took me 10 years before I ever came back into a four-year university and it almost, that piece almost was confirming that I wasn’t . . . prepared for this or I’m not meant for this, and it was feeding into all the labels that everybody else was giving me that I don’t belong here, I’m not smart enough for this. And it took a lot to finally overcome that piece, so I think the faster that we can understand that, and the faster we can value people, the faster we can encourage people and say that this *is* for them, this can be for them, I think we can create that environment to help them get there, a *proper* environment to help them get there.

Elias acknowledged the value in his Latino identity, saying his ability to connect with the culture and speak Spanish helps him build relationships with students and their parents. He could see the impact he was making on his community and was excited to be able to give back and share all of the opportunities that higher education could provide, so much so that he returned to pursue a Master’s degree in Educational Leadership. He was beaming when he stated, “The best part is families are believing in me. Moms, dads are believing in me. Their kids, I’m already seeing second and third year students that are now in a degree, doing what they love, and making it!” He elaborated:

I’m just moved at the opportunities that I’ve been given, mostly of the trust that I’ve been given by families, students, ‘cause I work with their most treasured gifts, and I believe I’m impacting students’ lives in a very vulnerable time of their



life and that this time in their life is when they're at the "Y" in the road where they're gonna say, "Okay, this is who I am. This is what people label me, so this is who I am." But now I'm able to do what others have done for me, and that's give them a different label, give them a different confidence, a different hope.

I believe that best sums up the light that shines through Elias and that he is able to shine for others, an ability to see something different, to provide a sense of hope.

### **Thematic Discussion**

In keeping with the purpose of the study - to explore the experience of transformative learning from the perspectives of the learner, the educator, and a significant individual in the learner's life - the themes that emerged came from the stories told by all three participant groups. While the focus was primarily on the experience of the learners, the narratives shared by the educators and significant others who supported the learners during their transformative learning journeys also informed the findings. Taken as a whole, the themes and threads woven throughout the participants' portraits help shed light on the meaning-making surrounding the students' transformative learning experiences in higher education, the first research question I sought to address through this study.

The emergent themes fell into two main groupings. The first grouping, essential components of the transformative learning experience, centered around three common threads. The first, characteristics of the learner, contained themes such as learner openness and readiness; investment and responsibility; emotional engagement and connection; and life experiences. The second, characteristics of the educator and learning environment, included themes pertaining to educator caring and concern; vulnerability, authenticity, and transparency; egalitarian, collaborative learning spaces; seeing the learners as individuals; and seeing the learners' potential. The third, the relationship

between learner and educator, covered themes regarding building trust; exchange and experimentation; eliminating power; reciprocity; and reluctance to take credit for transformation.

Having an understanding of these essential components should provide insight for educators concerning how to best create and support transformative learning opportunities, the second research question I sought to address through this study. This understanding enables educators to (1) know which characteristics or traits to be aware of in those students who will likely be the most open to transformative learning; (2) know what qualities they may want to focus on or cultivate within themselves and the learning environment; and (3) understand what type of relationship to develop with their students in order to foster this type of learning. Students may also benefit from an understanding of these components.

The second grouping, student outcomes of the transformative learning experience, contained three themes: finding one's voice and place; paying it forward; and changing relationships, changing perceptions of self. These themes address the third research question regarding the changes students make as a result of their transformative learning experiences. The fourth research question concerning how key relationships in the learners' lives are influenced is also addressed. Through an understanding of these potential outcomes, learners may be better able to anticipate the changes they could experience as a result of transformative learning and educators may be better prepared for supporting students through these major life shifts.

## **Characteristics of the Learner**

In reviewing the participants' stories, there are several themes that surfaced again and again concerning specific characteristics all four of the learners possessed that seemed to lend themselves to experiencing transformative learning. First, all of the educators recognized that each learner had an increased openness and readiness to learn. For example, Rebecca wondered if Reneé could have had a transformative learning experience with another instructor because of Reneé's readiness. In addition, Jana talked about the importance of Elias' openness and willingness to share his vulnerabilities with her. This theme is supported by the transformative learning literature concerning students' openness and readiness for learning (e.g., Mezirow, 1997, 2000; E. W. Taylor, 2008; K. Taylor, 2000). Specifically, in research concerning barriers to transformative learning, lack of readiness was identified as one reason why learners did not experience any meaningful change (E. W. Taylor, 2008). In another study, a lack of openness was shown to impede learners' abilities to "integrate learning in a way that challenges their existing ideas" (K. Taylor, 2000, p. 157). Because of this, learners may be successful in meeting course objectives or doing well on exams, but an unwillingness to engage new ideas and perspectives prevents them from experiencing transformation.

A willingness to step outside of their own comfort zones was another characteristic the transformed learners shared. For Reneé, this involved experimenting with new ways of expressing her scholarship as a student, and the use of new technology and teaching modalities as an educator. For Eric, this was a characteristic the fraternity sought in new members that he believed contributed to transformative learning. Pushing themselves to the limits of their own understanding is what one researcher referred to as a

student's "growing edge" (Berger, 2004, p. 336). Studies have shown that this space, where students are situated at the verge of transformation, is an important one for educators to recognize and to provide much needed support (Berger, 2004; Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; Hicks et al., 2005; Generett & Hicks, 2004).

All of the learners invested in the learning process and discussed the importance of taking ownership of, or responsibility for, their own learning. This sense of self-ownership is part of the process of individuation, where learners - through critical self-reflection - begin to move away from collective thought to rely more heavily on individual consciousness (Cranton, 2000). Sarah mentioned how, as an educator herself now, she understood the significance this sense of ownership played in her own experience and works to instill this in her students. Some of the educators also noted how engaged the learners had been within the particular learning environment where they interacted. For example, Eric talked about how he encouraged new members of the fraternity to take ownership of their own learning and attributed Zach's transformation to how engaged he had been during the new member education program. Zach agreed that doing so, and investing himself in the process, made the experience more meaningful for him.

Being emotionally engaged and connected to the learning was another commonality for the learners. Both Sarah and Reneé commented on how different it felt to be able to put themselves into the subject matter they were learning and discussing by sharing their own stories and relating what they had experienced in their lives to the material. Learning that is situated in the students' own experiences assists them in the process of critical reflection (K. Taylor, 2000) and is a necessary component of self-

authorship, whereby students shift from relying on external authority to their own “growing internal voices” (Baxter Magolda, 2003, p. 235) for making meaning. Research has also shown that when students are not able to connect with the material being learned, transformation is unlikely to occur (Synder, 2008). Zach addressed how having an emotional connection to what he was learning was an essential component to why the new member education process was so transformative for him. He believed it was why he was able to remember that process and other emotionally powerful moments in his education more vividly than things he learned from textbooks or lectures.

The participants all spoke to the importance of engaging emotions in transformative learning environments, which is supported by scholarly writing on the topic of teaching and learning (Dirkx, 2006; Palmer, 2007; Rendón, 2009). Dirkx (2006), specifically, noted that employing emotions within the learning setting provides “an opportunity for establishing a dialogue with those unconscious aspects of ourselves seeking expression through various images, feelings, and behaviors” (p. 22). Research has also demonstrated that a shift in meaning perspectives is doubtful if learners are “put into new learning situations without an intrinsic emotional buy-in” (Snyder, 2008, p. 171). These ideas point to why personal and emotional connection to learning is so essential.

A final unifying characteristic of the four learners was having some life experiences that enabled them to truly value learning and the opportunities that were presented to them. Transformative learning theory points to the fact that experiences are what individuals use to frame their meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). It is through this “accumulation of experiences” (Snyder, 2008, p. 165) that learners make sense of

their world. As Cranton (2006b) noted, adult learners bring “rich experiences and resources” (p. 5) to the learning environment. With the majority of the literature concerning transformative learning situated within the field of adult education, it makes sense that three of the four main participants were non-traditional students (Elias, Reneé, and Sarah), and while Zach entered college as a traditional age student, his transformative learning experience did not take place until his senior year. While this does not imply that 18 to 22-year-old students are unable to experience transformative learning, having some varied life experiences before entering higher education, along with an increased maturity level and openness, may lead to a greater likelihood of transformation occurring.

The ability to recognize students’ characteristics that may lend themselves most toward transformative learning would be beneficial to faculty, student affairs practitioners, and other educational professionals hoping to create more of these types of learning opportunities. Getting to know one’s students well and identifying those who display an openness to new ideas and perspectives, who appear ready and willing to fully invest in the learning process and emotionally engage themselves in the experience, and who are ready to test their own limits and step outside the boundaries of their own comfort will allow educators to more easily target those students who are most likely to participate in and benefit from transformative learning.

### **Characteristics of the Educator and Learning Environment**

There are a number of characteristics that transformative educators, themselves, share. These traits may be inherent to the educator’s own personality, values, and teaching style, but may also be learned. Additionally, while I initially conceptualized the characteristics of the learning environment as being a separate essential component of the

transformative learning experience, because it takes a special educator to create the necessary environment, I have chosen to discuss these two components together.

The learners attributed a number of adjectives to the educators in this study, including caring, compassionate, encouraging, supportive, open, dedicated, transparent, respectful, non-judgmental, and authentic. The educators' ability to show genuine caring and concern for their students was one characteristic all of them shared. This nurturing approach to student relationships has been demonstrated through research concerning authenticity in teaching (Cranton, 2006a; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004) and moving toward a more holistic approach to higher education (Moore, 2005). Elias, specifically, talked about how Jana's caring nature and concern for him as a person, not just a student, had a major impact on him. Whereas, Zach shared how Eric's passion and dedication influenced Zach to want to invest himself wholeheartedly in the learning process.

In addition, the educators' willingness to be vulnerable and to share their own personal stories helped the learners feel more connected to them and allowed the learners to share their own vulnerabilities and experiences in return. Being authentic and transparent, either in the classroom or in the one-on-one relationships cultivated with the students, created a sense of openness and comfort in the learning environment and has been discussed at length in the literature (e.g., Berger, 2004; Cranton, 2006a; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Stillion & Siegel, 1994; E. W. Taylor, 2000). Renée noted what a unique experience it was to have a professor so openly share of herself and admit to her own mistakes. Sarah also observed how willing Jeff was to share his own personal struggles and discuss his hearing impairment with the class.

These educators were also open to their students' feedback, suggestions, and ideas, which helped to equalize the distribution of power among students and educator. It also contributed to the learners feeling acknowledged as valuable members of the learning community. This attention to power dynamics is an essential component of culturally-responsive education (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). As Sarah shared, this enabled her to feel more comfortable approaching other faculty, whereas she had previously felt intimidated by them. This led Reneé to feel comfortable enough to ask Rebecca if she could co-teach with her, something that was not allowed in her previous department.

All of the students in this study felt that the educators they identified as transformative valued multiple voices and viewpoints and demonstrated this in the learning environment. The inclusion of multiple perspectives is one of the values of a critical-cultural approach to being a transformative student affairs educator (Rhoads & Black, 1995). The educators displayed an openness to multiple ways of knowing and helped to eliminate the misconception that there was a "right" and "wrong" way of doing things. Instead, a sense of freedom was created within the learning environment allowing the students to make assignments look the way they wanted them to look, play a part in designing exams, and have discussions that were meaningful and relevant to them. This is consistent with the learning environments discussed in other research concerning constructivist, learner-centered, and transformative spaces (e.g., Alkove & McCarty, 1992; Estes, 2004; Generett & Hicks, 2004; Paris & Combs, 2006). Specifically, being involved in deciding how to demonstrate their understanding is considered a valuable part



of students' transformative learning process (Alkove & McCarty, 1992; Paris & Combs, 2006).

Initially, it was uncomfortable or "weird," as both Reneé and Sarah noted, to be exposed to a different type of learning environment, one where they sat in a circle and were permitted to discuss their own life experiences. However, it made the environment more egalitarian and collaborative, giving the students a space where they could be comfortable being themselves and thereby open to learning. Research also supports the notion that something as simple as sitting in a circle helps to shift authority, open communication, and level the playing field between learner and educator (Paris & Combs, 2006).

The educators in this study an ability to see the learners as more than just students, but also as individuals who had roles and responsibilities outside of the classroom or university. Although true of most students, this is particularly relevant for both non-traditional and first-generation students who often have obligations to family, friends, and work and may be providing support for their parents and siblings, as well as their own children (Gupton, Castelo-Rodríguez, Martínez, & Quintanar, 2009; Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles, 2009). Because of this, students may be challenged to strike a balance between academic and family commitments, as was noted by Sarah, Reneé, and Elias. That is why Jana's ability to recognize Elias' many roles was especially poignant for him, and he was touched that Jana took the time to get to know him as a person and ask about his family and life at home.

The learners also shared that other professors were often unwilling to acknowledge that their students had families, jobs, and other commitments and expected

students' entire lives to revolve around academics. As such, some educators may be inflexible with allowing extra time for the completion of assignments or missing class due to another obligation. The transformative educators, on the other hand, respected each student as a person and made the students feel valued. They were also understanding when a student did not complete an assignment on time or had to miss class or an appointment and did not ridicule or embarrass the students for doing so. As Cranton (2006a) pointed out as a result of her extensive examination of authenticity in teaching, "When teachers do not see students as individual people, authentic relationships are not possible" (p. 8).

Another unique characteristic the learners noted was the educators' availability. They were available both inside and outside of the classroom or resource office, and responded to inquiries in a timely manner. This contributed to the learners feeling more valued by and connected to the educators and is another noted attribute of authentic educators (Cranton, 2006a). However, the educators also modeled balance between their university and family lives, which the learners say contributed to their own capacity to achieve greater balance between work, academic, and social and personal commitments. Student affairs research indicates that learning how to achieve such balance is the key to non-traditional and first-generation student success (Gupton et al., 2009; Silverman et al., 2009).

Finally, the educators all displayed an ability to see in the learners what the learners did not see themselves. This "gift," as Jana called it, to help learners see a future self or the potential the learner could not yet recognize was extremely powerful for the learners. The transformative educator's belief in the "inherent worth and potential"

(Generett & Hicks, 2004, p. 190) of their students contributed to the learner's self-confidence and sense of self-worth and has been discussed in previous studies (Stillion & Siegel, 1994; E. W. Taylor, 2008). Elias talked about Jana's ability to see his strengths and look past all of his "failures," to even see what he was capable of becoming in the future. Eric talked about feeling like it was his responsibility to help the new members see all of the possibilities they had before them. These unique characteristics of the learners and educators helped contribute to the special relationship that developed between the two of them. This relationship served as the most pivotal component of the transformative learning experience and will be discussed next.

### **The Relationship between Learner and Educator**

E. W. Taylor's (1997, 2007) reviews of transformative learning research spanning nearly 25 years pointed to a need to better understand the relational nature of transformative learning, specifically how relationships between teachers and students can be fostered and how trust is built. My study sought to take that one step further and examine the relationships with not only classroom educators, but also student affairs professionals and other types of teachers. I believe the stories of the four learners interviewed for this study shed some light on this important topic and may provide educators with the insight needed to create transformative relationships with their own students.

For each of the learners, the relationships they developed with the educators was the single most important facet of their transformative learning experiences. While some of the learners talked about the content of their courses or programs as being transformative, they all explained that without the relationships they formed with the

educators, they do not believe transformation would have taken place. The relationships were characterized by trust, which was born out of the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment where the students felt free to bring their authentic selves. The learners also viewed the educators as mentors and role models who further created trust by breaking down walls the learners had built due to prior negative educational experiences.

The educators modeled authenticity for the students by sharing their own personal stories and encouraging student feedback regarding what was and was not working in the learning environment (Cranton, 2006a). In turn, the students shared their own stories, creating a two-way relationship where both parties learned about each other. This authenticity allowed the students the freedom to try new things, themselves, when it came to doing assignments or projects and to push themselves to the boundaries of their own comfort knowing there was always “a safe place to land,” as Reneé put it. Prior research demonstrates the importance of supporting students at this edge of their understanding (Berger, 2004). The trust created was noted by all of the learners as being one of the most crucial aspects of the relationship, and as Sarah mentioned, it was not just trust in that other person, but also trust in the learning process, itself. The willingness of both the learners and educators to take risks and experiment with new ways of knowing and being further strengthened their bond and is supported by the literature (e.g., Stillion & Siegel, 1994; E. W. Taylor, 2000).

The educators also sought to eliminate the power differential in their relationships with the students by treating them as colleagues and helping the learners feel like their contributions and perspectives were valued. This is seen as one of the approaches central

to fostering emancipatory transformative learning (Freire & Macedo, 1995) and is valued by student affairs practitioners and social justice educators interested in minimizing hierarchies and creating greater inclusion (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Rhoads & Black, 1995). For Elias, this meant feeling as if he was on “the same playing field” as the campus leaders to whom he was introduced by Jana. Reneé explained that in Rebecca’s classroom, as both a student and co-instructor, she was never treated as “lesser” or that Rebecca was superior. This sense of equality in the learning environment was new for the students and appeared to be fundamental to their experience of transformative learning.

Another unique aspect of the relationship was its symbiotic and reciprocal nature. Both the learners and educators mentioned the importance of being invested in the relationship. The educators also talked about learning with and from the learners, and as such, the learners were also serving as educators because they were sharing their own perspectives and constructing knowledge with the educators (and their peers or classmates, for those learners who were interacting with other students). Eric, for example, talked about feeling like he had learned as much about himself through his experience with Zach, as Zach had learned. Both Jana and Jeff talked about how their relationships with Elias and Sarah, respectively, were transformative for them, as well. For Jeff, it had to do with Sarah being the kind of student “that lets me be who I wanted to be when I took this job [as a professor],” a student that allowed him to say, “This is why I do this!” For Jana, the special connection she shared with Elias was transformative because she was able to experience that trust being built, firsthand, and was excited to now send students to Elias, having seen his ability to help them early in their relationship.

Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006) spoke to this co-construction of knowledge and the potential for transformative educators to experience transformation themselves. The idea that “teachers learn and grow together with their students” (Jarvis, 1992, p. 114) is not new to the field of education, particularly with regard to classroom educators. However, it would also be valuable for student affairs practitioners to approach their work in this way in order to create opportunities for transformation in all areas of a student’s campus life and to provide those professionals the opportunity to grow alongside their students (Keeling, 2004; Rhoads & Black, 1995). This aspect of professional development is one of the tenets of life-long learning that is required as good practice for student affairs professionals (Cranton, 1996; Fried & Associates, 1995).

One unexpected aspect of the learner-educator relationship was the educator’s reluctance to take credit for the student’s transformation, despite the students adamantly attributing their transformative experiences to the educators. The educators described themselves as providing an opportunity, being a catalyst, or helping the learners use tools they already had, but not as being transformative. This points to the notion that while some educators may be intentional in their effort to design transformative learning opportunities for students, other educators by virtue of their personality or teaching style may create these experiences without even knowing it. In our final individual meetings, all of the learners expressed surprise that the educators did not recognize the impact they had had on the learners. This pattern of the learner saying, “It was you” and the educator saying, “No, it was all you” is worthy of closer examination, as it does not appear to be addressed in any of the existing literature.

The readiness and openness of the learners coupled with the authenticity and genuine caring of the educators allowed the space for trust to be built and transformation to take place. The learners talked about a sense of being seen for who they truly were, their “whole” selves, good and bad, which was unlike anything they had ever experienced in their educations up until that point. Exposure to such unique educators and environments were undeniably essential to these students’ transformative learning journeys and allowed for the outcomes of these journeys and the many changes the learners underwent, which are discussed next.

### **Finding One’s Voice, One’s Place**

One of the first things I noticed when I began to look at the learners’ stories was this idea of feeling truly comfortable speaking their minds, of finding where they “were meant to be,” as Sarah put it. Each learner talked about this in one way or another, and although subtle at times, it seemed to be a significant change they all experienced. When discussing his transformative learning journey, Zach shared, “I felt that I had a place, and I had a voice.” Reneé, when talking about finding her place within her graduate program, stated, “This is where I want to be. This is where I feel at home.”

This idea of finally belonging or feeling like they “fit in” characterized each of these learners’ journeys. The sense of belonging resulting from transformative learning has been demonstrated through previous research (Hart, 2004; Lange, 2004). Finding one’s voice and feeling like they could share their own stories and truly just be themselves brought the learners a sense of comfort in the classrooms, meeting rooms, and offices where their transformative learning experiences were situated. Encouraging such storytelling has been shown to foster transformative learning in studies examining

spirituality and cultural identity in transformative higher education (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). Freire (1970/2000) also discussed the importance of helping those with marginalized identities find their voices, which relates to the empowerment experienced by Sarah and Reneé as women, and Reneé and Elias as Latina/os. This points to transformative learning as a form of culturally-responsive education aimed at social justice and change.

Additionally, finding a place where they felt comfortable in their own skin and no longer had to conform to fit someone else's expectations of what they "should" be was extremely freeing for all of the learners. These "shoulds" were messages the learners received throughout their lives from family, the media, society, and as a result of prior educational experiences. However, as explained from the theory of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999b, 2003, 2014), their transformative learning experiences allowed the learners to shift from relying on these external voices to their own internal constructions. Self-authorship is the "internal capacity to make meaning of one's beliefs, knowledge, identity, and relationships to others" (Baxter Magolda, 2003, p. 235) and is consistent with these learners' experiences.

The ability to better understand and embrace one's identity was an empowering experience. It led to increased self-confidence for the learners, which was recognized by family members like Jane, Zach's mother, and Laura, Elias' wife. It also created greater self-acceptance, as the learners began to embrace every element that made them who they were, including sometimes painful histories and past relationships. This ability gave the learners freedom to make decisions concerning the type of people they wanted to be, "to present self in any way you choose," as Sarah explained. Individuation is another



concept related to transformative learning, which is similar to self-authorship, and accounts for the increased self-confidence and empowerment experienced by the learners (Cranton, 2000).

Feeling free to be themselves, to voice their opinions and viewpoints, was made possible through the creation of learning environments where multiple perspectives were respected and the learners were encouraged to provide their feedback and suggestions. Such learning environments are consistent with those utilized by culturally-responsive educators interested in collaboration, inclusion, and egalitarianism (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). The development of relationships with educators who modeled authenticity and transparency also created safe spaces where the learners could feel free to act with that same authenticity and transparency (Cranton, 2006a; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). In addition, because the educators were forthcoming in sharing the potential they saw in the learners and the future possibilities before them, the learners were then able to embrace those positive aspects of themselves they may have been unwilling or unable to accept before. As Elias explained, he was able to discover who he really was, his talents and gifts, by seeing the person Jana saw and believing in himself.

The concept of self-authorship is not new to student affairs research (Baxter Magolda, 1999b, 2003), but is one deserving a closer look with regard to creating transformative learning spaces for students in higher education. It is clear that these spaces can be fostered not only in the relationships formed in the classroom, as they were for Sarah and Reneé, but also through relationships with other educators, like Elias and his academic counselor, Jana, or Zach, and his fraternity's new member educator, Eric. The call to make student affairs work more transformative is outlined in *Learning*

*Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004). This document addresses the importance of creating integrative and collaborative learning opportunities aimed at educating the whole student. Additionally, the Learning Partnership Model (Baxter Magolda, 2003, 2014), developed out of the research on self-authorship, is consistent with the relationships these transformative educators developed with their students. In this model, learning partners are those who encourage learners “to develop their personal authority by listening to their own voices” (Baxter Magolda, 2014, p. 30). Such partnerships are a valuable tool in fostering the critical reflection and shift in meaning perspectives necessary for transformative learning.

### **Paying It Forward**

Another common outcome for all of the learners was their desire to create transformative learning opportunities for others because of the transformations and positive changes the learners, themselves, experienced. This connects to one of the goals of a critical-cultural approach to student affairs work, which is to help students “engage in social and cultural transformation” (Rhoads & Black, 1995, p. 413). Learning contexts that promote self-authorship have been shown to help students develop a caring self, which Rhoads (2000) described as “a sense of self firmly rooted in a concern for the welfare of others” (p. 37). As such, this drive to pay the learning forward was powerful for the learners and influenced their present work. They now recognized their own abilities to make a difference in others’ lives and chose educational and career paths that would allow them to do so.

As authentic educators, themselves, the learners felt compelled to use their newfound voices to share their own stories. Elias talked about this being a significant

part of his work as an admissions counselor because it helped him to connect with and inspire other first-generation, low income, underrepresented students to pursue their dreams of higher education. Sarah said that sharing her story with students gave them insight into who she was, making her more relatable and allowing her and her students an opportunity to connect through common aspects of identity. Again, this storytelling has been shown to be a valuable resource in creating authentic relationships and fostering transformation (Cranton, 2006a; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006) and should serve the learners well as they work to create these opportunities for others.

Each of the four learners described wanting to build transformative learning spaces for those with whom they interacted. They were inspired to create change for others and to promote the personal growth of the students and individuals with whom they worked, concepts consistent with transformative learning, which is intended to foster personal and social change (E. W. Taylor, 2006). For Zach, this meant becoming a new member educator, himself, because he wanted to ensure the same experience was available to others, and pursuing graduate work in counseling because he enjoyed seeing people develop and wanted to empower individuals to improve their lives. For Reneé, it meant creating student-centered learning spaces through her teaching and helping other women find their voices, much as she had, through her research and advocacy work. Transformative learning researchers have pointed to a problem in need of further examination where some students experienced perspective transformation, but for some reason were not compelled to act upon these changes (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; Whitelaw, Sears, & Campbell, 2004). This, however, did not seem to be an issue for the students in this study, who were all driven to action.

Jeff, one of the educators interviewed for this study, shared how a transformative learning experience he had as a student led him to become a professor because he wanted to create those types of experiences for others, as well. His transformation was prompted by one of his professors who recognized Jeff's potential, saying, "You can do what I do, if you want to." Jeff had never seen himself in this way before. Additionally, all of the educators interviewed mentioned the impact they had seen the learners have for others and could have in the future. Rebecca, specifically, discussed being able to envision Reneé as an important person in Latina leadership and believed Reneé could help other students' experiences in higher education be easier and more meaningful.

This idea of learning and then wanting to *do* something with that learning is consistent with the literature concerning transformative education because this type of learning is not passive or static (Lange, 2004). It is one that leads to great change and growth and prompts forward motion and the desire to bring about change for other people, other systems, and for society. That is why transformative learning is closely tied to critical pedagogy and social justice education, because this type of learning effects social change. Learning, itself, is not enough - action must take place (Hicks et al., 2005). As such, these learners are enacting transformational change through their roles as teachers, researchers, counselors, advocates, and activists.

### **Changing Relationships, Changing Perceptions of Self**

The final outcome that all of the transformed learners experienced involved changes in their relationships, as well as in how they viewed themselves. With regard to relationships, all of the learners in this study chose to have me interview significant individuals in their lives who had been supportive of them during their transformative

learning journeys. These individuals talked about being positively affected by the learners' resulting self-confidence, increased happiness, and greater involvement. The significant others also recognized, however, that not everyone in the learners' lives had been supportive and that this was challenging and painful at times for the learners. Joel, for example, pointed out how the changes Sarah experienced made it difficult for her to relate to some of her old friends because their values and priorities were no longer the same. Laura talked about her and Elias' families not understanding the sacrifices Elias had made returning to college, nor the value his education had for them and their son.

The learners, too, discussed that while many of their relationships had been positively influenced by their transformative learning experiences, there were definitely individuals who had not been supportive or who did not comprehend what the learners had gone through or the changes they had made. Zach, for instance, shared that he felt judged by some of his high school friends for joining the fraternity, despite what an enriching experience it had been for him. Reneé explained that her parents did not understand what she did, why she was still in school, and why she did not have a job yet, not realizing that the work she was doing (through her teaching, research, and writing) would help her to get a job someday. Research on transformative learning has revealed that during times of transformation, alienation can occur when one's views no longer fit with those around them or when one recognizes that current relationships are oppressive (Cohen, 2004; Moore, 2005). As a result, these learners may seek out new relationships with people who hold similar views or have undergone similar transformations.

Elias, Reneé, and Sarah also talked about a disconnect between their home lives and academic lives and feeling like they were straddling a line between two different

worlds. They spoke of feeling like they were one person with their families and another person at the university. For them, it was a sense of two worlds colliding, where their lives prior to their transformative learning journeys collided with the lives they now led as transformed learners. This is consistent with the research on first-generation college students, which labels the experience of straddling two worlds as “culture shock” because students are “mov[ing] from the culture of home to the culture of higher education” (Gupton et al., 2009, p. 247). Despite how heartbreaking the lack of understanding the learners received from significant people in their lives was at times, all four of the learners shared that things happened just as they should have and they would not change anything about their transformative learning experiences.

With regard to their perceptions of self, all of the learners began to view themselves differently as a result of their transformative educational encounters. This change in how one views the self is an expected outcome of transformative learning (Lange, 2004; Mezirow, 1994, 1997, 2000; E. W. Taylor, 2008). According to transformative learning theory, it comes about as learners explore options for, test out, build competence in, and embrace new roles and relationships (Mezirow, 2000). Each of the learners gained a greater awareness of who they were and began to embrace their multiple, intersecting identities. They had been given the opportunity to see themselves through the educators’ eyes and were able to recognize their abilities to create change for others.

Many of the roles and identities the learners began to embrace centered around gender, race, and culture. For Reneé, this involved gaining pride in her Mexican heritage and of being a Latina, which led to her speaking Spanish again. Some of the new

identities she embraced included being “an advocate, a feminist, and a critical race theorist.” Sarah talked about more closely examining issues of gender and social class in her own life. She was able to identify the aspects of her identity where she was privileged, as well as where she had been oppressed. She also discussed her identity as an activist. Both of these women began to see themselves as capable, as being “smart enough” and “good enough” despite previous insecurities. Like Reneé, Elias fully embraced his Mexican heritage, as well as his identity as a Latino. He used those identities to connect with his students and serve as a role model. He also saw himself as a leader and a change agent. Although Zach did not specifically discuss issues related to culture or gender, like Elias, he too saw himself as a leader. In addition, he identified with his fraternity’s core values and viewed himself as courageous and one who acted with honor and integrity. This self-reflection on, and incorporation of, new identities and relationships is another component of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2003).

For all four of the learners, their career goals shifted as a result of their transformative learning experiences. They were all interested in continuing their educational journeys and pursuing advanced or additional degrees. They also expressed an interest in working with students in some capacity, as either teachers or counselors or both. They viewed their transformations as something that was ongoing and evolving. Much as the educators with whom they had worked had done, I, too, could see the enormous potential these learners each had to create change for their students, co-workers, family, and friends, as well as for the university. They exemplified what transformative learning was all about, and I was eager to share their amazing and

inspiring stories with the hope that others would feel compelled to bring transformative learning to their own workplaces and communities.

### **Summary**

The students interviewed for this study all experienced transformative learning in different ways and in different settings. For Reneé, her transformation was prompted by graduate classes she had taken and research she completed at the campus' Hispanic cultural center. Completing his fraternity's new member education process ignited Zach's transformative learning journey. Sarah experienced transformation resulting from her experiences in women's studies and sociology courses as an undergraduate. For Elias, the support he received from his TRIO advisor helped him navigate returning to school as an adult learner and contributed to one of many transformative educational experiences he encountered. What cannot be overlooked, however, is that each of these stories would not have been possible without the trusting relationships the learners developed with a caring, authentic educator.

Transformative learning theory, research, and practice was used in discussing the themes that emerged from the participants' portraits. These themes centered around two main groupings. The first, essential components of the transformative learning experience, contained three common threads: characteristics of the learner, characteristics of the educator and learning environment, and the relationship between learner and educator. An assessment of the themes provided insight into how these components led to the experience of transformative learning and why they were important. The second grouping, outcomes of the transformative learning experience, included the themes finding one's voice, one's place; paying it forward; and changing relationships, changing



perceptions of self. The discussion addressed what aspects of the transformative learning experiences contributed to these outcomes and how these outcomes were impactful for the learners.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The participants' stories shared in the previous chapter illuminate what the actual experience of transformative learning looked like for these individuals and their meaning-making around it. These findings lend support to what is already known about transformative teaching and learning and contribute new knowledge to the topic. The thick, rich description provided should allow readers to determine the transferability of these findings and how they may be relevant to their own work with students. To assist in this transferability, I offer some implications for practice and future research.

Through an examination of the four portraits, as well as the common themes and threads woven throughout them, I have identified ways in which transformative teaching and learning practices can become more widely used in higher and adult education. In this chapter, I will make recommendations for classroom and student affairs educators who strive to create transformative learning opportunities for their students. I will also make recommendations for students - those who are familiar with transformative learning and are interested in seeking such opportunities for themselves, as well as ways to increase student awareness of this form of learning for those who are new to it.

The recommendations are organized around each of the study's six themes. It should be noted that, as was the case for the participants in this study, an amalgamation of the techniques and recommendations suggested herein is more likely to result in

transformation than the implementation of a single tool or suggestion. As such, the implications for practice should be taken in concert and integrated in order to provide the most comprehensive and effective approach. I conclude the chapter with suggestions for how this study could be expanded and discuss implications for future research.

### **Characteristics of the Learner**

#### **Recommendations for Educators**

Educators should have an understanding of and ability to recognize the characteristics that allow students to be open to transformative teaching and learning practices. The students in this study who experienced transformative learning shared a number of personal characteristics, including: an increased openness and readiness to learn, a willingness to step outside one's comfort zone, investment and ownership in the learning process, and an emotional engagement and connection to the learning. That is not to say that transformative practices cannot be directed toward all students with whom one works, but knowing that not all students in one given class or student group, for example, are likely to experience transformation, this will allow educators to target their efforts where appropriate and to look for signs of readiness.

For educators who have the opportunity to work one-on-one with students (such as counselors, advisors, and other student affairs professionals, as well as facilitators of small classes or groups), getting to know a student well enough to identify these particular traits may occur over a shorter period of time due to increased opportunities for individual interaction. This can occur through conversations with students, listening to their stories, noticing their degree of engagement, and recognizing their ability to appreciate and consider other perspectives. Other ideas include having students share an

artifact of some personal relevance to them (e.g., a photograph, inspirational book, token of good luck, etc.) or engage in reflective journaling (Burk, 2006; King, 2004). Once these student characteristics are noted, students should continue to be encouraged to invest in the learning process and connect their own experiences to the learning (Baxter Magolda, 2014; K. Taylor, 2000). In addition, they should be challenged to test their limits of comfort, while also being supported in doing so (Berger, 2004; Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; Generett & Hicks, 2004).

For educators who meet with vast numbers of students at once, such as facilitators of large classes or groups, it may be more difficult and take a greater amount of time to get to know students well enough to determine their level of openness or emotional engagement, for example. This is likely to be more of a reflective process, meaning that the educator may not notice these characteristics in a student right away, but may become more cognizant of them after numerous interactions and over time (for example, after having multiple classes with the same student or meeting with an advisee over the course of several semesters). Classroom educators can design assignments or in-class activities that are more reflective in nature earlier in the semester to help determine which students may be the most ready for transformative learning. Again, students should be encouraged to examine how their own experiences may connect to the course content or skills being learned in order to make the material more personally relevant and tangible (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Fried & Associates, 2012). One thing to be mindful of is the fact that in settings with large groups of students, the educator's own traits and the set-up of the learning environment may prove to be more effective in creating transformative learning than looking for specific student characteristics.

Using one's knowledge of these student characteristics can also prove useful when selecting students for leadership positions (such as resident advisors, peer wellness educators, or orientation leaders) or workshop facilitation (for events such as social justice retreats or student organization trainings). Educators interviewing students could structure their questions to get at the particular student traits geared toward transformative learning (for example, asking students to name a time when they stepped outside of their comfort zone and what that experience was like for them). The idea is that by selecting student leaders who either have experienced transformative learning for themselves (although they are unlikely to label it as such) or are the most likely open to experiencing it, those students in turn are more likely to gain from the experience and to create transformative learning opportunities for other students.

Another consideration is that three of the four learners in this study were non-traditional students, and all of them brought a vast array of life experiences to the learning environment, perhaps making them more open to a variety of perspectives and learning opportunities (Cranton, 2006b). As such, an argument could be made for encouraging students to take time after high school to gain some experiences, whether through working or travelling, for example, before seeking higher education in order to have a greater appreciation for and ability to connect with the learning and the many ideas to which they will be exposed. This may be appropriate for an academic advisor, for instance, working with students in their first semester of college who senses a student could benefit from taking some time to learn more about themselves and the world around them.

Because many students are no longer “traditional” in terms of age, life experiences, and other factors, educators need to gain a better understanding of the changing student populations (Keeling, 2004). This understanding should include an expectation that students have responsibilities beyond just being a student (to family, jobs, etc.) and should allow some flexibility when it comes to students’ needs to fulfill other obligations (e.g., taking a sick child to the doctor or having a work commitment; Silverman et al., 2009). Professional training opportunities where such information could be conveyed may include orientation programs for new faculty and graduate teaching assistants (as these are our future faculty), training within their degree programs for student affairs professionals, and professional development workshops or in-service sessions for all types of educators. However, in order to get educators, particularly faculty and other classroom instructors, involved in professional development, buy-in is necessary. This buy-in would require institutional support of transformative learning and changing evaluation structures to reward educators for teaching in transformative ways.

An excellent resource for learning about the needs of a variety of student populations (including non-traditional and first-generation students) and concrete strategies for working with them is Harper & Quaye’s (2009) book, *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations*. Additionally, Compton, Cox, and Laanan’s (2006) article, “Adult Learners in Transition,” is another good reference for better understanding the unique needs of non-traditional students. Of note, research has shown that student engagement is directly related to persistence and success in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As such, the formation of deep, meaningful connections and relationships is extremely important for

both non-traditional and first-generation students, as their time on campus may be limited due to other commitments and therefore, their opportunities for engagement reduced (Gupton et al., 2009; Silverman et al., 2009).

### **Recommendations for Students**

A student who has never heard of transformative learning may not intentionally seek out this type of learning, or they may desire this type of learning but not know what to call it or how to look for it. However, there are endless opportunities for introducing students to this concept, such as through new student orientation, academic advising, participation in various student groups and organizations, and an institution's website, which may include transformative learning in its mission statement (Fried, 2013). For those students who are familiar with this form of learning, understanding the characteristics they can cultivate within themselves to create increased opportunities for transformation may prove beneficial.

When asked what information they thought would be helpful for other students to know about their own transformative learning experiences, the student participants in this study shared a number of recommendations. Reneé emphasized the importance of being open to a variety of perspectives and learning environments. Zach suggested students engross themselves in whatever they are learning with the idea that the greater one's emotional involvement, the greater the impact that experience will have and the more long-lasting its effects will be. Sarah encouraged students to take ownership of, and responsibility for, their own learning in order to make the experience more personally meaningful. All of these recommendations can be implemented by the educators with

whom students interact, will prove enriching for *any* student's learning, and may increase the likelihood of experiencing transformation.

### **Characteristics of the Educator and Learning Environment**

#### **Recommendations for Educators**

Educators who were identified as being transformative also shared a number of personal characteristics, including: genuine caring and concern; vulnerability, authenticity, and transparency; willingness to accept feedback and suggestions; and openness to multiple perspectives and learning styles. These characteristics are likely inherent for some educators, but for others will need to be learned. They can be cultivated in classroom educators and other types of teachers (such as fraternity new member educators), as well as in student affairs professionals. An educator may choose, for example, to focus on one or two of the characteristics they hope to develop, practicing them in their everyday interactions with students or even with colleagues and co-workers. These characteristics also represent a number of the competencies recommended by Keeling (2004) for student affairs professionals charged with making campuses more transformative, and therefore, an expansion of these competencies should be part of their professional development.

One way for educators to display authenticity is to introduce themselves to their students, whether in one-on-one interactions or on the first day of a class or workshop, by disclosing some personal stories about themselves (Cranton, 2006a). Rather than simply sharing their credentials or all of the classes they have taught, educators may want to talk about their families or people who have inspired them to pursue their particular career paths, or to share experiences they have had that relate in some way to the topic they are



going to discuss. It is human nature to connect with those with whom we have things in common and with whom we feel can understand our own experiences. The more opportunities educators take to create these connections and convey their understanding to and of their students, the more likely they are to have a transformative impact on them and vice versa.

Another practice educators can utilize includes regularly asking students for their feedback and input (Fried & Associates, 2012; Keeling, 2004). This includes not only making sure students understand what is being taught or discussed, but also determining whether the way one teaches matches with the way students learn. If educators find themselves teaching to one type of learning style (lecturing to auditory learners, for example), they should consider ways in which they can connect with other types of learners, such as creating opportunities for dialogue or making the learning more hands-on and experiential. Students should also be asked where they would like to meet, as meeting in spaces that have personal relevance or significance could also lend to transformation (Fisher-Yoshida et al., 2009).

The educators in this study gave students room to explore by involving them in curriculum design. This included having students create test questions, choose texts and other reading materials, and decide how they were going to make their assignments look. Other ideas include involving students in the creation of the syllabus or giving students the option of submitting a portfolio of their learning in lieu of taking a final exam. The students in this study also felt supported in taking risks, testing their own limits and boundaries, and experimenting with new ways of thinking and doing. This can be achieved both inside and outside of the classroom by encouraging students to: use a new

form of technology with which they are not familiar; express their ideas through some type of artistic representation, to include music and metaphor, even if they do not consider themselves “artistic;” or present their understanding of a topic or concept through the use of a story, poem, collage, or play (Burk, 2006; Davis-Manigaulte et al., 2006).

In the classroom or in meeting with various types of student groups, the room arrangement is important, such as sitting in a circle instead of rows, thus encouraging multiple voices and perspectives to be heard, and treating students as colleagues and collaborators in the learning process (Rhoads & Black, 1995). Meeting in the outdoors or in spaces that may foster creativity (such as a museum, gallery, or art studio) or spark conversation around the exploration of identity (such as a women’s, LGBT, or cultural center), may further contribute to students’ sense of agency, multicultural competence, and the process of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Generett & Hicks, 2004; Keeling, 2004).

Educators can let students know they are interested in learning from them to provide a sense that the students are teachers, too (Shushok et al., 2009). One way to do this is to have students actually facilitate the learning. For example, students in pairs or small groups can choose a chapter or section of material to teach to the rest of the class through the use of learning protocols. Learning protocols are creative ways to present material, generate discussions, and get students thinking in new and unique ways. A great resource, with examples of learning protocols that can be modified for whatever type of learning environment and audience with whom you are working, can be found at <http://www.nsrffharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z>.

Small groups and pairs can also be used in non-classroom learning environments when working with student clubs and organizations, residence hall members, or different types of teams, for example, to enrich the learning experience, encourage collaboration, and create peer support networks (Vega & Tayler, 2005). In addition, to expand upon the idea of students as collaborators and colleagues, educators can invite students to co-facilitate or co-teach future groups or courses with them. These are some easy ways to make the learning environment more collaborative and egalitarian, one that may lend itself to transformative learning (Cohen, 2004; Rhoads & Black, 1995).

### **Recommendations for Students**

Just as educators can gather information about their students, students who are interested in transformative learning should seek out educators who have characteristics similar to those in this study. To do so, students should ask peers (particularly juniors, seniors, and graduate students who may have had more than one class or interaction with a variety of educators), other professors, and student affairs professionals for recommendations concerning transformative educators. For individuals unfamiliar with that terminology, students can instead ask questions about a professional's personal traits such as authenticity, transparency, collaboration, and fairness. Students can also ask about the type of learning environment established by a particular professional (e.g., is it more teacher-centered or learner-centered?) and how that person interacts with their students. Students can find out which professors have won awards for their teaching and which student affairs professionals have been recognized for their service as another possible clue. In addition, student organizations can provide this type of information to their new recruits. Seeking out educators who are known for their transformative

practices will hopefully become easier as knowledge of transformative learning increases and transformative teaching becomes more widely employed.

### **The Relationship between Learner and Educator**

#### **Recommendations for Educators and Students**

The most pivotal aspect of the transformative learning experiences for each of the learners interviewed for this study was their relationships with the educators. As such, it is important for educators interested in creating transformative learning spaces to understand what type of relationship to develop with their students in order to foster this type of learning. These relationships were characterized by trust and were reciprocal in nature. Trust can be built with students by encouraging them to be their authentic selves and accepting them for who they are. The students in this study talked about feeling intimidated and being belittled by previous educators. Clearly these types of behaviors do not build trust. Students must feel supported in providing their perspectives, asking questions, and contributing their own knowledge of a topic or experience. Again, treating students like colleagues and making them feel like equals also contribute to the creation of trust.

Reciprocity is experienced when students feel that they are valuable members of the learning environment, which can be achieved by asking for their input and encouraging their contributions to the learning community (Mezirow, 2000). Reciprocity is also displayed through the sharing of stories, so taking time to get to know one another is vitally important. Educators should put thought into what they share with their students in an effort to build connections. As mentioned previously, relationship-building takes time and is easier to achieve with one-on-one interaction (Cranton, 2006a).

That means educators need to use their time with students purposefully and intentionally. This might mean taking a few minutes out of a busy day to meet with a student who arrives without an appointment or outside of established walk-in hours, even if it feels like there is not time in one's schedule to do so. Taking those few minutes to chat with a student, get to know them better, or answer a question, could mean the world to that student. This might not always be possible, so it is important to be discerning and able to judge a situation quickly. Time is a factor for teachers of all types, as well as student affairs professionals. With jam-packed schedules, being intentional about how one is going to use their time with students and getting to know students as quickly as possible becomes a necessity.

Reciprocity is also displayed when both educators and students show their investment in the relationship and learning process, as well as their willingness to be vulnerable. This involves being present, open to each other's feedback, and able to admit when one does not understand something or has made a mistake. Admitting to these things displays one's ability for growth. Additionally, acting in new and transformative ways can be uncomfortable for individuals in colleges and universities because it may look or feel different from what they are accustomed to seeing or experiencing (E. W. Taylor, 2006). However, as Rendón (2009) shared in her book on integrating the heart and mind in education, "Doing things differently in the face of resistance is an act of courage" (p. 111). Therefore, educators and students, alike, should not be fearful of developing deep, meaningful connections because these bonds lend themselves to more deep, meaningful, and long-lasting learning (Cranton, 2006a; Stillion & Siegel, 1994).

Getting to know one's students also involves asking them questions about themselves, their families, outside interests, academic pursuits, and goals for the future (Estes, 2004; Paris & Combs, 2006). It involves discerning their needs, and most importantly, helping them see their own strengths (Shor, 1989; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). It is surprising how difficult it can be for students to identify the things they do well. That is likely why all of the students in this study were so profoundly impacted by the educators' abilities to see them for everything they were, to recognize their unique capabilities and potential. As educators, assisting students in seeing themselves through our eyes is one of the greatest gifts we can bestow upon them. The learners in this study overcame many challenges, and the educators were able to point that out and reframe it in a way that showed the students they could achieve their dreams. Particularly for students who have had struggles or are the first in their families to attend college, like the individuals in this study, helping them recognize their own resilience and validating their ability to succeed is another powerful relationship-building mechanism (Rendón, 2009).

Educators in transformative relationships serve as both mentors and role models. They are giving of their time with students, but also model balance with regard to how to maintain healthy boundaries between work and family responsibilities. That means educators must be mindful of how they spend their time and be cognizant of potential burnout. There is a fine line that must be achieved between being available to students and overextending oneself, leaving little energy and focus for families, friendships, and other non-work commitments. That is why the establishment of healthy boundaries is of utmost importance.

One question educators might ask is, “Can I enter into a relationship with a student expecting them to transform?” While the answer is “yes,” I propose that the question be reframed. Educators do not necessarily go into their work with students thinking they are going to transform them, as much as they might think that they will create an environment that will make room for transformative learning to occur. The goal should be to design spaces where such learning is possible, and I would venture to say, even probable. It is done through: getting to know one’s students; letting them be *who* they are and learn from *where* they are; fostering transformative characteristics within oneself, as an educator; leaving room for continual self-reflection and professional, as well as personal, growth; setting up safe and equitable spaces; and creating nurturing, supportive relationships (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Moore, 2005; E. W. Taylor, 2009). These are the essential components of transformative learning as identified by the participants.

### **Finding One’s Voice, One’s Place**

One of the most powerful outcomes of the students’ transformative learning journeys was a sense that they finally had a voice and their comfort in using that voice. The students also achieved a sense of belonging. As transformative educators, discovering and utilizing ways to encourage student voices and to craft this sense of belonging is imperative (Keeling, 2004; Rhoads & Black, 1995). This “radical” approach to teaching allows students to engage in reflection and utilize their own emotions, in essence, to make learning matter (Fried, 2013, p. 2). To do this, educators must create opportunities for students to share their stories and make meaning for themselves by connecting their own life experiences and interests to what they are learning (Baxter

Magolda, 2003; Fried, 2013). This means that students should never be discouraged from bringing themselves into the learning. A student who sees “self” in the learning is more likely to retain that information and make use of it in the future because it is more meaningful to them than simply memorizing facts and regurgitating them for a test.

Again, when talking about learning, I am referring to learning that takes place in a classroom, as much as the learning that occurs in residence halls, in student clubs and organizations, and through interactions with advisors, counselors, and other student affairs professionals. Any situation in higher education where students are learning information or learning about themselves and the world around them affords opportunities to create transformation. This idea that learning happens everywhere is supported by Keeling (2004) and is one of the foundations of student affairs practice. This applies to all subject areas, as well. While some topics may lend themselves more to transformative learning than others, such as those in the social sciences where multiple perspectives and subjective realities are more accepted, even mathematics and the hard sciences can be taught in transformative ways.

Methods that can be employed to support students sharing and building connections include the use of personal artifacts (i.e., objects that are meaningful to the student in some way), vision boards, photographs, artwork, film, music, and poetry. Students can also be encouraged to write for a campus newsletter or publication, particularly one that deals with an exploration of socio-cultural or political issues. Even a seemingly unrelated conversation taking place within a classroom or meeting space can become an opportunity for learning. An example given by Jeff was a discussion in one of his social statistics courses of a topic from popular culture (the death of a popular R&B



musician) that he was able to turn into a conversation about a sociological concept (the causes and rate of mortality in African American males) and relate back to the class topic of correlation and regression.

Oftentimes educators, particularly those in the classroom, might dismiss trying something new because it does not feel “academic enough,” as Sarah explained regarding her experience co-teaching with another instructor. That individual was reluctant to utilize student journaling and the use of artifacts in story-telling because those methods did not seem to meet the standards of academic rigor. However, in doing so, opportunities for self-authorship were created and the co-instructor was impressed by how much they all learned. The importance of providing time for self-reflection and self-authorship in student learning cannot be over-emphasized. Learning that is centered in students’ own experiences and is integrative and contemplative, allowing students to think with both their minds and their hearts (Rendón, 2009), are the keys to transformation.

Giving voice to students and creating a safe and supportive learning space where they can be free to be themselves is also achieved through culturally-responsive practices. Inclusive curriculum that takes into account varying ethnic and cultural perspectives is one way to ensure that students from all different backgrounds feel represented in the learning environment (Rendón, 2009). In doing so, this sense of place and belonging allows students to truly open up and blossom in ways never seen before. Additionally, providing opportunities for students to connect with or strengthen (possibly unexplored) aspects of identity can lend to this idea of finding one’s voice. This can be accomplished through exposure to diverse student groups and resources, such as cultural centers, LGBT

and women's centers, religious organizations, and disability services (Keeling, 2004; Rhoads & Black, 1995).

### **Paying It Forward**

Another important outcome of the students' transformative learning journeys was their desire to want to create similar experiences for others. This points to a need to make learning more experiential and afford students opportunities to give back to others. One example was Zach's fraternity experience when he and his brothers volunteered with a community organization in order to enact the fraternity's values of service and stewardship. Bringing these values to life and getting to see them in action had a great impact on Zach and is another way educators can help students connect learning with doing, heart with mind (Rendón, 2009). Reneé was influenced to pursue advocacy work after her class research project at the campus Hispanic cultural center. Again, this out-of-the-classroom experience introduced her to a resource of which she had previously been unaware and prompted her to volunteer there as a result. As a critical pedagogy aimed at social justice, transformative teaching should involve exposing students to communities in need and centering the stories of individuals from marginalized populations. In doing so, a desire is ignited within learners to make a difference in their communities and to show others the potential within, just as the educators in this study had done.

Possible ways to foster this desire to pay transformation forward to others include providing opportunities for service-learning and community engagement as a co-curricular aspect of a class or as part of membership in a student club or organization (Keeling, 2004). One thing to be mindful of is the importance of tying the service experience to some form of learning, whether it is a concept being taught in a class or

through participation in a student group, in order to help students further examine their values and identities (Fried & Associates, 2012). Specific examples include participation in alternative spring break, where students travel to impoverished areas to provide service, or involvement with community organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity or a Boys and Girls Club.

One sage piece of advice that relates to this theme came from Zach when I asked how he thought the findings from the study could best be used. He suggested that students be encouraged to enter their fields of study earlier in their academic careers and not waiting until senior year, for example, to pursue internships and field experiences. Again, because the act of doing is so powerful, a student is more likely to determine if a particular major is a good fit by actually engaging in the work of that field, rather than sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture. As a result, that student is more likely to have a transformative moment being immersed in and emotionally connected to that learning environment and the people in it, and more likely to discover passion for a field of study and use that passion to give back to others.

Action-based learning and providing opportunities for reflection are additional ways to help students see the gains they and others are making as a result of their learning experiences (Davis-Manigaulte et al., 2006; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred; 2006; Snyder, 2008). Encouraging advocacy, activism, and ally development can be done in any setting and relates to any topic, from a class in environmental science to a resident advisor training session on social justice to an individual academic advising appointment. By using their newfound voices to speak out for a particular cause or group or simply to teach others about something they have learned, students are afforded an opportunity to

pay their transformative experiences forward and will likely want to continue doing so long after that course, training, or interaction is over.

### **Changing Relationships, Changing Perceptions of Self**

For all of the learners in this study, their transformative experiences led to changes in their relationships, as well as changes in how they viewed themselves and their identities. Being able to anticipate the changes a transformed learner is likely to undergo allows educators to better prepare for supporting students through these major life shifts. This does not mean that all educators should be expected to counsel students beyond their own skills or training, but they should be familiar with campus resources and be prepared to make referrals to those resources when necessary.

The changes that take place as a result of transformative learning can be uncomfortable and tumultuous for students (Cohen, 2004; Moore, 2005). While the outcomes are almost always positive, students do sometimes experience rifts in relationships when their worldviews shift, for example, and no longer fit with those in their immediate circles. Students engaged in transformative learning, therefore, need to have sources of support built into those experiences. Peers who are participating in the same class, group, who have the same advisor or counselor, or are in the same cohort are obvious sources of support, as they all have some common focus or shared experience. Once again, encouraging collaboration and the idea of learning with and from one another are useful tools in building community and helping students feel that they are not alone in the experience.

Helping to normalize students' transformative learning experiences and to prepare them for some of the changes they may face is also essential. Students are unlikely to

have the language to talk about the dramatic paradigm shifts that may be taking place, so giving them some language to voice their questions and discuss their feelings may be useful. Being able to refer them to books and articles about transformative learning, even sharing with them the stories of students in this study, for example, can help provide further understanding. With transformative learning being an on-going process, it is also important to follow-up with students (as much as is reasonably possible) after a course or interaction has ended to provide additional opportunities for processing and reflection.

Reneé and Elias also had some suggestions for students experiencing the sometimes disorienting changes associated with transformative learning and the educators assisting them. Reneé said, as a student, to be wary of latching onto the educator who creates the experience and having their opinion mean everything to you. This is because at a time when the world may appear so different and other people in your life may not comprehend what you are going through, it is easy to become attached to the one person who you feel does understand you. However, in returning to the ideas of balance and boundaries, becoming too reliant on any one person's perspective is not healthy and may interfere with the process of self-authorship, when students should be analyzing different ideas and figuring things out for themselves (Baxter Magolda, 2003, 2014). In a similar vein, Elias warns educators of students becoming too dependent on them, and as a result, becoming drained because of that connection. He explained that it is important to stay mindful of the fact that we only have a finite amount of energy to invest in others, and we need to retain some of that energy for our loved ones and ourselves. This speaks to the need for educators to also take time for reflection and contemplation (E. W. Taylor, 2006). In a field that involves giving and investing of

ourselves, we cannot expect to bring our genuine caring and concern to our relationships with our students if we are not taking time to extend that same sense of care and concern for ourselves.

### **Future Research**

The stories of transformation revealed through this study contribute to the ever growing field of transformative teaching and learning theory and practices. Student affairs research incorporating exposure to multiple perspectives, examination of identity, opportunities to share stories, and relationship-building - all essential components of transformative learning as viewed by the participants in this study - will lend further understanding to how transformation can be fostered in higher education. With that in mind, there are numerous ways in which the present study can be expanded and improved.

First of all, identifying students who had actually experienced transformative learning proved to be the first challenge of this study. As such, only four students who responded to my inquiry fit the study's parameters of transformative learning. In the future, a larger and more diverse participant sample would lend further strength to the findings and would undoubtedly produce a wider range of stories and experiences, along with more varied results. One interesting demographic characteristic was the fact that all of the learners in this study, myself included, identified as first-generation college students. Future research aimed specifically at first-generation students' experiences of transformative learning or how their experiences differ from non-first generation students would contribute to better understanding whether these students are more open to transformative learning or if there is a connection between the two.

The paired interview between learner and educator was a unique component of this study. Future research directed at further examining these special relationships would be useful in gaining increased insight into how these relationships may best be fostered. Additionally, research focused solely on educators who have either been identified as transformative by students and colleagues or who self-identify as such, would build further knowledge of how to best create transformative learning spaces, as well as what the experience is like from the educators' perspectives. Although this study sought to learn from transformative student affairs professionals, in addition to classroom educators, as only one educator in this study fit that description, it would be useful to focus specifically on the transformative work of student affairs practitioners, as this is one area that is greatly under-researched.

When I set out to do this study, I had hoped to find students who had experienced transformation in different settings and with different types of educators. Although I successfully met this goal - interviewing a student who experienced transformation in the undergraduate classroom, another in a graduate classroom, another during his fraternity's new member education process, and another through his relationship with his TRIO advisor - an in-depth look at any one of these settings, particularly non-classroom environments utilizing a larger pool of participants, would lend to a greater understanding of that particular environment's transformative potential. Longitudinal studies of students in settings that are known as being transformative would also be useful in seeing a student's progression through the transformative learning process. As previously mentioned, though, there is always the possibility that transformation does not take place for the particular students under examination (E. W. Taylor, 2007). However, if a

particular course, workshop, or educator was known for their transformative qualities, interviewing numerous students across several months or even years would provide a unique perspective on the transformative learning process.

One unexpected finding of this study was the educators' reluctance to accept credit for their students' transformations, despite the students' adamant attributions to the educators. This phenomenon is worthy of closer examination as it might lend some insight into whether, for example, the outcomes are different for educators who are intentional in their efforts to create transformative learning compared with those who are not or who do not view themselves as being transformative.

One of my hopes was that interviewing significant individuals in the learners' lives would shed some light on how the complex nature of transformation impacts relationships, both positively and negatively. However, I noticed two distinct issues with this study that I was not expecting and for which I had not accounted. First of all, each of the learners selected individuals for me to speak with who were positively affected by and supportive of the learners' transformative experiences. While the learners talked about relationships that were negatively affected or unsupportive, it would be useful to gain a better understanding of why that happens from the individuals, themselves. Additionally, with the exception of Joel (who was Sarah's friend, one-time boyfriend, and prior classmate), the other three significant individuals interviewed were not able to talk about the learners' transformative learning experiences at much depth. While they all had recognized that some type of change or shift had taken place within the learners, they were unable to speak to those changes in the same type of language or with the same level of understanding to which Joel did. I suspect this may have been due to the fact that



Sarah and Joel were both familiar with the transformative learning terminology and had engaged in conversations about their own transformative learning experiences prior to this study. Asking the learners to name several possible significant individuals to be interviewed and engaging in a screening process similar to that used with the learners may elicit better results. Developing interview questions aimed at delving beyond the surface of the changes that took place into the deeper learning may also prove beneficial.

Another area that could be researched based on the findings of this study would involve taking a gendered or cultured perspective when examining and making meaning of the participants' stories. In this case, Sarah and Reneé both shared some commonalities that may have been further highlighted had the study been focused specifically on the transformative learning experiences of women. Similarly, looking at the experiences through a cultured lens might shed some light on what transformative learning means for students of color, for example. Changing the framework from which the study is conducted would provide additional opportunities for centering the experiences of students with marginalized identities. It may also prove useful to more closely examine the gender or ethnicities of educators and what, if any, impact that has on transformative teaching and learning.

A final consideration is the fact that all of the learners in this study commented on how the research process, itself, was transformative for them. This connects transformative learning to critical pedagogy and supports a case for more widespread and intentional use of critical and transformational approaches to working with students, as well as to research in higher education and student affairs. The act of reflecting back on their prior transformative learning experiences, sharing their stories, and having the

opportunity to discuss these experiences with the educators who helped create them allowed the learners to re-engage with those transformative moments. Through the process of re-telling, the learners were able to add another layer to their stories, giving those experiences more depth and making the learning “more resilient,” as Zach described it.

Because portraiture methodology is focused on strengths and what is working well within a given situation, as well as on relationship-building with participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), it would serve student affairs research particularly well. Portraiture could also be used as an assessment tool to determine if a particular method of teaching and learning (e.g., a course, workshop, advising interaction, residence hall program, leadership training, etc.) was transformative and how so. Portraiture is also consistent with the values of student affairs practice because it provides opportunities for reflection and centers the experiences of participants (Keeling, 2004). Additionally, involving the participants in the meaning making process and asking them how the findings could best be used contributed to the development of this study’s practical implications, another benefit to utilizing portraiture. Lastly, portraiture also lends itself well to relationship-building because it invites researchers to share their own stories and perspectives, another way for educators and learners to get to know one another. As such, utilizing portraiture methodology in higher education and student affairs research may help to further advance the use of transformative practices in our work.

### **Conclusion**

Students have a need to be known. They need to be seen as individuals with their own unique learning styles, dreams, and goals. They also need to be seen for all the

many roles they play and the number of responsibilities they have beyond just being students. They are sons, daughters, parents, siblings, friends, partners, employees, breadwinners, advocates, and allies. Students have a need to be understood. They need to feel valued, to feel heard, and to feel like their experiences, ideas, and perspectives matter and are relevant. They need opportunities to share their own stories and make meaning by connecting their own experiences to what they are learning. Students also need to feel supported in taking risks, exploring, testing their own limits and boundaries, and experimenting with new ideas and new ways of knowing, being, and doing. In order to create transformative learning environments, these needs must be met. I believe this study provides some insight into the ways in which educators can do this and the resources and tools that are necessary. It also demonstrates how transformative learning can show up where it is least expected. The possibilities for transformation are endless. It is a matter of committing oneself, enlisting the courage it takes to do so, and making that first leap.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL**

UNIVERSITY  
NORTHERN COLORADO  
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

April 11, 2011

TO: Megan Babkes Stellino  
School of Sport and Exercise Science

FROM: The Office of Sponsored Programs

RE: Exempt Review of *Portraits of Transformation in Higher Education*,  
submitted by Christine P. Braun (Research Advisor: Katrina Rodriguez)

The above proposal is being submitted to you for exemption review. When approved, return the proposal to Sherry May in the Office of Sponsored Programs.

I recommend approval.

  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Co-Chair

4/25/11  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

The above referenced prospectus has been reviewed for compliance with HHS guidelines for ethical principles in human subjects research. The decision of the Institutional Review Board is that the project is exempt from further review.

IT IS THE ADVISOR'S RESPONSIBILITY TO NOTIFY THE STUDENT OF THIS STATUS.

**Comments:**

- o email 4/20
- o recruitment scripts ✓
- o location 1 face-to-face interviews? ✓
- o incentive added to consent

25 Kepner Hall – Campus Box #143  
Greeley, Colorado 80639  
Ph: 970.351.1907 – Fax: 970.351.1934

**APPENDIX B**

**CALL FOR PARTICIPATION: EMAIL TO GATEKEEPERS**

Dear Colleagues,

I am getting ready to begin my dissertation research and am in need of participants. I am looking for students (either in their last year of undergraduate studies, who have recently graduated, or are pursuing graduate studies) who have had transformative learning experiences. For purposes of my study, this would be learning characterized by a shift or change in a person's way of knowing, thinking, and being in the world, as well as how that person views himself or herself and others within that world.

Here are some examples of other things to look for in potential student participants:

- Oftentimes transformative learning experiences will lead to dramatic changes in students' professional goals.
- They may become more social justice minded and more attuned to issues surrounding privilege and oppression.
- They may display a previously unseen passion for particular political, cultural, or social issues.
- They may describe to you experiencing changes in their relationships or feeling like they no longer fit with their social support systems.
- They may describe themselves as becoming aware of a new way of thinking or learning or being more open to other perspectives.

These are just a few examples, but are not necessarily "required" experiences for participation in the study. Also, the transformative learning experience could have been prompted either inside or outside the classroom (e.g., participation in a particular student group or community organization).

Each of the student participants would also need to identify an educator (either a professor or student affairs professional) who helped to create, inspire, or nurture the transformative learning experience, as well as a significant individual in their lives (e.g., family member, partner, or friend) who could speak to changes they witnessed. I will be interviewing these individuals, as well. Interviews are expected to take place throughout May and June, so participants would need to be available for in-person interviews during that time.

It is difficult to fully define transformative learning in an email, so I would love to chat with you more about the types of experiences that might fit with my study's definition. Please feel free to contact me via email ([brau0416@bears.unco.edu](mailto:brau0416@bears.unco.edu)) if you have any questions or would like additional information.

Thank you so much for your assistance!

Sincerely,  
Christine Braun  
*Ph.D. Candidate*  
*Higher Education & Student Affairs Leadership*

**APPENDIX C**

**CALL FOR PARTICIPATION: EMAIL TO STUDENTS**



Hello!

My name is Christine Braun, and I am a graduate student at UNC. I am conducting my dissertation research on transformative learning experiences in higher education and am looking for student participants for my study.

For purposes of this project, transformative learning is learning characterized by a shift or change in a person's way of knowing, thinking, and being in the world, as well as how that person views himself or herself and others within that world. The experience is typically seen by the student as being life-changing in some significant way. Sometimes students describe the changes as being so dramatic that they can no longer go back to their "old" way of thinking or being. The experience may have been prompted by learning in a way that was completely new to them or learning about a subject area that they never gave much thought to in the past or may have thought about in an entirely different way. Sometimes this results in being more open to other perspectives, and it may lead to dramatic changes in one's professional goals.

Does any of that describe an experience you had during your undergraduate or graduate studies? If so, I was wondering if you would be interested in being a participant? Or, if you think this describes an experience of someone you know, would you be willing to pass along the person's contact information? The attached Informed Consent form provides some more details concerning the study.

For those who participate in the study, I am requesting that they also identify an educator (either a professor or other member of the campus community, such as an advisor or supervisor) who helped to create, inspire, or nurture the transformative learning experience, as well as a significant individual in their life (such as a family member, partner, or friend) who could speak to changes they witnessed in the participant during or following the transformative learning experience. I will be interviewing these individuals, as well.

It is difficult to fully define transformative learning in an email, so I would love to chat with you more about the types of experiences that might fit with my study's definition. Please feel free to contact me via email ([brau0416@bears.unco.edu](mailto:brau0416@bears.unco.edu)) if you have any questions or would like additional information.

Thank you so much for your assistance!

Sincerely,  
Christine Braun  
*Ph.D. Candidate*  
*Higher Education & Student Affairs Leadership*

**APPENDIX D**

**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH: LEARNER**

UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO**

Project Title: Portraits of Transformation in Higher Education

Researcher: Christine P. Braun, brau0416@bears.unco.edu  
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership  
School of Educational Research, Leadership, and Technology

Research Advisor: Dr. Katrina Rodriguez, 970-351-2495  
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership  
School of Educational Research, Leadership, and Technology

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of transformative learning from three perspectives: the learner, the educator, and a significant individual in the learner's life. At this stage of the research, transformative learning will be defined as learning that creates a shift or change in a person's way of knowing, thinking, and being in the world, as well as how that person views the self and others within that world.

As the primary participant in this study, you will be interviewed a total of three times. The first will be an individual interview where you will be asked to describe your transformative learning experience, including how this experience was created or supported by a specific educator. This educator will be invited to participate in a paired interview with you (your second interview) in order to create a dialogue concerning your transformative learning experience. You will also be asked to indicate a significant individual in your life (e.g., spouse, partner, family member, or friend) who could speak to the changes you have made as a result of your transformative learning experience. This person will be invited to an individual interview, and you will be involved in creating the questions for that interview. Your third and final interview will take place after all of the other interviews have been completed. By consenting to this study, you are also granting permission for me to speak with the educator and significant individual you have designated regarding their perceptions of your transformative learning experience.

All of the interviews will take place in a mutually decided upon location on campus, such as a library study room or other quiet, private space. If you are unable to come to campus, another quiet location convenient to you will be used. The interviews are expected to take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. They will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and your name will be replaced with a pseudonym of your choosing to protect your identity. Additionally, any information that could be used to identify you will be removed from the final report. Access to the research data will be limited to the researcher and research advisor named above to ensure further confidentiality.

There are no known risks associated with participation in this research. There will be no cost involved with participating in this study other than the time commitment involved for completing the interviews. While potential benefits are not known at this time, two of the goals of the study are to demonstrate the strengths and effectiveness of transformative education and to encourage more widespread use of transformative teaching and learning in higher education. To compensate you for your time, you will receive a \$25 gift card to be selected from a variety of local retailers and restaurants at the completion of your final interview.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Should you have any questions or concerns prior to, during, or following this study, please feel free to contact us.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX E**

**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH: EDUCATOR**

UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO**

Project Title: Portraits of Transformation in Higher Education

Researcher: Christine P. Braun, brau0416@bears.unco.edu  
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership  
School of Educational Research, Leadership, and Technology

Research Advisor: Dr. Katrina Rodriguez, 970-351-2495  
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership  
School of Educational Research, Leadership, and Technology

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of transformative learning from three perspectives: the learner, the educator, and a significant individual in the learner's life. At this stage of the research, transformative learning will be defined as learning that creates a shift or change in a person's way of knowing, thinking, and being in the world, as well as how that person views the self and others within that world.

You have been designated as an educator who helped to create or support a transformative learning experience for one of the learners in this study. This person has given me permission to speak with you. As such, you will be asked to participate in a paired interview with this individual to discuss your perceptions of transformative teaching and learning. The interview will take place in a mutually decided upon location on campus, such as a library study room or other quiet, private space. If you are unable to come to campus, another quiet location convenient to you will be used. The interview is expected to take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. It will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and your name will be replaced with a pseudonym of your choosing to protect your identity. Additionally, any information that could be used to identify you will be removed from the final report. Access to the research data will be limited to the researcher and research advisor named above to ensure further confidentiality.

There are no known risks associated with participation in this research. There will be no cost involved with participating in this study other than the time commitment involved for completing the interview. While potential benefits are not known at this time, two of the goals of the study are to demonstrate the strengths and effectiveness of transformative education and to encourage more widespread use of transformative teaching and learning in higher education.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Should you have any questions or concerns prior to, during, or following this study, please feel free to contact us.

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Participant's Signature

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Date

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Researcher's Signature

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Date

**APPENDIX F**

**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH:  
SIGNIFICANT OTHER**



UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO**

Project Title: Portraits of Transformation in Higher Education

Researcher: Christine P. Braun, brau0416@bears.unco.edu  
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership  
School of Educational Research, Leadership, and Technology

Research Advisor: Dr. Katrina Rodriguez, 970-351-2495  
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership  
School of Educational Research, Leadership, and Technology

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of transformative learning from three perspectives: the learner, the educator, and a significant individual in the learner's life. At this stage of the research, transformative learning will be defined as learning that creates a shift or change in a person's way of knowing, thinking, and being in the world, as well as how that person views the self and others within that world.

You have been designated as a significant individual in the life of one of the learners in this study. This person has given me permission to speak with you. As such, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview to discuss your perceptions of how this learner changed as a result of her or his transformative learning experience, as well as how your relationship with each another may have changed. The interview will take place in a mutually decided upon location on campus, such as a library study room or other quiet, private space. If you are unable to come to campus, another quiet location convenient to you will be used. The interview is expected to take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. It will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and your name will be replaced with a pseudonym of your choosing to protect your identity. Additionally, any information that could be used to identify you will be removed from the final report. Access to the research data will be limited to the researcher and research advisor named above to ensure further confidentiality.

There are no known risks associated with participation in this research. There will be no cost involved with participating in this study other than the time commitment involved for completing the interview. While potential benefits are not known at this time, two of the goals of the study are to demonstrate the strengths and effectiveness of transformative education and to encourage more widespread use of transformative teaching and learning in higher education.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Should you have any questions or concerns prior to, during, or following this study, please feel free to contact us.

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Participant's Signature

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Date

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Researcher's Signature

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Date