Abstract

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This constructivist case study explored undergraduate students' experiences and learning as a result of their participation in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program at the University of Maryland. The research questions that guided this study were: (1) How do undergraduate students describe their learning and experiences as participants in Common Ground?; (2) How do undergraduate students describe their willingness and ability to engage in difficult dialogues as a result of participating in Common Ground? This study included seven participants from two Common Ground dialogue groups during the Fall 2009 semester. Data collection included semi-structured individual interviews and reflective essays written by the participants. Data was analyzed using the constant comparative method characteristic of grounded theory (Merriam, 2009).

Five themes emerged from the analysis. The participants described the Common Ground Program's model, structure, and setting as central to their experience. The second theme dealt with students' perceptions of conflict, negotiating conflict within the dialogue, and self-censorship. The third theme incorporated the relationships between identity, experiences, and perspectives.

Fourth, the participants illustrated cognitive development in their acknowledgement of multiple perspectives, recognition of peers as sources of learning, and comfort and value in challenging their own opinions. Lastly, the participants described their willingness to engage in dialogues on controversial topics and new approaches to dialogues based on their experiences in the Common Ground Program.

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND LEARNING IN THE
COMMON GROUND MULTICULTURAL DIALOGUE PROGRAM:
A CASE STUDY

by

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doubt, and consistently reminded me of my purpose. When I came to Maryland, a close friend told me "To whom much is given, much is expected." You all have given me so much, and I hope that I have met your expectations.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the past several decades, there has been an increasing emphasis on diversity and its resulting educational benefits in institutions of higher education (Astin, 1993; Chang, 2002; Gurin, Dey, Gurin, & Hurtado, 2004; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Strange & Alston, 1998). More recently, the emphasis on diversity has evolved to include how the opportunities presented in diverse communities contribute to student learning and preparing active, engaged citizens of a democratic society (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004; Chang, Denson, Sáenz, & Misa, 2006; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003). This focus on diversity was initiated with the desegregation of colleges and universities with the purpose of creating access to higher education for historically underrepresented students (Milem et al., 2005). Although access for historically marginalized students remains a priority for many institutions, the purpose of diversity initiatives and whom they serve has evolved as educational and professional settings become more diverse. Research on diversity initiatives has shifted from focusing primarily on historically underrepresented students to a broader focus of exploring the educational benefits of diversity for all students (Milem et al., 2005; Nagda et al., 2003; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000).

The early diversity initiatives that focused on providing access to education for underrepresented students contributed to the current compositional diversity of campuses (Chang et al., 2006; Milem et al., 2005). However, the mere presence of students of various backgrounds does not ensure intercultural interactions or the educational benefits of diversity-related activities (Chang et al., 2006; Gurin et al.,

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2004a; Milem et al., 2005). The Association of American Colleges and Universities'

(AAC&U) national panel on American Commitments: Diversity, Democracy, and

Liberal Learning recommends that higher education institutions "provide

opportunities for students to engage diversity in the larger context of their society's

unfinished exploration of democratic values, aspirations, and commitments," while

also emphasizing that "each campus needs to address diversity and civic engagement

in ways appropriate to its own mission, history, curricular patterns, and students"

(Milem et al., 2005, p. 26).

Although a diverse student population increases the likelihood of students

interacting with peers of different backgrounds (Antonio, Chang, Hakuta, Kenny,

Levin, & Milem, 2004; Gurin et al., 2004a), there is still a tendency for students to

gravitate toward peers of similar backgrounds (Milem et al., 2005). According to

Milem et al. (2005), there must also be an institutional commitment to diversity and

intentional efforts to bring together diverse groups of students in meaningful

interactions to balance the tendency of students to interact predominantly with peers

of similar backgrounds. An additional obstacle to engaging students in multicultural

education and interactions relates to the history of diversity initiatives as focusing on

the needs and experiences of students of color as opposed to the complex evolution of

cultural maturity in all students and the importance of intercultural interaction in that

process.

The problem, as most college and university educators are well aware, is that

students, especially White students, tend to shut down when issues of race and

privilege are introduced to classroom and co-curricular contexts. Students

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often fear that they may unintentionally make ignorant or racist statements, or

that they may indeed expose prejudice and stereotypes they have. (Ortiz &

Rhoads, 2000, p. 84)

The fear of presenting oneself as ignorant may apply to students of various identities.

However, the emphasis Ortiz and Rhoads (2000) place on White students is important

to consider in approaching diversity-related activities on college campuses. In order

to provide students with opportunities for meaningful interaction and honest

discussions with diverse groups, a safe and comfortable environment where mistakes

are allowed must be present (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000). In order to create this

environment and develop investment from the participants, students must feel equally

included in the process (hooks, 1994).

Dialogue Programs

Dialogue programs have become an increasingly common approach from

colleges and universities to engage students in diversity-related activities (King &

Baxter Magolda, 2005; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). Zúñiga (2003) asserts that

dialogue programs can be used to "foster learning and understanding across

differences" (p. 8) as well as "to bring college students together to talk and learn from

each other, to find ways to communicate, and to understand why it is not always easy

to get along or to identify common ground" (p. 8). Structured dialogue programs

designed to bring together diverse groups of students around various social issues can

be found on many college campuses (Schoem, Hurtado, Sevig, Chesler, & Sumida,

2001); however, the most common form of these programs is Intergroup Dialogue

(Voorhees, 2008).

Intergroup Dialogue

Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) is defined as "a face-to-face meeting between students from two or more social identity groups that have a history of conflict or potential conflict" (Zúñiga & Sevig, 2000, p. 489). These social identity groups are based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and socioeconomic status (Zúñiga & Sevig, 2000). The intentions of Intergroup Dialogue programs in higher education include developing self-awareness in the context of institutional privilege and oppression, fostering relationship-building across differences among social identity groups, gaining awareness of social inequalities, exploring commonalities and differences among various social identity groups, challenging ignorance and oppression through reflective learning and critical analysis, and developing tools for social justice advocacy and action (Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Zúñiga & Sevig, 2000).

In order to attain these outcomes, the Intergroup Dialogue model employs a four-stage model that emphasizes creating an environment conducive to dialogue, developing a shared vocabulary to discuss social identity, exploring multiple perspectives on topics, and establishing alliances across identity groups (Zúñiga, 2003). The University of Michigan houses one of the first and best-known dialogue programs, the Program on Intergroup Relations. Although several universities, including Arizona State University and the University of Illinois, follow the University of Michigan's model, different dialogue program models have emerged – one of which is the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program, the focus of this study (Voorhees, 2008).

Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program

The Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program at the University of Maryland uses "an analytical, task-oriented approach to dialogue that provides structured opportunities for diverse groups of 12 to 15 undergraduate students to engage in peer-led dialogues" (Voorhees, 2008, p. 9) about complex societal dilemmas with multicultural components and multiple perspectives. The program, which is coordinated by the Department of Resident Life (DRL), differs from the Intergroup Dialogue model in that it does not purposefully select two social identity groups as participants for a dialogue and its emphasis on the process of effective dialogue in understanding and addressing complex multicultural issues (Voorhees, 2008).

The program's process-oriented emphasis provides an opportunity for students to explore the benefits of using dialogue to discuss controversial topics and learn how to communicate effectively in difficult dialogues; it focuses on the process of engaging in dialogue effectively, rather than the content of the topic or trying to solve a complex issue (Voorhees, 2008). The topics for the dialogue groups are framed as questions. For example, the topic of affirmative action in the context of higher education may be framed as: "Should colleges and universities use intentional methods to diversify the student population?" Using a four-session model, the Common Ground Program emphasizes the complexity of multicultural dilemmas by first exploring the various dimensions of the topic, brainstorming options for action, discussing and reaching an area or areas of consensus, and lastly, engaging in

discussion on the intended and unintended consequences of the chosen action plan (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004; Voorhees, 2008).

Another unique aspect of the program is the model of facilitation. Each dialogue group is co-facilitated by two trained undergraduate Peer Dialogue Leaders (PDLs), who participate in a three-credit, semester-long training program (Voorhees, 2008). In a study on the cognitive development of the PDLs, Voorhees (2008) found that the majority of dialogue programs in higher education settings are facilitated by graduate students, professional staff, or faculty members, rather than undergraduate students.

The distinctive aspects of the program, including the formation of dialogue groups, structure of the dialogues, and facilitation model, position the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program as a unique and compelling focus of study. A more in-depth description of the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program is presented in a detailed description of the specific case in Chapter 3.

To disclose my role as a researcher for this study, I was involved in the administration, co-teaching, and co-training of the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program since July 2009 as the Program's Graduate Coordinator. In addition, I previously worked in DRL Human Resources for a year as a Graduate Coordinator and taught a preparation class for potential Resident Advisors in which students had the option of participating in Common Ground. My experience working directly with the program, as well as with students who participated in Common Ground, gave me valuable insight into the Program's functioning and intentions, as well as students' experiences. However, my relationship with the Program also

created potential biases and predispositions that could have had an influence on my interactions and interpretations within this study. Further elaboration on my role as a researcher and strategies I employed to address the potential influence of my position is presented in Chapter 3.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Although a number of diversity programs have been initiated on college and university campuses, the problem is that it is still rare for students to have structured and facilitated opportunities to discuss controversial topics and share their own experiences with people from different identity groups (Zúñiga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002). Dialogue programs set up environments in which students can engage in discussions with diverse groups of individuals about controversial topics. With the increase of dialogue programs on college campuses and growing attention to the programs' outcomes, Dessel and Rogge (2008) encouraged more research on the effects of dialogue programs on student participants. However, the differences in dialogue programs make it difficult to define participant outcomes. The most common form of programs is Intergroup Dialogue with the majority of research on dialogue programs on that particular model (Voorhees, 2008). Although colleges and universities may have dialogue programs that do not follow the Intergroup Dialogue model, there is a lack of research on other dialogue models and the experiences of participants. The problem identified in this study was the shortage of research on participants' experiences in dialogue programs different from the Intergroup Dialogue model, such as the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program. Participants of the Common Ground Program may express different views on their experiences in a

dialogue program that does not intentionally target two or more social identities with historical conflict, but rather brings together a diverse group of students from a range of different social identities to discuss controversial topics.

To address the limited knowledge about different dialogue programs, the purpose of this constructivist case study was to explore undergraduate students' experiences as participants in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program at the University of Maryland. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do undergraduate students describe their learning and experiences as participants in Common Ground?

2. How do undergraduate students describe their willingness and ability to engage in difficult dialogues as a result of participating in Common Ground?

Overview of Methodology

A constructivist case study was the methodology used for this study to explore students' experiences and learning as participants in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program, as well as their willingness and ability to engage in dialogue as a result of their participation in the program. The bounded case in this study was two Common Ground dialogue groups during the fall 2009 semester.

The data collected for this study consisted of semi-structured interviews with seven Common Ground participants as well as documents, including reflective essays, in order to provide an in-depth and detailed understanding of the case (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). I used the constant comparative method to analyze the data and develop a rich description of the case (Creswell, 2009).

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, I defined major terms that I used throughout this thesis:

Common Ground refers to the four-session dialogue format. Although the program also has a one-session option, this study explored the experiences of undergraduate students who participated in four-session Common Ground dialogue groups.

Difficult dialogues are defined as dialogues on complex and controversial topics with multiple perspectives that have multicultural components and implications that are tied to social identities. For instance, dialogues on abortion may include perspectives influenced by gender, socioeconomic status, or religion, and dialogues on racial profiling may bring about different perspectives based on students' gender, as well as ethnic and racial identities.

Diversity in the context of the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program refers to nine significant components of identity: race and ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, language, national origin, socioeconomic status, and religion. These aspects of identity are emphasized during Peer Dialogue Leader training, as well as during introduction activities in Common Ground dialogue sessions. For the purpose of this study, I defined diversity as groups of individuals from different social identities. As noted earlier, diversity is a complex term and researchers have articulated several different meanings, from structural diversity to institutional diversity, which will be discussed in Chapter 2. Throughout this study, I

was intentional in clearly defining diversity in the context of my own research as well as studies I included in the literature review.

Diversity programs, diversity-related activities, or diversity-related initiatives refer to programs or services an institution provides with the intention of bringing attention to aspects of identity (as defined above) and multiculturalism, as well as providing opportunities for students to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds (Smith et al., 1997).

Learning is defined broadly and can relate to a student's cognitive development or learning about one's own identity or the process of dialogue. Learning was open for participants to define during their responses to open-ended questions in interviews as well as reflective essays about their experience in the dialogue program.

Social identities refer to socially constructed aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, socioeconomic status, and language. These identity groups are situated in a cultural and sociohistorical context and are capable of change in how they are defined by members of society (Adams, 2000).

Willingness and ability to engage will be defined by participants in their responses to open-ended questions during interviews as well as reflective essays about their experience in the dialogue program. This opportunity to self-define "willingness" and "ability" allows the participants to articulate what it means to be "engaged." Considering that participants take on different roles within dialogue

groups, it is important that they are able to construct and articulate their own meanings of engagement in dialogue.

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to the literature in several ways. First, because the majority of research on dialogue programs focuses on the Intergroup Dialogue model, this in-depth study will provide insight into the experiences of Common Ground participants and contribute to the existing literature on different types of dialogue programs and approaches to diversity education. Second, the findings of this study will contribute to the literature on diversity education and diversity-related initiatives, specifically with insight in engaging diverse groups of students on multicultural topics. The findings will provide insight into the components needed to encourage effective dialogue among undergraduate students to foster meaningful interaction across differences of perspectives, backgrounds, and identities.

This study will also contribute to practice. First, the results of this study will have implications for the growth and development of the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program. Although there has been research on the cognitive development of Common Ground's Peer Dialogue Leaders (Voorhees, 2008), this study will focus on participants' experiences and provide feedback and insight for the program staff. Second, my emphasis on the participants' experiences and learning as a result of Common Ground will be useful to practitioners who currently work with or are in the process of developing dialogue programs. Through the findings of this study, practitioners may develop insight on students' learning within Common Ground and use that insight as guidance in creating or further developing dialogue

programs. Practitioners in multicultural education may also apply findings of this study in order to foster meaningful engagement across differences among diverse undergraduate students.

Summary

As colleges and universities increasingly place an emphasis on diversity and the associated educational benefits to students, dialogue programs have become a common approach to multicultural education within higher education. The most prevalent model is Intergroup Dialogue and the majority of the research on dialogue programs focuses on this model. The purpose of this study was to explore participants' experiences and learning in another type of dialogue, the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program, as well as how these participants described their willingness and ability to engage in difficult dialogues as a result of their participation. In the next chapter, I will review literature pertaining to higher education's commitment to diversity and approaches to diversity education, as well as dialogue programs, specifically Intergroup Dialogue.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will review the literature pertaining to dialogue programs in higher education settings. To set the context, I will discuss higher education's commitment to diversity and research about diversity in college student populations, and how those commitments and the scope of the research have evolved, as well as educational benefits of diverse student populations. Next, I will discuss concepts that inform diversity education, highlighting intercultural maturity, cognitive development, and Freire's (2000) concept of co-intentional education. Lastly, I will present research on dialogue programs, specifically the Intergroup Dialogue model, the component of peer interaction in dialogue programs, and outcomes of dialogue, with an emphasis on students' willingness to engage in dialogues.

The Commitment to Diversity

Institutions of higher education are significant socialization agents that strive to prepare students to be active and informed citizens in a democratic society (Chang et al., 2006; Gurin et al., 2004a; Nagda et al., 2003) and provide a wide range of opportunities for intercultural interaction in various formal and informal contexts (Landreman, Rasmussen, King, & Xinquan Jiang, 2007). These intercultural experiences, which include dialogue programs, assist in the development of active, engaged, and socially aware citizens (Chang et al., 2004; Chang et al., 2006; Gurin et al., 2004a; Landreman et al., 2007).

In the 2003 Supreme Court case, *Grutter v. Bollinger,* the court determined that a diverse student population was a compelling governmental interest and essential to "enable institutions of higher education to better fulfill their overarching

mission" (Milem et al., 2005, p. 2). Milem et al. (2005) assert that the diversity within a college student population enhances the broad institutional mission by developing and building upon students' knowledge and preparing them to become active citizens that serve their communities. However, in order to achieve the resulting educational benefits associated with diversity in college student populations (Chang et al., 2004; Chang et al., 2006; Landreman et al., 2007), an institutional commitment to diversity is imperative and opportunities for purposeful, relevant, and meaningful intercultural engagement and dialogue among students must be available (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Gurin et al., 2004a; Milem et al., 2005).

Educational Benefits of Diverse Student Populations

Colleges and universities educate students to "bring a range of competencies and world-views to understand and respond to human and social dilemmas" (Nagda et al., 2003, p. 166). For many students, college is the first opportunity to interact with diverse peers and learn about different cultures, values, and experiences (Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin et al., 2004a). For this reason, structured environments where ground rules are set before dialogue takes place may be more comfortable for students who have not previously engaged in dialogue with peers of diverse backgrounds. Increased compositional diversity of the student body can provide opportunities for a greater range of opinions among students, thus increasing the likelihood of students being exposed to multiple perspectives on complex issues (Chang et al., 2004; Gurin et al., 2004a; Milem et al., 2005). This recognition of multiple perspectives is described in relativistic thinking (Perry, 1968), which will be discussed further in this chapter.

Several studies have shown that engagement with diverse peers results in an increase in critical thinking and a shift from dualistic thinking toward an acknowledgement of multiple perspectives (Chang, 2003; Chang et al., 2006; Gurin et al., 2002; Milem et al., 2005; Nagda et al., 2003). In addition, students with higher frequencies of cross-racial interaction reported larger gains in knowledge and acceptance of different cultures, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, as well as intellectual and social self-confidence (Chang et al., 2006). Although compositional diversity is a crucial factor in achieving the educational benefits of a diverse student population, the mere presence of students from different backgrounds does not guarantee intercultural interactions. Therefore, it is imperative that institutions implement programs and opportunities that bring together students from various social identity groups for meaningful discussions and interactions to occur (Gurin et al., 2002).

In a study on integrative complexity and peer interaction in dialogue with diverse peers on controversial issues, Antonio et al. (2004) organized dialogues to explore how the presence of a person of color influenced conversations. The concept of integrative complexity involves the recognition of truth in multiple perspectives, a central feature of dialogue programs (Antonio et al., 2004; Voorhees, 2008). White students were randomly assigned to dialogue groups consisting of three students and one participant who acted as a collaborator, who was either Black or White; this participant would agree or disagree with the White students' opinions based on a pre-dialogue essay they had completed. Since some of the participants expressed different opinions than they had in their essay, the researchers expanded the variable

for group opinion composition to encompass the collaborator disagreeing with one, two, or all three of the dialogue participants. After a 15-minute dialogue, the participants were asked to write a second essay on another topic; researchers used this writing as a "transfer essay" to determine "whether any stimulation on complex thinking due to the group discussion on the first topic transferred to thinking on a second topic" (Antonio et al., 2004, p. 508). The participants also completed a questionnaire on how they perceived others contributing to the group, how others made them think about the issue, and the influence of members on the group.

The researchers found that the presence of a Black collaborator resulted in students reporting higher integrative complexity, seeing value and truth in multiple perspectives (Antonio et al., 2004). Although this study only focused on the influence of a racial minority presence and opinions on White students and only included Black and White students, several studies focusing on a broader range of students have found similar results in the students' cognitive development as a result of interacting with diverse peers, specifically in terms of the recognition of multiple perspectives (Chang, 2003; Chang et al., 2006; Gurin et al., 2002; Milem et al., 2005; Nagda et al., 2003; Voorhees, 2008). The finding that the presence of a student of color may influence White students' perceptions is compelling, as well as the prevalent finding of students' recognition of multiple perspectives as a result of cross-racial interaction. Antonio et al.'s (2004) finding that students were more likely to think about and recognize multiple perspectives when in diverse groups is informative and useful in understanding students' experiences in multicultural dialogue programs.

In another study on intercultural interaction among undergraduate students, Chang et al. (2006) conducted a study on how cross-racial interaction (CRI) affected students' openness to diversity, cognitive development, and self-confidence, taking a multilevel approach that included student- and institution-level effects of cross-racial interaction. The study's sample consisted of 19,667 students from 227 four-year institutions who were surveyed using the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) when entering college in 1994 and followed up with in 1998. Although the 1994 survey provided background information on the students and asked about previous experiences, values, attitudes, self-concepts, and career goals, the 1998 follow-up survey additionally asked students how they had changed in college and how their experiences in college had affected them.

Chang et al. (2006) identified three domains of the benefits of diversity for students: openness to diversity, cognitive development, and self-confidence. The students' openness to diversity was measured by the student's perceived growth in accepting differences since entering college and knowledge of other social identity groups; cognitive development was measured by students' perceived growth in three areas: problem solving, critical thinking, and general knowledge. To measure self-confidence, the researchers calculated the scores students had given to their own intellectual and social self-confidence and compared them to the scores of their peers (Chang et al., 2006). The researchers found that the students' frequency of cross-racial interaction had significantly positive effects on all three of the outcomes tested, even after controlling for differences in student background, as well as institutional and student body characteristics. Even though CRI was found to result in positive

effects on all three outcomes, the cross-racial interaction had the strongest effect on students' openness to diversity (Chang et al., 2006).

Concepts Informing Diversity Education

In order to achieve the educational benefits associated with diversity and prepare students for roles in a multicultural society, colleges and universities must implement effective programs that educate students about diversity. The concepts that guide diversity education initiate ways of thinking that can inform participants' willingness and abilities to talk about diversity with their peers and learn about different perspectives. Although each institution must address diversity in ways appropriate to its own campus, Milem et al. (2005) outlined four topics as essential in order to prepare students for a diverse democracy: experience, identity, and aspiration; United States pluralism and the pursuits of justice; experiences in justice seeking; and exploration of diversity, equity, and justice issues. The topic of experience, identity, and aspiration refers to the exploration of one's own identity groups, values, beliefs, and culture, and how one approaches differing identities, values, beliefs, and cultures based on one's own identity (Milem et al., 2005). The second topic of U.S. pluralism deals with the histories of different social identity groups in the U.S. and experiences with democracy; this topic may be more likely to be explored in formal academic settings. Justice seeking focuses on the ability to articulate principles of justice, expand opportunities, and address social inequities while acknowledging multiple perspectives of what justice means. The last topic emphasizes the exploration of issues of diversity, equity, and justice, as well as "engaging difficult difference" (Milem et al., 2005, p. 27). All of these components

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require the ability to recognize and value multiple perspectives, an essential component of dialogue programs. Intercultural maturity, cognitive development, and co-intentional education, the topics explored next, provide frameworks for understanding how students might acknowledge, integrate, and reconcile multiple perspectives.

Intercultural Maturity

King and Baxter Magolda (2005) developed a framework of intercultural maturity based on various theories, including cognitive development (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Perry, 1968), identity development (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1995), and moral development (Kegan, 1994). The term "competence" has been commonly used to describe individuals' thinking, attitudes, and behavior in regards to multiculturalism and intercultural interaction (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Pope, Reynolds, & Meuller, 2004). King and Baxter Magolda (2005) used "intercultural maturity" for a more holistic approach to the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions, rather than focusing on the development of only skills or knowledge. Intercultural maturity is applicable to dialogue programs because students are engaged and challenged cognitively, intrapersonally, and interpersonally (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Furthermore, the concept of intercultural maturity is significant in students' development in college, where they have opportunities to experiment with new ideas, relationships, and roles, explore possibilities, and begin to define themselves as independent and mature adults (Gurin et al., 2004a).

Intercultural maturity is defined as "multidimensional and consisting of a range of attributes, including understanding (the cognitive dimension), sensitivity to

others (the interpersonal dimension), and a sense of oneself that enables one to listen

to and learn from others (the intrapersonal dimension)" (King & Baxter Magolda,

2005, p. 274). According to King and Baxter Magolda (2005), maturity in all three

dimensions is imperative in developing interculturally competent individuals. These

three dimensions are also imperative in students' abilities and effectiveness in

engaging in "intercultural interactions that are interdependent, respectful, informed by

cultural understanding, and mutually negotiated," making the framework especially

relevant to this study (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p. 580). For each of the

dimensions of intercultural maturity, King and Baxter Magolda (2005) outline initial,

intermediate, and mature phases through which individuals may progress.

The cognitive dimension of the framework refers to how individuals think

about and understand issues of diversity, their views of knowledge, and an

understanding of multiple perspectives (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). At the initial

level of this dimension, individuals rely on authorities for knowledge. It is similar to

Perry's (1968) dualistic thinking phase in that it does not allow for truth in multiple

perspectives, as well as Freire's (2000) concept of the banking method, in which

students accept teachers' knowledge claims without critique. In this perspective,

individuals view cultural perspectives that conflict with their own as wrong rather

than different (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). The initial phase does not allow

space for alternative perspectives or questioning of existing perspectives. Students in

this phase may find it difficult to engage in dialogue that requires openness to

different perspectives.

In the intermediate phase, individuals begin to shift from relying on authority to a more internal process of adopting knowledge (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005); they begin to recognize their own ability to construct knowledge and their "authority of experience" (hooks, 1994, p. 89). This phase is also characterized by an increasing awareness of the uncertainty and ambiguity in knowledge claims. The mature phase of the cognitive dimension is marked by recognition of knowledge as a social construction that is grounded in context, as well as the individual's ability to recognize multiple perspectives in multiple contexts (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). This ability to use multiple frames is also characteristic of the advanced stage, relativistic thinking, in Perry's (1968) cognitive development theory.

The intrapersonal dimension is a broad category encompassing several identity-related topics that range from how individuals' decisions are influenced by values and beliefs to how people interpret and perceive their own social identities. King and Baxter Magolda (2005) relate this dimension to racial and ethnic identity development theories such as Cross (1991), Helms (1995), and Phinney (1990) in which individuals move through stages or statuses, gaining a greater understanding of their racial or ethnic identity. Individuals in the initial phase may have a lack of awareness about social identity, have not reflected or engaged in critical thinking on their own cultural beliefs, values, or practices, and feel threatened by differing values or social identities.

The intermediate phase of the intrapersonal dimension is characterized by a peak in "tension between an externally derived sense of self (e.g., reliance upon affirmation by others or peer group acceptance) and an internally derived self-

definition" (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p. 578). During this phase, individuals engage in an intentional self-exploration examining their own cultures in the context of personal life experiences, as well as in the larger context of society. When an individual reaches the mature phase of the intrapersonal dimension, a sense of self that provides a foundation for decision-making that is culturally-sensitive and considerate of multiple perspectives is achieved. In addition, different perspectives no longer threaten individuals; rather, students are open to others questioning and challenging their views and perceptions, an important aspect of engaging in dialogue. This recognition of and confidence in one's own identity and perspectives is similar to the mature phases of racial and ethnic identity development theories that Cross (1991), Helms (1995), and Phinney (1990) described.

King and Baxter Magolda (2005) relate the interpersonal dimension to models of moral development (Kohlberg, 1984) and appreciation of intercultural differences (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This dimension refers to the individual's ability to interact with others effectively in a way that balances one's own beliefs and values with a respect and understanding of others' perspectives. This dimension is perhaps the most directly related to students' engagement in dialogue programs. At the initial level, individuals' interactions with others as well as views on cultural differences and social policy issues are grounded in their own social identity and affinity groups. When individuals begin to see legitimacy in multiple perspectives and gain an initial awareness of social constructions and systems, the intermediate phase begins. The mature level is achieved when the individual experiences "heightened awareness and capacity to engage in intercultural interactions that are interdependent, respectful,

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informed by cultural understanding, and mutually negotiated" (King & Baxter

Magolda, 2005, p. 580). The ability to effectively interact with peers from different

backgrounds with various perspectives is a desired outcome of dialogue programs

(Voorhees, 2008). Through structured dialogue programs, students have the

opportunity to progress through these levels.

Perry's Theory on Cognitive Development

In Perry's (1968) theory of cognitive development, he identified nine

positions to illustrate students' intellectual and ethical development that are grouped

into four categories: dualism, multiplicity, contextual relativism, and commitment in

relativism. The first three categories focus on cognitive development, while the last

emphasizes ethical development. Perry's use of the term "position" instead of stage

is intentional and defined as "that structure representing the mode, or central

tendency, among the forms through which an individual construes the world of

knowledge and values at a given time" (Perry, 1999, p. 287).

In the earlier positions, students think dualistically; there are right and wrong

answers to all questions, these answers are absolute, and authority figures are relied

on for knowledge and are not challenged (Perry, 1968). In the second category,

multiplicity, students begin to rely less on authorities for answers; they begin to

recognize that multiple perspectives exist and may be equally valid (Perry, 1968;

Voorhees, 2008). The third category represents the highest position of cognitive

development and a critical shift in students' thinking (King, 2003; Perry, 1968). In

these positions, students begin to see knowledge as contextual and involve critical

and independent thinking in formulating perspectives (King, 2003; Perry, 1968).

Authority members are seen as resources and mutual collaborators in the learning

process, in which students adopt a more invested role (Perry, 1968). In this category,

students begin to take part in co-intentional education, in which they are active

partners in the learning process.

Co-intentional Education

In intercultural maturity and cognitive development, individuals move from an

early phase of development where authorities' views are accepted and identification

is through others' views and expectations to a more mature phase where a sense of

self is more internally defined and knowledge is recognized as constructed and as a

process, rather than absolute truths (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). In order to

progress to a more mature phase of development, students must be actively engaged

in the process. Freire (2000) presents the concept of co-intentional dialogic

education, "in which the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of students *and*

teachers are honored as central to the education process" (Nagda et al., 2003, p. 168).

Co-intentional education engages students as active participants in reflecting on their

own experiences and perspectives in relation to others' views and larger social issues

through inquiry and creative transformation (Freire, 2000; Nagda et al., 2003).

Freire (2000) and hooks (1994) describe the banking method as education that

reinforces domination and only allows student participation as passive consumers; co-

intentional education that engages students as teachers is described as education as

liberatory and the practice of freedom. This approach to education is conducive to

dialogue programs because it involves students as central to the learning process,

providing a sense of ownership and investment in their education. As hooks (1994)

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noted: "All students, not just those from marginalized groups, seem more eager to enter energetically into classroom discussion when they perceive it as pertaining directly to them" (p. 87). Diversity education, hooks indicated, should be presented in a way that is meaningful and relevant to students' lives in order to be effective. The students' experiences must be acknowledged and valued, rather than ignored or negated.

The concept of co-intentional education values the voices and experiences of students (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994). This also means that education negates "the false assumption that education is neutral" (hooks, 1994, p. 198). Rather, subjective voices of the students, as well as the teachers, must be heard and engaged in dialogue. In the banking method of education, authorities "teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies" (hooks, 1994, p. 139), as though knowledge consists of objective, absolute truths. "By recognizing subjectivity and the limits of identity, we disrupt the objectification that is so necessary in a culture of domination" (hooks, 1994, p. 139). Acknowledging the realities of subjectivity and the influence of one's identity is essential to the validation of truth in multiple perspectives. The recognition of students' voices and experiences as valuable and relevant in their learning engages them as active participants in a liberating process of education as the practice of freedom (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994). This process of education is present in dialogue programs through the emphasis on students' voices and value of subjectivity by recognizing truth in various opinions (hooks, 1994; Voorhees, 2008).

The practice of co-intentional education creates a setting in which students have the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences, as well as engage in

dialogue with diverse peers (Nagda et al., 2003). However, these opportunities and the resulting educational benefits of diversity as stated previously are not assured simply by the compositional diversity of the student population. An institutional commitment to diversity must be present in order to provide and encourage opportunities for intercultural interaction among students (Milem et al., 2005; Nagda et al., 2003). The value of compositional diversity depends on whether it results in increased levels of engagement in diversity-related activities (Chang et al., 2006). One of the most significant engagement activities involves interaction in sustained and meaningful ways with someone of a different background, such as through structured dialogue programs (Chang et al., 2006; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen, 1999; Khuri, 2005). Having explored the concepts of intercultural maturity, cognitive development, and co-intentional education as necessary frameworks for dialogues, I now discuss research on dialogue programs.

Dialogue Programs

Dialogue as an early form in the Socratic Method emphasized challenging and engaging individuals to formulate their own views on societal issues; although dialogue has been associated with persuasion and debate, Plato reinterpreted it to emphasize participants coming to their own conclusions on issues of concern on the basis of shared meaning and understanding (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). Schoem et al. (2001) describe intergroup dialogue as "a diverse twenty-first-century version of the homogenous nineteenth-century town hall meeting" (p. 4) in which members of the community gathered to discuss current topics, find solutions, and strengthen community. The difference, according to Schoem et al. (2001), is that while town

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hall meetings often consisted of a homogeneous group with common goals, intergroup dialogue participants likely have different perspectives and goals coming into the dialogue. Dialogue programs have been utilized in various venues, including community, professional, and university settings (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006). For the purpose of this study, the literature review will focus on dialogue practices within higher education.

Intergroup Dialogue

Although dialogue formats and structures differ depending on the university, the University of Michigan's Intergroup Dialogue approach is the most common and recognized university dialogue program (Gurin et al., 2004a; Gurin et al., 2004b; Voorhees, 2008). Intergroup Dialogue brings together students of two or more social identity groups who have a history of conflict with the intent of encouraging dialogue participants to actively explore singular and intersecting social identities, as well as the dynamics of privilege and oppression (Zúñiga 2003; Zúñiga & Sevig, 2000). Schoem et al. (2001) further defined intergroup dialogue as a process that involves "face-to-face, focused, facilitated, and confidential discussions occurring over time" (p. 6).

Intended goals of intergroup dialogue include building skills for the development of relationships across differences, fostering alliances and collaboration, and practicing dialogue skills and other constructive methods to address controversial issues (Zúñiga et al., 2002). In addressing issues of power and privilege within the intergroup dialogue, participants are encouraged to think about similarities and differences across and within social identity groups, develop self-awareness of one's

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own identity groups in the context of power and privilege, and identify methods to actively contribute to the development of more inclusive and socially just relations among social identity groups (Zúñiga et al., 2002).

The length of dialogue programs vary. Although most dialogue groups meet weekly, they differ in that they can last from three weeks to over a year (Schoem et al., 2001). According to Zúñiga (2003), dialogue groups meet for seven to fourteen weeks. The extended period of dialogue serves several purposes: (1) provides opportunity for relationship and trust building among the dialogue participants, (2) offers sufficient time for participants to reflect on the topic in between sessions, (3) allows for participants to explore the complexity of the topic, (4) enables participants to engage in outside research on the topic, and (5) emphasizes change as a process and long-term commitment (Schoem et al., 2001).

There are several different models of facilitation used in Intergroup Dialogue programs. Although the University of Michigan's dialogue groups are co-facilitated by undergraduate students, each student representing one of the social identity groups participating in the dialogue, the University of Illinois pairs undergraduate students with professional staff members as co-facilitators, and the University of Maryland's Words of Engagement Program is facilitated by professional staff and graduate students (Voorhees, 2008). Although professional staff and graduate students may have more experience than undergraduate students, there is also value in peer facilitation. According to Schoem et al. (2001), peer facilitation can contribute to participants' increased sense of ownership, engagement, and understanding within the dialogue, as well as the development of relationships among the participants.

The intergroup dialogue model is informed by three pedagogical practices: sustained communication, critical social awareness, and bridge building (Zúñiga, 2003). Sustained communication refers to the face-to-face conversations that take place over an extended period of time, which encourage participants to engage in active listening and questioning (Zúñiga, 2003). The intergroup dialogue process provides students with an opportunity to "recognize, question, and analyze prevailing beliefs and behaviors that maintain systems of stratification and perpetuate estranged and oppressive relations between groups" (Zúñiga, 2003, p. 10) by bringing attention to systems of privilege and oppression. The inevitable conflicting perspectives and opinions of dialogue participants lead to the emphasis on building bridges across lines of difference. These conflicting perspectives bring about opportunities for students to engage in honest conversations about the topic and explore the sources of tension and disconnection (Zúñiga, 2003).

A four-stage model is used in intergroup dialogue for the purpose of creating an environment that is conducive to constructive dialogue (Zúñiga, 2003). The goal of the first stage is to establish a climate for honest and meaningful dialogue, as well as to identify the purpose of the dialogue (Zúñiga, 2003; Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001). During this stage, participants become acquainted with each other, explore the characteristics and behaviors that are conducive to constructive dialogue, and discuss their own hopes and fears for the dialogue (Zúñiga, 2003). Participants in the second stage seek to establish a shared vocabulary and a common base to engage in dialogue about social identity and social stratification (Zúñiga, 2003; Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001). This common language allows participants to explore privilege and oppression on

personal, intergroup, and societal levels (Zúñiga, 2003). In the third stage, participants begin to narrow the focus of the dialogue and explore multiple perspectives about controversial issues (Zúñiga, 2003; Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001). Facilitators encourage participants to use their own awareness, knowledge, and skills to engage in dialogue with their peers, answer each other's questions, and build on each other's comments (Zúñiga, 2003). The last stage shifts the focus from dialogue to action in encouraging the participants to develop action plans, create alliances across differences, and generate collective visions for a more inclusive community (Zúñiga, 2003; Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001).

Peer Interaction in Dialogue Programs

A significant component of dialogue programs is peer interaction (Voorhees, 2008). Several researchers have identified peer interaction as a significant factor in students' college experience as well as development (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Astin, 1993; Astin, 1996; Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strange & Alston, 1998). The current literature focuses on a wide range of peer interaction, including mentoring relationships among students (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2000), peer programs for international students (Abe et al., 1998), diversity-related activities (Strange & Alston, 1998), and extracurricular involvement (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Since few college and university dialogue programs utilize undergraduate peer leaders, there is a lack of research on peer-led dialogues in higher education settings (Voorhees, 2008). However, several inferences may be drawn from the existing literature on peer interaction.

In a longitudinal, multi-institutional study on college student development, Astin (1996) found that a student's peer group is the single most influential factor on the student's cognitive and affective development. Like Freire (2000) and hooks (1994), Astin (1996) emphasizes the significance of the student taking ownership in his or her own education. Astin (1996) asserts that the influence of peers is powerful because peer interaction actively involves the students in their own learning, while also creating the opportunity for students to serve as mentors and teachers to each other.

According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), peer interaction plays a significant role in students' learning in the formal classroom, as well as learning outside the classroom. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) assert that peer interactions "that reinforce the ethos of the formal academic program and extend it into classroom settings" (p. 121) are most influential; these interactions can consist of serious discussions on religion, philosophy, politics, personal issues, on-campus policies or events, international relations, or an idea brought up in class. Peer interaction appears to be most significant when engaging students in discussions on issues or topics relevant to the academic curriculum or personal experiences of the students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The literature on peer interaction and the power of peers in students' learning and development is substantial (Abe et al., 1998; Astin, 1993; Astin, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Voorhees, 2008); however, there is a gap in the literature on how students are engaged and interact within peer-led dialogue programs.

Voorhees (2008) noted the lack of research on peer-led dialogue programs in her study on the impact of dialogue leader training on students' cognitive development, using the Common Ground Program as the site of the study. The case study's primary unit of analysis was the 2005 Peer Dialogue Leader (PDL) training cohort, and data were collected from the Measure of Intellectual Development (MID), interviews with eight students in the training program, reflection, observations of training, and a focus group with five PDL alumni (Voorhees, 2008). The researcher's outcomes of interest included cognitive development in the context of Perry's (1968) theory of intellectual development, students' understanding of multiple perspectives, the nature of experiential learning, and how the students described their learning in the training process (Voorhees, 2008).

Voorhees (2008) found that participation in PDL training had a positive influence on students' cognitive development, shifting their thinking from dualistic to more relativistic thinking, encouraging them to challenge and think critically about their own perspectives; the study also found that students began to see their peers "as a legitimate source of learning" (Voorhees, 2008, p. 367) through their discussions with each other, as defined by Perry (1968). The study's participants reported "powerful learning associated with hearing first-hand stories from dialogue group participants that contradicted and therefore challenged stereotypes" (Voorhees, 2008, p. 368). Through this learning that resulted from peer interaction, the students illustrated increased self-awareness about their own identities and the complexity of their views, recognition and understanding of multiple perspectives, and a desire to be more complex thinkers (Voorhees, 2008). In terms of transferability, Voorhees found

that the students applied their learning to personal, work, and academic contexts; this included knowledge on content, such as interracial adoption, as well as the process of cognitive development. Voorhees' (2008) findings on the cognitive development and learning of Common Ground's Peer Dialogue Leaders illustrate the influence of peer interaction, as well as the principles of the Common Ground Program. The findings related to cognitive development are also prevalent among other dialogue programs in higher education (Dessel & Rogge, 2008).

Outcomes of Dialogue Programs

Several studies have addressed what students learn as a result of participating in dialogue programs (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin et al., 2004a; Nagda et al., 2003; Zúñiga, 2003). Participation in dialogue programs can promote cognitive development, knowledge acquisition about other social identity groups and social systems, stereotype and prejudice reduction, complex thinking, self-awareness, perspective-taking, and increased understanding about causes of conflict between social identity groups (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; DeTurk, 2006; Engberg, 2004; Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin et al., 2004a; Nagda, 2006; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001; Zúñiga, 2003). Khuri (2004) found that recognition of multiple perspectives, as well as clarifying beliefs through challenging perspectives, were also significant outcomes for dialogue participants. In addition, students who participated in dialogue programs showed an increased commitment to social justice work (Zúñiga, 2003). Although the research on dialogue programs revealed outcomes that could be long-term, there was a lack of literature that specifically addressed long-term effects of dialogue programs.

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Gurin, Peng, Lopez, and Nagda (1999) conducted a study on outcomes of Intergroup Dialogue programs using the University of Michigan's Intergroup Relations, Conflict, and Community (IGRC) program. The study focused on students' group identification, implications of group identity, outcomes associated with participation in the IGRC program, and how participation in the program affected group identity. The researchers used a sample of 174 students, half of whom were participants in the IGRC program and half selected as a control sample from a larger study. The participants were given five surveys: one upon entering the university, one at the end of their first year, one at the end of their second year, and two at the end of their senior year. The researchers found that participation in the IGRC program had positive intergroup outcomes (Gurin et al., 1999). When comparing the results based on students' race and ethnicity, they found that White students were more likely to see commonalities in interests and values among different identity groups and advocate for multicultural and affirmative action policies. Students of color who participated in the IGRC program were less likely to perceive intergroup divisiveness and more likely to advocate for university policies related to identity groups. Surveys completed during the students' senior year revealed that students of color were also more likely to have positive interactions with White students (Gurin et al., 1999). These findings of increased advocacy and positive effects on intergroup interaction are further supported by other studies (DeTurk, 2006; Gurin et al., 2004a; Zúñiga, 2003).

Additional outcomes of dialogue group participation were outlined in a review of empirical literature, consisting of 23 studies conducted from 1997 to 2006 (Dessel

& Rogge, 2008). The included studies focused on intergroup dialogue in academic, community, and international settings; 11 of the 23 studies were in the context of academic settings (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). In the review, Dessel and Rogge (2008) drew themes among the studies regarding outcomes of dialogue programs in academic settings. Of the dialogue programs in higher education settings, outcomes included learning about and valuing new perspectives, developing analytical problem solving skills, gaining an understanding of social identity and how one's identity may influence viewpoints, and developing a greater awareness of social inequalities (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). Although Dessel and Rogge (2008) provided a comprehensive review of Intergroup Dialogue programs, there was a lack of detail in the actual structure of these programs, such as how the dialogues were facilitated and by whom, length of the dialogue sessions, and how dialogue groups were formed. These structural components are crucial to understanding exactly how participation in dialogue groups affected students.

  Willingness to Engage. Several researchers have asserted that students who participate in structured dialogue programs are more likely to engage in informal discussions with peers about multicultural topics and have more positive perceptions of conflict as part of dialogue (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Gurin et al., 1999; Nagda et al., 2003; Zúñiga et al., 2002; Zúñiga, 2003). Recognizing that many college students are interacting with diverse groups for the first time (Gurin et al., 2004a), it is important to acknowledge that prejudice against different identity groups often stems from perceived differences between groups rather than actual differences (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995). Intergroup Dialogue programs bring together students

from two identity groups who have a history of conflict and foster an environment where effective and respectful discussion can take place and prejudice can be reduced (Engberg, 2004; Zúñiga et al., 2002). As a result of participation in dialogue groups, students may experience increased skills and comfort levels in intercultural interactions, conflict exploration, and perspective taking, as well as reduced feelings of anxiety related to dealing with differences among individuals' social identities (Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin et al., 2004b; Zúñiga, 2003).

Participation in dialogue programs encourages students to see conflict as normative or even perceive conflict as having positive effects on dialogue (Gurin et al., 1999). According to Zúñiga et al. (2002), dialogue programs inherently highlight conflicting perspectives, feelings, and experiences and may lead to heated disagreements or intense displays of emotions. Proponents of dialogue value conflict as an opportunity to engage in honest discussions that highlight the underlying sources of tension among individuals (Zúñiga et al., 2002). Dialogue program facilitators "encourage students to embrace conflict as an opportunity to engage in possibly uncomfortable heart-to-heart conversations, reconsider potentially polarizing conflict episodes, and practice skills for meaningful engagement" (Zúñiga et al., 2002, p. 9). These opportunities for honest discussions may also initiate new behaviors that illustrate increased interpersonal skills, cultural sensitivity, and self-awareness and reduced anxiety when interacting with peers from different backgrounds (Gurin et al., 1999; Zúñiga et al., 2002). Dialogue programs are instrumental in shifting students' perceptions of conflict, as well as how they engage in discussions that have the potential for conflicting perspectives. As the above

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studies illustrate, participation in dialogue programs contributes to higher levels of comfort in intercultural interactions, greater self-awareness, perspective-taking, and positive perceptions of conflict within dialogue (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Gurin et al., 1999; Nagda et al., 2003; Zúñiga et al., 2002; Zúñiga, 2003), thereby increasing students' potential effectiveness in and comfort and willingness to engage in future dialogues about multicultural topics with diverse peers.

Summary

Higher education has shown a commitment to diversity through an emphasis on diverse student populations and the implementation of diversity-related activities and programs (Chang et al., 2006; Nagda et al., 2003; Landreman et al., 2007). A prevalent diversity initiative among institutions of higher education is dialogue programs, particularly Intergroup Dialogue (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Voorhees, 2008). Although there is a significant amount of literature on the Intergroup Dialogue model and outcomes associated with the programs, there is a lack of research on dialogue programs that differ from the Intergroup Dialogue model – such as the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program. Considering the gap in the research on various dialogue programs and models, I pursued a study exploring the participants' experiences and learning as a result of participating in the Common Ground Program, as well as how the participants perceived their willingness and ability to engage in future dialogues. In the next chapter, I provide a detailed description of the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program and the specific case, as well as discuss the methodology and methods that I used to conduct my study.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The purpose of this constructivist case study was to explore undergraduate students' experiences as participants in dialogue groups through the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program at the University of Maryland. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do undergraduate students describe their learning and experiences as participants in Common Ground?

2. How do undergraduate students describe their willingness and ability to engage in difficult dialogues as a result of participating in Common Ground?

This study was guided by a constructivist paradigm and case study methodology in order to explore the experiences of Common Ground dialogue participants.

Paradigm

Also known as social constructivism, the constructivist paradigm "maintains that human beings construct their perceptions of the world, that no one perception is 'right' or more 'real' than another" (Glesne, 2006, p. 7), but rather "simply more or less informed and/or sophisticated" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). The paradigm focuses on how individuals construct meaning of their experiences through interaction and engagement with their environment (Creswell, 2009; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006; Stake, 1995). The constructivist paradigm's emphasis on multiple truths is consistent with the dialogue program studied, which emphasizes multiple perspectives. According to Guba and Lincoln (2001), multiple perspectives can coexist with disagreements between equally competent individuals, and the

individuals' social identities, beliefs, and values may influence their interpretations to create those multiple perspectives.

In dialogue programs, a diverse group of individuals with different backgrounds is brought together. The constructivist paradigm also informed my interaction with the participants. In inviting participants to define their own experiences and learning in the Common Ground Program and leaving some of the terms used in the study open for them to define, such as learning and willingness to engage, the participants were able to construct their own realities. Recognizing that each student approaches and perceives dialogue differently, I wanted to give each of them an opportunity to define their experiences individually. The acknowledgement of individuals' abilities to develop their own unique meanings of their experiences produces recognition of truth in multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2009).

Methodology

Case study methodology focuses on one or more cases within a bounded system in order to study an issue (Creswell, 2007) and provide thick description and analysis of the case, which can be a person, program, institution, or community that represents some phenomenon (Jones et al., 2006; Merriam, 2009). Case studies are preferred when "how" research questions are posed and when the researcher is studying "a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (Yin, 2003, p. 1). The intention of a case study is to provide a rich and detailed description of a bounded case or multiple cases. In order to do so, case study research involves in-depth data collection from multiple sources, which can include individual interviews, document analysis, and observations (Creswell, 2007).

This study on participants' experiences within the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program was conducive to case study research because I sought to understand a phenomenon within a real-life context that existed within a bounded system (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). According to Merriam (2009), a case is intrinsically bounded if there is a limit to the number of participants who may be interviewed for the purpose of the study. Therefore, the study of Common Ground dialogue groups was intrinsically bound by the number of participants in the group. The intent of this study was to provide a rich, thick description of students' experiences and learning as a result of Common Ground dialogues within a real-life context, consistent with Merriam's (2009) definition of a descriptive case study.

Stake (1995) distinguishes three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective case studies. An intrinsic case study is conducted when the researcher is interested in one particular case, not a general problem or issue. Instrumental case studies focus on one case in order to bring insight or understanding to a larger issue; the case plays a supportive role to the study, enhancing understanding of a broader issue (Stake, 1995). Collective case studies focus on multiple cases to study an issue (Stake, 1995). This study was an intrinsic case study, although instrumental case study concepts were incorporated at times to bring a broader understanding to dialogue programs. I focused on two specific Common Ground dialogue groups and the experiences of the group's participants, consistent with an intrinsic case study. However, I used the findings to bring insight and understanding to the experiences and learning of participants as a result of the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program. The findings provide insight into how to engage students in multicultural

education, create environments conducive to dialogue, and the influence of dialogue participation.

Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program

The Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program brings together a diverse group of students to discuss a controversial multicultural societal dilemma. Multicultural dilemmas are defined as complex and multi-dimensional problems that involve multiple stakeholders (Petkas, 2004). The Program's primary goals are to: (1) educate students on how to effectively engage in dialogue with the intent of developing the ability and willingness to engage in future dialogues with peers who have differing views and perspectives and (2) to demonstrate the effectiveness and importance of dialogue as a consensual decision-making process that emphasizes multiple perspectives and common ground (Voorhees, 2008). Throughout the dialogue process, students are encouraged to challenge their own beliefs and perspectives, engage in active listening, develop empathy for others' perspectives, and gain an understanding of the complexity of multicultural and societal issues (Voorhees, 2008).

The Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program is a unique dialogue program that provides an alternative to the popular Intergroup Dialogue model. The method in which groups are formed and the intention of bringing together students of many different identities, rather than targeted social identities, sets the Program apart from others. The exclusive use of undergraduate students in the facilitation of the dialogues, emphasis on illustrating ways to find common ground, teaching students *how* to engage in dialogue, and the focus on critical thought and analysis are also

factors that make Common Ground unique among dialogue programs in higher education settings (Voorhees, 2008).

History of the Common Ground Program

The idea of Common Ground came about in the mid-1990s as a result of ongoing discussions among Department of Resident Life (DRL) staff at the University of Maryland about how to initiate engaged dialogue about contemporary, controversial multicultural issues among students who live in the residence halls (Voorhees, 2008). The intention of such a dialogue program was to initiate more discussions on multicultural issues among students in the residence halls by bringing together diverse groups of students in structured dialogue programs (Voorhees, 2008). The Department's Associate Director, Steve Petkas, developed the original vision of the Program and worked with Dr. Carlos E. Cortés, a long-term consultant to DRL and Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, Riverside, to further develop the Common Ground Program's current mission and structure (Voorhees, 2008).

During this time, a new living-learning community called CIVICUS was also being developed in the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences (BSOS); the primary goal of this living-learning community was educating students on concepts of a civil society (Voorhees, 2008). Staff members working to develop CIVICUS and DRL staff discussing emerging ideas of a residence hall dialogue program both perceived dialogue as "a fundamental element of healthy civic engagement" (Voorhees, 2008, p. 119). Through mutual goals and values, CIVICUS and DRL collaborated on the formation of the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue

Program (Voorhees, 2008). The two programs were able to fulfill mutual needs –

CIVICUS needed a diversity-related course and a capstone opportunity for

sophomores, and Common Ground needed a group of students to train to become

Peer Dialogue Leaders. The living-learning community became the home for BSOS

301: Leadership in a Multicultural Society, which was required of Peer Dialogue

Leaders and taught every fall, as well as the PDL training program that was taught in

spring during the 2000-2001 academic year (Voorhees, 2008). Consequently, the

opportunity to be a Peer Dialogue Leader was only open to CIVICUS students. In

Fall 2009, the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program expanded by

teaching a leadership course, EDCP 318: Adaptive Strategies for Multicultural

Leadership and Dialogue, which was open to all students. However, the majority of

PDLs are from the CIVICUS Living-Learning Program.

CIVICUS Living-Learning Program

CIVICUS was established in 1999 in joint sponsorship from the College of

Behavioral and Social Sciences and the Department of Resident Life (Voorhees,

2008). CIVICUS is a two-year living and learning program that is focused on five

principles of civil society: "citizenship, leadership, community building in a diverse

society, scholarship, and community service-learning" ("CIVICUS," 2009, p. 1). The

CIVICUS Living-Learning Program is founded on the assumption that awareness of

social issues and the world beyond the classroom are essential to becoming active and

engaged members of society ("CIVICUS," 2009).

The Program is comprised of approximately 130 first- and second-year

students who enroll in core classes, live together, and engage in service projects

within the surrounding community ("CIVICUS," 2009; Voorhees, 2008). On an individual level, CIVICUS students pursue majors in a variety of different academic fields and participate in internships throughout the Washington, DC area during their second year (Voorhees, 2008). Since all of the participants in my study were CIVICUS students, it is important to consider how their membership in the Living-Learning Program may have influenced the findings of the study. Students are selected for the CIVICUS Living-Learning Program based on their application for admission to the University, high school transcripts, co-curricular activities and leadership, involvement in school and in the community, and letters of recommendation (Voorhees, 2008). Students in the CIVICUS Program are generally already engaged in activities with diverse groups of individuals; also, in their acceptance of admission to the CIVICUS program, the students showed an interest in civic engagement and intercultural interaction.

Fundamental Aspects of the Common Ground Program

Cortés developed the definition of dialogue used by Common Ground dialogue facilitators: "Dialogue is honest discussion of serious topics, with flexible minds, without polarizing, while maintaining civility" (Voorhees, 2008, p. 122). The dialogue relies on the multiple perspectives of participants; therefore, honest discussion is imperative to all voices being heard and exploring the various dimensions of the topic. The topics used in Common Ground are complex and multidimensional in order to challenge students to explore a controversial issue and find common ground (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004). Common topics for Common Ground dialogues include abortion, affirmative action,

same-sex marriage, racial profiling, and the death penalty. The topics are posed as questions in order to focus the dialogue; for example, "Should same-sex couples enjoy the same rights and privileges that are conferred by legal marriage to heterosexual couples?"

Recognizing that participants come into the dialogue with preconceived opinions on the topic, Common Ground facilitators emphasize a "flexible mind" instead of an open mind. Rather than expecting participants to openly accept new perspectives regardless of their own, facilitators encourage dialogue participants to make conscious efforts to set aside their own perspectives in order to better understand others' perspectives (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004). In order to promote civility in the dialogue, facilitators set up obligations emphasizing engagement, active listening, and understanding (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004). Through the Common Ground dialogue experience, the participants are poised to learn four predispositions: to ask, to listen, to see life through another's eyes, and to understand another's views, instead of simply asserting their own (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004).

Peer Dialogue Leaders

Common Ground dialogues are co-facilitated by undergraduate Peer Dialogue Leaders (PDLs). The undergraduate facilitators complete a semester-long course on multicultural dialogue and leadership during the fall semester and a 120-hour PDL training internship in the spring (Voorhees, 2008). The training consists of two phases, the preparation and leading phases, which are designed to promote complex

thinking, teach about the process of dialogue, and provide students with practical experience as dialogue participants and facilitators in discussing multicultural dilemmas (Voorhees, 2008). Topics covered in the preparation phase include: an overview of the Common Ground program and dialogue; basic dialogue leader skills, such as listening, monitoring self-awareness, and interpersonal communication; participant behaviors; and advanced dialogue leader skills, such as facilitative, interpretive, and confronting behaviors, typical challenges in dialogue, and reframing skills (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004; Voorhees, 2008). Trainees also participate in role-play simulations as leaders and participants, as well as analyzing participant and leader behaviors through the simulations and film clips (Voorhees, 2008). During the leading phase, students co-facilitate a four-session dialogue group; the majority of these dialogue groups are in conjunction with the spring Resident Advisor (RA) training course. Trainees also participate in weekly consultation meetings with Common Ground professional staff throughout the dialogue group process (Voorhees, 2008).

The Common Ground Four-Session Model

Students participating in Common Ground meet weekly for an hour and a half for four consecutive weeks; dialogue groups usually consist of 12 to 15 students (Voorhees, 2008). The four-session format allows the participants to go through a dialogue process of exploring multiple perspectives in order to find common ground. The dialogue groups focus on a deliberative question about a contemporary multicultural dilemma; during each of the four sessions, the group focuses on a specific task (Voorhees, 2008). The tasks for each of the four group sessions centered

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on the deliberative question are: (1) "What are the dimensions of this issue or controversy?" (2) "What are options for action in response to this issue?" (3) "What are actions that the group can come to consensus on?" (4) "What might be some of the consequences of taking those actions" (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004, p. 32)?

During the initial session, students become acquainted with each other, explore the purpose of dialogue and the differences between dialogue and debate, and establish guidelines for the dialogue process (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004). The Peer Dialogue Leaders outline "obligations to a successful dialogue," such as listening to understand, speaking as an individual, and speaking in a civil manner (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004). The objective of the first session is to identify multiple dimensions of the dialogue topic with the intent of demonstrating the issue's complexity (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004). In this session, participants may discuss important aspects of the topic, why the topic is important to them, and the history or background of the issue (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004).

In the second session, participants explore potential options for action regarding the topic. The group reviews the dimensions of the topic discussed in the first session, and then brainstorms a list of possible options for action (Voorhees, 2008). The majority of the second session is spent discussing the list of options for action with the intent of allowing students to "wrestle with the issue and to challenge and test each other's thinking about it" (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training

Manual, 2004, p. 87). During this session, participants may discuss the options to which they are drawn, initial reactions to the options, and the viability of the options (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004).

The third session narrows the focus, encouraging students to find an area of consensus based on the proposed options for action. During this session, the participants engage in in-depth dialogue about the options for action discussed in the second session in order to come to consensus on one or more options for action on which every participant agrees (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004; Voorhees, 2008). The objective of this session is to identify common ground through consensual deliberative decision-making using active engagement and listening skills, as well as a willingness to adapt one's own stance when there seems to be irreconcilable differences in order to identify a creative solution (Voorhees, 2008).

In the final session, the participants further explore the chosen plan of action by engaging in dialogue about the intended and unintended consequences of the proposed solution (Voorhees, 2008). The intent of the fourth session is to illustrate the "importance of thinking intentionally and critically" (Voorhees, 2008, p. 127) about intended and unintended consequences of decisions and to re-emphasize the complexity of multicultural issues (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004; Voorhees, 2008). The facilitators conclude the four-session Common Ground experience by allowing time for participants to reflect on what they have learned and share with the group, as well as revisiting the purpose of dialogue, the importance of active listening, multiple perspectives, and finding common ground,

and encouraging participants to utilize what they have learned about dialogue in future interactions with others (Peer Multicultural Dialogue Leader Training Manual, 2004).

Defining the Case

The setting for this case was the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program at the University of Maryland, College Park. The specific case was two four-session dialogue groups during the Fall 2009 semester. The Common Ground dialogue groups that I used in this study met for four consecutive weeks from mid-October to mid-November 2009. All of the participants of the dialogue groups were first- and second-year students in the CIVICUS Living-Learning Program. The students' participation in the dialogue groups I selected occurred in conjunction with required CIVICUS courses. As part of BSOS 191: Introduction to CIVICUS and BSOS 301: Leadership in a Multicultural Society, students have the option of participating in a Common Ground dialogue group or completing another assignment. The students in my study chose the Common Ground option.

Considering that I had been working with the Common Ground Program for less than a year, my knowledge of and interaction with students in the CIVICUS program were somewhat limited. However, it is important to consider the potential of the students' participation in the living-learning program as a significant factor in their learning and experience in Common Ground. In a study on the cognitive development of Peer Dialogue Leaders (PDLs), who were all CIVICUS students, Voorhees (2008) discussed her interaction with CIVICUS students. She noted that these students tended to be more intentional and willing to learn about issues of

diversity and from people who were different from them, and that CIVICUS students were generally "engaged and amenable to the fundamental tenets of the program, which include a general commitment to civic ideals and community service" (Voorhees, 2008, p. 118).

<div align="center">**Sampling, Data Collection, and Data Analysis**</div>

Sampling

Two levels of sampling were conducted with this study, as is necessary in most qualitative case studies – the selection of the actual case and then the individuals within the case (Merriam, 2009). The study used criterion-based sampling to select the case. According to Creswell (2007), participants chosen through criterion-based sampling all meet certain criteria; in this case, all of the students invited to participate in the study participated in particular Common Ground dialogue groups. During the Fall 2009 semester, eight, four-session Common Ground dialogue groups were coordinated. For the purpose of this study, I selected typical Common Ground groups from Fall 2009. The criteria for a typical group, based on reviewing the demographics of past Common Ground groups, included: primarily first- and second-year students; a topic that had been explored in Common Ground groups before; over 12 participants in the group; and facilitated by experienced Peer Dialogue Leaders. All participants chose to participate in Common Ground and preferenced the topic of the dialogue group in which they were placed. Also, many of the Common Ground dialogue groups have been in collaboration with the CIVICUS Living-Learning Program because of the partnership between the two programs. Based on these criteria, I selected two dialogue groups from the Fall 2009 semester.

The groups I selected focused on the following topics: "Should universities use intentional methods in admissions to achieve greater racial/ethnic diversity in their student populations?" and "Should same-sex couples have the same rights and privileges that are conferred by legal marriage to heterosexual couples?" The dialogue group on intentional methods consisted of 12 students and the dialogue group on same-sex marriage consisted of 14 students. Since the focus of this study was on the students' experience and learning as a result of their participation in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program, I decided not to include Peer Dialogue Leaders as participants in my study.

I sent the two selected groups' participants an email with a brief overview of the study and an invitation to participate in an individual interview about their experience and learning as a result of participating in Common Ground (see Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in Study). After sending the emails, I followed up with participants with phone calls inviting them to participate in the study. Considering time limitations, I utilized convenience sampling in selecting participants whose schedules were most conducive to participation in my study. Nine dialogue participants expressed interest in participating in the study, and I was able to schedule interviews with seven of them. The participants selected expressed interest in a timely manner and had schedules conducive to being interviewed. I discussed the consent form individually with each participant prior to their participation (see Appendix B: Informed Consent Form). The students who participated received incentives through gift cards.

Seven students who participated in the Common Ground Multicultural

Dialogue Program during Fall 2009 were participants in this study. The participants

were identified by the following pseudonyms: Ashley, Elizabeth, Evan, James, Jenny,

Raelyn, and Scott.

In order to protect the anonymity of the participants to the best of my ability, I

decided not to identify each participant with specific demographics. Some of these

demographic characteristics may become evident through selected quotations and

analysis in the following chapters. However, in order to protect the students'

identities as much as possible, I decided to present the demographics of the group in

aggregate while still allowing me to adequately present the findings of my study.

The group consisted of four women and three men. There were five first-year

students and two second-year students; all were members of the CIVICUS Living-

Learning Program during their participation in the Common Ground Multicultural

Dialogue Program in Fall 2009. Three participated in a group on the topic: "Should

same-sex couples have the same rights and privileges that are conferred by legal

marriage to heterosexual couples?" Four participated in a group on the topic:

"Should universities use intentional methods in admissions to achieve greater

racial/ethnic diversity in their student populations?" When asked to describe their

race/ethnicity, one identified as Black/African American, one as Chinese and White,

and five as White/Caucasian. To describe their religious/spiritual affiliation, one

identified as questioning, one as atheist, two as Jewish, one as Baptist, one as

Lutheran, and one as Episcopalian. When asked to describe their sexual orientation,

one identified as homosexual (the term used by the student), one as bisexual, and five

as heterosexual/straight. The demographics of the participants reflected the demographics of the dialogue groups selected through criterion sampling.

Data Collection

Case study research includes extensive data collection from multiple sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell, 2007). In this study, I used two types of data sources: semi-structured individual interviews and documents, which consisted of reflective essays written by the participants about their Common Ground experience.

Interviews. Consistent with the constructivist paradigm, the open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews assumes that the participants have their own unique perspectives and ways of defining the world (Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured interviews are conducted in a conversational manner and include a list of questions, requiring specific information from participants, but also allow for flexibility (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). The integration of more and less structured questions "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 90).

I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with seven participants, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes; the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. At the beginning of each interview, I provided the participant with an overview of the study, reviewed the consent form, and reiterated the use of a digital recorder. The questions focused on the student's experience in Common Ground, perceptions of dialogue on complex topics, the student's approach to dialogue, and learning as a result of participation in the Program (see Appendix C:

Interview Protocol). I also provided participants with the opportunity to select a pseudonym to protect their identity in the study.

Document Analysis. I asked each of the participants to write a short reflection about their experience in Common Ground. I provided a prompt to write about how they experienced the dialogue group and their learning process (see Appendix D: Reflective Essay). Six of the seven participants completed the essays. Since my presence in the dialogue sessions may have altered the environment and participant experience, I used the essay reflections as primary sources of data in that they provided insight into the student's learning with firsthand experience. In addition, the documents provided thick description of participants' experiences during the dialogues (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 2009). "In some ways documents are like observations in that documents give us a snapshot into what the author thinks is important, that is, their personal perspective" (Merriam, 2009, p. 142). The essays were written after the participants' individual interviews. Considering that the study was conducted three months after the students' participation in dialogue groups, the individual interviews assisted in initiating thoughts and reflection on their experiences. Reflective essays allowed the participants an opportunity to describe the dialogue experience in their own way, with the freedom to emphasize aspects of the experience that were significant to them.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is an ongoing process that occurs simultaneously with data collection (Creswell, 2009). The analysis of qualitative data

involves organizing the data for analysis, developing themes to reduce the data through coding, and presenting the data in a discussion (Creswell, 2007).

In case study methodology, data analysis techniques from other qualitative methodologies, such as ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory, can be used (Jones et al., 2006). For this study, I used the constant comparative method of data analysis. Although this method is often used in grounded theory studies, it is used in a variety of qualitative methodologies because "its inductive comparative nature provides a systematic strategy" (Merriam, 2009, p. 31) for analyzing qualitative data. The process of the constant comparative method involves constantly comparing segments of data to develop similarities and differences through line-by-line analysis, categorizing the data, and developing themes and codes (Jones et al., 2006; Merriam, 2009). This method also involves "identifying incidents, events, and activities and constantly comparing them to an emerging category to develop and saturate the category" (Creswell, 2007, p. 238).

In developing tentative themes during data analysis throughout the data collection process, I used the constant comparative method to elaborate, adapt, and expand the themes from the study. The constant comparative method of analysis uses specific coding techniques, open, axial, and selective, in order to provide a rich, thick description of the data (Creswell, 2007). At the first level, open coding, I analyzed the data for major themes or categories. The axial coding process involved identifying a central phenomenon or theme from the open coding process, and then returning to the data to further explore and create categories specific to the core

phenomenon. In the final step of selective coding, a story is developed through interrelating the categories within the model (Creswell, 2007).

I began the data analysis process through open coding (Creswell, 2007). Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. I used the NVivo Software Package for Qualitative Research to code and analyze each transcript, as well as the reflective essays from participants. I began by categorizing the data into themes. This resulted in 41 code words that represented the ways in which participants described their experiences and learning in the Common Ground Program. These 41 code words were constantly revised and adjusted throughout the process in order to more credibly portray the data. This was followed by identifying major ideas among the themes and grouping the data into these broader themes using NVivo. Throughout the coding process, I revisited the interview transcripts and essays to clarify and elaborate on my interpretations. In the final step of coding, I developed a "story" within the themes to illustrate the participants' experiences, learning, and willingness to engage.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the quality or goodness of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this study, I addressed trustworthiness through member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009; Jones et al., 2006; Merriam, 2009). Trustworthiness of a qualitative study involves the confirmability of the interpretation and findings, the reasonable judgment of the researcher considering the topic and circumstances, and the applicability of the study to practice (Jones et al., 2006). In addition, strategies to ensure trustworthiness provide verification that the

researcher "did not reshape the data to merely meet [her or his] assumptions" (Jones et al., 2006, p. 130).

Member Checking

I employed member checking in order to ensure the credibility of the interpretations of the students' experiences (Creswell, 2007; 2009). The process of member checking involved collaborating with the participants by sharing the data, interpretations, and conclusions and allowing them to check for credibility in the analyses (Creswell, 2007). I sent drafts of the case analysis to the participants so that they could respond with feedback on the credibility of my interpretations and address any missing or additional information relevant to the study. Three of the participants responded and said the analysis was a credible representation of their experiences and learning.

Triangulation

I also attempted to ensure trustworthiness through the data triangulation of multiple sources of evidence, including interviews and document analysis (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). The use of multiple sources of evidence in case study methodology creates "converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 2009, p. 115) in which findings and conclusions are illustrated through multiple sources in order to establish the credibility of the researcher's interpretations. According to Yin (2009), the use of multiple sources in a study makes the findings more convincing because the findings can be traced to various forms of information. In this study, I triangulated data across two different sources, including semi-structured interviews and reflective essays.

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing or examination involves individuals external to the study who provide input and reflection on the researcher's work (Glesne, 2006). Peer debriefers review the researcher's interpretations, ask difficult questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations, and provide feedback on the findings (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). The Chair of my thesis committee reviewed drafts of my interpretations of the findings and provided input on my work. I also met with a peer who was external to my research; this person reviewed drafts of my findings and offered an additional perspective and insight into my study.

<div align="center">

Ethics

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Ethical issues are prevalent in qualitative research because of the human relationships involved, specifically during data collection and dissemination of findings (Creswell, 2007; Jones et al., 2006; Merriam, 2009). Participation in the study was voluntary. Although all students in the dialogue groups were invited to participate, each student was free to choose whether or not to take part in the study. I took steps to protect participants' privacy by reviewing a prepared statement of informed consent prior to the interviews and use of their reflective essays. In addition, I had a conversation with each student prior to her or his participation about the confidentiality of the study, as well as the limitations of having a small and potentially identifiable group.

Since the students in this study were part of a small group of CIVICUS students who participated in Common Ground in Fall 2009, I needed to take several steps to protect their identities during the data collection, analysis, and dissemination

stages. The use of pseudonyms chosen by the participants helped to protect the students' confidentiality (Creswell, 2007). I used these pseudonyms throughout the study on all documents, including transcripts, notes, and the thesis. I also masked, as best as possible, personally identifiable information that participants shared during interviews. To address ethical considerations during the dissemination of findings, I maintained a researcher journal throughout the data collection and analysis processes with reflections on my role as a researcher and as a Graduate Coordinator for the Program, as well as my assumptions and biases regarding the Program.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the selection of the participants and the case. All of the participants were part of the CIVICUS Living-Learning Program and completed required courses for the living-learning program. As part of the living-learning program and students in a particular course, the participants are unique in their experience with the content of the dialogue as well as their relationships with each other. This may limit the transferability of the study and findings.

As members of the CIVICUS Living-Learning Program, the participants were predisposed to controversial societal dilemmas and the concept of dialogue as a form of civic engagement. Furthermore, the students had been enrolled in classes together and live in the same residence hall. They had formed relationships with each other and had opportunities to build trust with each other prior to coming into the Common Ground Program. Considering their previous experience with societal issues and civic engagement, as well as the community they have developed, the students present a unique group to study.

The timing of the study also presents a limitation. The data collection was conducted three months after the participants completed the Common Ground program. Although the participants may have had more time to reflect on and incorporate learning from the program into everyday interactions, they also may have had a difficult time recollecting aspects of their experiences in the Common Ground Program.

Another limitation of the study was my role as Graduate Coordinator for the Program and my potential influence on the participants. In conversations prior to individual interviews, I fully disclosed to students the intent of this study, as well as my role within the Common Ground Program. Knowledge of my role within the Program may have influenced participants in what they shared about their experiences in Common Ground dialogue groups.

Role of the Researcher

During the study, I served two roles in relation to the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program: the researcher of this study and Graduate Coordinator for the Common Ground Program. As a staff member for the Common Ground Program, I had a vested interest in presenting the program in a positive light. However, in order to fulfill my role as a researcher, I maintained a researcher journal in which I reflected on my thoughts on the Common Ground Program and my dual role. This assisted me in providing a credible, rich description of the participants' experiences in the Program.

I had been in the role of Graduate Coordinator for the Common Ground Program since July 2009. In my role as a researcher, my potential biases came from

my position, as well as my previous interactions with students who had participated in the Common Ground program. In my previous role as Graduate Coordinator for Human Resources in DRL, I co-taught a class for potential resident advisors. An option for an assignment in the class was participation in a Common Ground dialogue group. Several students in my class participated in Common Ground, and I learned of their experiences through conversations and reflective essays they had written. This initiated my interest in the participant experience of Common Ground.

As the Program's Graduate Coordinator, I organized dialogue groups, recruited Peer Dialogue Leaders, and facilitated consultation meetings with the PDLs. Although I had been in the position for less than a year, it is important that I recognized my potential biases and predispositions and how they may have influenced my role as a researcher. During my undergraduate years, I was heavily involved in a cultural center, and in turn, programs and dialogues about multicultural issues. These opportunities for dialogue are important for students to have and they have significant benefits for students. Participating in dialogues and workshops as an undergraduate student, these opportunities enabled me to develop more self-awareness regarding my social identities and privileges, engaged me in learning about others' perspectives, and caused me to critically think about my own values and beliefs. Although I recognized that dialogue programs differ and that students experience these programs differently, there can be beneficial effects in terms of the students' cognitive development, self-awareness, and perceptions of difficult conversations on multicultural topics. Throughout the process of this study, I

continually reflected on the influence of my own thoughts about and experiences with dialogue.

Summary

In this study, I used a constructivist case study methodology to explore participants' experiences and learning as a result of participating in a Common Ground dialogue group. I used criterion-based and convenience sampling to select seven participants who participated in two particular Common Ground dialogue groups during the Fall 2009 semester. The data collected included semi-structured individual interviews and reflective essays. Using the constant comparative method of data analysis, I analyzed the data for major themes in order to illustrate the students' experiences and learning. Through this study, I hoped to provide a rich, thick description of the participants' experiences and learning as a result of Common Ground, as well as their willingness and ability to engage in future dialogues. In the next chapter, I provide the findings of this study.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings that emerged from the data analysis. In describing their experiences and learning in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program, the participants in the groups on "Should same-sex couples have the same rights and privileges that are conferred by legal marriage to heterosexual couples?" and "Should universities use intentional methods in admissions to achieve greater racial/ethnic diversity in their student populations?" discussed several distinct aspects of their dialogue experience as well as their learning, new perceptions, and behaviors as a result of the dialogue. The first three themes, the Common Ground model, negotiating conflict in dialogue, and relationships between identity, experiences, and perspectives, describe the participants' experiences, perceptions, and revelations during the Common Ground experience. The last two themes, cognitive learning and approaches to dialogue, describe the participants' learning in terms of cognitive development and interactions with peers on multicultural topics outside the Common Ground dialogue group.

The Common Ground Model

Participants emphasized the environment and model of the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program as central to their experiences. In describing the setting, structure, and model of the Common Ground Program, participants reflected on the perceived professionalism of the dialogue. James described the setting as "an academic environment" while acknowledging that it was not a formal class. "There was more of a sense of professionalism where as if we're just hanging out… there's no professionalism. You say whatever you want… But I think Common Ground just

had a very mature, intelligent kind of feeling about it." According to James, the professional and intellectual nature of Common Ground differentiated the program from informal conversations with peers. Elizabeth attributed the "formality" of the setting to the dialogue structure – sitting in a circle, having two "mediators," and obligations to follow, such as speak as "I" and listen to understand. She differentiated Common Ground from informal dialogue in her observations of how participants interacted:

> The first night of Common Ground was potentially the most helpful for me… After we sat down and introduced ourselves, we went over the "rules" of Common Ground and were told how the process worked. It was the first time I sat down and consciously thought about dialogue and really evaluated the effects of what I say has on others… In most every day conversation with friends, we don't usually think twice about other people's reactions.

For Elizabeth, and several other participants, Common Ground provided an opportunity for participants to think about the process of dialogue. All of the participants talked about the concept and structure of dialogue in Common Ground. Elizabeth said that prior to participating, she did not realize that the process of dialogue was the primary focus of Common Ground. "It's less about the topic, more about the concept of dialogue, how you're speaking to each other, how you're interacting, how you realize what you're saying is affecting someone else… I hadn't even thought about it."

According to Raelyn, the structure made the Common Ground dialogue "more focused" and allowed the participants to explore and work through a particular issue.

James elaborated:

> In Common Ground, you know what you're talking about, you think about it
>
> before you go, you want to figure out what you're going to say, and you want
>
> to be informed on the topic… I think the nature of having a very focused
>
> conversation made people just think on a higher level about it.

The focus on a particular topic throughout the four Common Ground dialogue

sessions allowed the participants to explore the topic in-depth, which also initiated

recognition of the complexity of controversial, multicultural issues. Raelyn wrote in

her essay: "Common Ground showed me that there are not just two sides to one

issue." In her reflective essay, Raelyn provided an example of the complexity of

discussing same-sex marriage. She wrote that although everyone in the group seemed

to be for same-sex marriage, the participants did not agree on how it should be

legalized.

> The issue of how gay marriage can be legalized breaks down the "for" side
>
> into many more sides. There are people that want the federal government to
>
> deal with the issue and then there are the people who believe the issue should
>
> stay under the control of the state governments.

Raelyn said that she did not expect more than "one or two different opinions" and

was surprised at how many different opinions the group held in regard to how same-

sex marriage should be legalized.

> Considering the controversy and complexity of the topics, several of the

participants expressed that they did not expect to come to a consensus on the issue.

Scott participated in the group on using intentional methods in admissions to increase racial and ethnic diversity.

> During the first session we had, [the PDLs] told us by the end of it we want you to come to a consensus. I was like there's no way that's going to happen just because I knew people had many different opinions on it, but it actually worked out pretty well. We drew conclusions from all of our opinions and it worked out well. I guess my perceptions weren't really right in that case.

Scott's expectation of not coming to consensus because of differing opinions was common among the study's participants. However, the acknowledgement that consensus was part of the dialogue process influenced how the participants engaged with each other. Elizabeth, who participated in the same group as Scott, emphasized her peers' efforts to understand each other's perspectives during the dialogue sessions.

> One thing that I noticed that doesn't happen in everyday conversation much is how people would paraphrase what others had said in order to clarify what they meant… I think part of this came from the understanding that we were going to have to agree on some of the proposed ideas at the end and we wanted to be clear that we knew what we were agreeing upon.

In order to reach consensus in the Common Ground dialogue sessions, participants adjusted the ways in which they engage in dialogue by being more intentional in listening and asking questions to understand others. In doing so, their perceptions of dialogue changed. Evan said that prior to Common Ground, he had "discounted dialogue as slightly less valuable, or not even valuable, worthless" but the Program

"helped me to realize that dialogue is more beneficial than I had previously thought."

He said he appreciated being able to speak from his own experiences and perspectives

and to learn about others' perspectives and experiences. Elizabeth expressed similar

thoughts on dialogue:

> There's a lot more to dialogue than just two people sitting and talking, or a
> group of people. It's a little concept of turn taking and who should go when,
> and who speaks… you're really listening to each other and you're learning
> about how other people express their views versus just focusing on what
> you're going to say next, what point you're going to make. My point wasn't
> as important as me figuring out what someone else is trying to say and then
> wanting to respond to him rather than just making my point and letting it be.

For Elizabeth, Common Ground initiated her to think more complexly about the

concept of dialogue as a means to understand others' perspectives. The setting,

structure, and model of Common Ground gave participants an opportunity to think

about the concept of dialogue, explore the complexity of a controversial topic, and

engage in dialogue with their peers. The in-depth exploration of these topics also

brought about multiple and, at times, conflicting perspectives through which the

participants had to work in order to reach consensus.

Negotiating Conflict within Dialogue

Participants expressed that they expected more conflict than existed during the

dialogue sessions because of the controversial nature of the topics, the size of the

dialogue groups, and the multiple perspectives they had previously heard from their

peers. Participants described having differing attitudes toward conflict prior to

Common Ground; some were attracted to the Program because of potential controversy, while others were apprehensive about potential conflict with their peers.

Despite their approach to conflict, the participants expected "heated" conflict to arise during the dialogue sessions. In her essay, Raelyn wrote she thought this conflict was inevitable. "The idea of having a discussion with a group of people on a controversial topic such as gay marriage without people screaming at the top of their lungs was so ideal that I didn't expect [a civil dialogue] would be possible." Elizabeth echoed Raelyn's expectations: "I expected there to be more conflict than there was. I thought they were going to be at each other's throats." Elizabeth, along with the other participants, expressed an expectation of a certain type of conflict characterized by anger, lack of civility and consideration for others, yelling, rigidity in perspectives, and heated debate.

The conflict that actually arose during the Common Ground dialogue sessions "wasn't like a vicious thing or malicious thing," according to Scott. "We were very civil about it… No one blew off anyone's opinions as being stupid or not important. I think we all had mutual respect for each other's opinions." Although conflict was present during the dialogue sessions, the respectful nature of the participants' interactions ensured that the conflicts were handled with civility. Scott noted that this civility was also a factor of the composition of the group – that all of the participants were members of CIVICUS and knew each other through courses and living in the same residence hall.

The familiarity the participants had with each other contributed to the civility of the dialogue but also a perceived need to censor oneself. Participants talked about

the influence of the dialogue group's composition on the dialogue process. For some, like Evan, the familiarity made them more comfortable in expressing their views. Evan said that although he used to avoid discussing LGBT issues with people he did not know well, he ranked the same-sex marriage topic first in choosing a Common Ground dialogue group because of the comfort in knowing the other participants. On the other hand, James felt less comfortable:

> In some respect, I felt comfortable saying what I felt because everybody knew me… But on the other hand, I was worried about gossip that could spread around the dorm because we were all close-knit… I felt like from saying something controversial people may have been talking about me afterwards saying, "I can't believe he's saying that, or whatever."

During his interview James said that even though he held this concern in the back of his mind, he still felt he was able to express his views. However, the notion that participants censored themselves because of how others may react was prevalent among the students who participated in this study.

Participants mentioned not wanting to offend others in the dialogue group. Elizabeth observed that there was more censorship in the beginning of Common Ground: "We weren't sure how much you could say, what you wanted to say. You didn't want to offend anyone." She said that as the weeks passed, the comfort of the group members with each other was visible but censorship was still present.

> We censored ourselves less and were more willing to flat out admit things that we did not agree with… I don't think there was ever a point when we didn't censor ourselves at all though… we would've needed a lot more time and to

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have been a lot more familiar with each other to feel comfortable enough to

completely let down the protective shield we put up.

Although the dialogue became more open, participants still felt a need to watch what

they said. Elizabeth stated: "…there's a level of not wanting to stomp on people's

toes. You can step on them but you don't want to stomp on them basically." There

was a level of comfort among the dialogue participants that increased throughout the

Common Ground sessions because of their familiarity with each other in CIVICUS.

This comfort level allowed the participants to bring up controversial opinions, but the

level of comfort was still insufficient in order for students to be more candid in the

dialogue.

The balance of addressing conflict and trying not to offend others by

expressing potentially controversial perspectives was an issue all participants

mentioned. This paradox was illuminated because of the diverse composition of the

groups. The presence of LGBT students in the group on same-sex marriage and

students of color in the group on intentional methods to increase diversity made it

more difficult for some of the participants to express certain perspectives. James

provided an example through his experience in the dialogue group that discussed

same-sex marriage. "In a sense, most students could say whatever they want about

the topic because it doesn't directly affect them, but when our opinions impact a gay

student who's sitting right there, it makes it difficult." The personal nature of the

topic and conversation added a component to the dialogue that enabled students to

think more about how what they said affected others. However, the mutual respect

and civility of the dialogue also helped develop an environment in which participants

could bring up controversial perspectives and not be perceived as being of ill intent. Scott talked about the dynamics of the group on intentional methods:

> There were several minorities in the group, and that made it a little strange at times to bring up a fact about African Americans and there's an African American girl there and you're like you don't want to offend her by saying anything… so I kind of felt that I had to watch what I was saying. That kind of made it more difficult, but at the same time everyone was cool about it so they understood that we're not here to offend anyone.

The structure and setting of Common Ground were intended to create a safe and respectful environment; however, at times, participants were uncomfortable mentioning certain perspectives. Although this discomfort arose from students being exposed to dialogue members' various identities, the diversity of the groups also contributed to the students' learning.

Relationship between Identity, Experiences, and Perspectives

In describing their experiences and learning in the Common Ground Program, participants talked about the role of one's identity and experiences in shaping perspectives. Some of them described ways in which they began to think about how their own perceptions had been shaped by their identities, personal experiences, and upbringing. Elizabeth talked about being from "a small all-girls Catholic high school… in the middle of nowhere" compared to some of her peers who "are coming from much more urban schools in the middle of cities." She attributed her lack of knowledge and exposure to the topic of affirmative action to her experiences.

Similarly, James noted in his essay that the first session of Common Ground prompted him to reflect on how his background influenced his opinion on same-sex marriage:

> There is a certain element of self-growth… When the discussion leaders told us the topic and the angles at which we'd be addressing it, there was a period of a week from the first meeting to the second meeting where I truly reflected on my opinion and searched within myself for a concrete explanation of why I felt that way. I knew that if I was going to take a stance on an issue, I needed to have supporting arguments, and not just a gut feeling. When I decided that I supported gay marriage because of social and family reasons, I felt as though I had accomplished a great deal of growth through my reflection.

Although James was sure of his stance for same-sex marriage, his participation in Common Ground prompted him to think about *why* he felt that way and how he came to believe that same-sex marriage should be legalized so that he could better articulate his opinion to the other dialogue group participants.

In addition to encouraging reflection on one's own perspectives, the Common Ground dialogue process also illuminated and challenged stereotypes or assumptions that participants had about how others would view certain topics. For instance, Ashley assumed that the majority of the group would be against using intentional methods to increase racial and ethnic diversity because the group was predominantly White.

> I thought it was going to be like everybody against it except for me and the one other Black girl [sic] that was in my group… I thought they were all

going to be like, "That's not fair to everybody… Let's just do away with it,"

because they're not the ones that really have to deal with it or think about it,

but it wasn't like that. They were more open-minded and half of them were

for it, more for it than me …It was kind of shocking, because in the media,

TV and stuff, when White people come on and they talk about affirmative

action, three-fourths of them are not for it.

Based on what she had seen of the media's portrayal of affirmative action, Ashley

had presumed that some of her peers would be against it because they were White.

However, rather than having a minority opinion for affirmative action, Ashley found

several of her White peers were also advocates of affirmative action. Her assumption

that the White participants would be against it because they did not "have to deal with

it or think about it" was challenged by the White participants who were for

affirmative action.

Several of the participants mentioned being surprised by their peers'

perspectives. Jenny said she was surprised her friend was for affirmative action

because he was "from a very conservative area." Elizabeth echoed Ashley and

Jenny's surprise in hearing peers who were White express that they were proponents

of affirmative action:

I was surprised by the people who were for it… I had no basis for assuming

they would think one way or another, I just did. It was sort of because you're

White you're going to be against it because it might hurt you... But once I

talked about it, I was like, "Oh yes, you have a really good point there, like we

do need some system." It was interesting that some people feel as strongly as

they do for it when it could have more or less hurt them.

Elizabeth said she had assumed that most of the White participants would be against affirmative action because it could have "hindered" their chances at getting into college. However, she appreciated hearing perspectives advocating for affirmative action, particularly from White students, because "I was exposed to something I wasn't expecting." Through hearing multiple perspectives during Common Ground, the participants were exposed to viewpoints that challenged their assumptions on how and to what extent identity influences perspectives.

In addition, the dialogue brought awareness to how personal experiences and relationships with individuals of different backgrounds can influence perspectives, perhaps more than the individual's identity. For instance, James wrote about learning of a peer's experiences in being from a very conservative background and being a proponent of same-sex marriage.

> Listening to [the participants] talk about how their personal opinions were shaped from their past gave me a deeper insight into them. For example, one girl is deeply religious and admitted that gay marriage is not accepted by her religion. However, her personal experience of seeing a gay student bullied in high school made her realize that an entire group of people was being denied basic rights, and she could not support that.

Stories such as these prompted James to think more about how experiences affect opinions and provided a basis for deeper understanding of his peers and their perspectives.

Learning more about peers' perspectives prompted the participants to shift

their perceptions of their peers. James said, "I felt that it was an eye opening experience in that it made me look at my peers in a different way and enhanced my ability to understand and respect people's opinions." The experiences within the Common Ground dialogue sessions transcended the four sessions; the interactions and learning within the dialogues influenced students' perceptions of each other outside the group as well. Elizabeth noted:

> You do learn things about other people that you never knew, and I think their opinions reflect themselves a bit… It's just interesting to see some people's logic and the way their minds work, and also the way that their experience and life from home has affected their decisions and actions now.

The way in which peers shaped participants' perspectives was a significant part of the dialogue process as well as the students' learning. The participants also recognized a need to ask questions about how individuals' perceptions were shaped in other situations because of the value in learning how their peers developed their opinions. For example, Evan said that it was important to him to "understand where people are coming from because it makes their opinions valid. If your reasons are founded in something other than just superficial support or opposition, then I find that much more meaningful." Knowing the foundation and reasons for others' opinions can lead to more respect for those opinions. Understanding where peers are coming from, Evan noted, can also result in more understanding of the perspective and individual. James said he is less likely to judge someone whose opinion he disagrees with if he knows the reasons and background behind their perspective:

I could easily judge them and be like, "If they don't agree with this, I find

them ignorant," but their past experiences could have shaped their opinion so

they're a different person than me… You can't judge people if they have an

opinion that you might think is wrong, or ignorant, or insensitive. You have to

understand the way they were brought up, maybe the way they've been

shaped in life, you have to understand that. For them, their opinion might be

right. I can't judge anyone based on that.

During the Common Ground dialogue sessions, participants learned about each

other's perspectives and how those perspectives were developed for each individual.

This created a basis for understanding in knowing some of the core beliefs, values,

and experiences that shaped individuals' worldviews.

Cognitive Learning

Participants illustrated cognitive learning through realizing the presence of

multiple perspectives on the dialogue topics rather than framing the topics in a

dualistic way. They also recognized the importance of multiple perspectives in terms

of understanding others' views, formulating opinions, and challenging their existing

opinions. Participants who had strong stances on a topic and those who were not

knowledgeable on the issue of focus emphasized the importance of learning about and

gaining an understanding of multiple perspectives through dialogue. In reflecting on

his learning during the Common Ground experience, Scott said:

An important factor [in] formulating an opinion on something is discussing it

with people who have different opinions than you so you can better shape

your opinion, find a middle ground on it, learn more about it. I learned you

can't go off hearsay, you can't hear something that maybe your parents say and

it seems right. You have to consider the opposing arguments.

Although individuals often learned their opinions from family and community

members, Scott emphasized the importance of challenging these views, exhibiting

critical thinking, and gathering multiple perspectives in order to formulate an opinion

on an issue.

The participants often talked about the importance of dialogue in that it

brought awareness to multiple perspectives and new insight to issues. Ashley, who

started the Common Ground Program strongly for affirmative action, said that

hearing her peers talk about the issue gave her an understanding of why others may

not share her perspective. She said she learned "more about reasons why people

think affirmative action is not always fair. Although I don't agree with them, they

made a lot of good points that actually make sense, the other side that I never really

think about." The Common Ground Program gave Ashley an opportunity to hear

conflicting perspectives and think about the topic through a different lens.

Several of the participants mentioned the importance of dialogue in

formulating one's own opinion on a controversial topic. In her essay, Elizabeth

shared that she "realized how talking it out can lead you to decisions." She said that

prior to participating in the Common Ground Program, she would research issues on

her own through reading about them, formulate her opinion based on what she had

read, and stick to that opinion rather than talking about the issue with others.

It was interesting for me to see the process of conversation, the way the

conversation developed, and just how you can form an opinion by talking to

other people, by hearing things. You don't need to look everything up and
then stick to what you think you know.

Elizabeth's experience in Common Ground brought awareness to the potential
effectiveness of dialogue and hearing multiple perspectives. Ashley expressed
similar learning about the importance of being open to other perspectives, being
flexible with her own opinion, and how others' views influenced her perspectives.
She said Common Ground enabled her to listen to others' perspectives before fully
developing her own "because they make points that I wouldn't have thought about
before so it could change my opinion." Although most of the participants'
perspectives did not change, hearing others' perspectives in the Common Ground
dialogue sessions challenged some of their opinions.

Ashley reflected on her approach to the dialogue throughout the Common
Ground Program and how it changed after hearing others' views on the topic. She
said she was more vocal in the beginning because she wanted her voice and opinion
to be heard. However, her peers' perspectives prompted her to step back, think about
the issue in different ways and "weigh all the options. That's what I didn't do before."
Ashley said she was less vocal in the last sessions of Common Ground because she
did not have the same opinion as when she started. "I took more from the side of
where it might not be fair and I added that with my own opinion, so it kind of altered
a little. I didn't feel the same." Rather, she heard others' perspectives, gained an
understanding of multiple views, and incorporated other perspectives into her own
opinion.

All of the participants talked or wrote about their opinions being challenged in some way. Elizabeth, although acknowledging that she was not knowledgeable on affirmative action, said she had a negative perception of it coming into Common Ground because she felt it "hindered" her in applying to colleges. However, through hearing others' perspectives, reflecting on her perspective and experiences, and learning about others' experiences and why they believed in affirmative action, her opinion shifted.

I do see a need for it that I didn't see before, whereas I felt like I could have come in, like on the first day if you said, "Are you for or against it [affirmative action] raise your hand," I would have said, "I was against it." On the last day, if you would have asked the same question, I wouldn't have said, "I was against it." I would have said, "Reform is one thing, different methods are one thing, but I don't think we can eradicate it all together," which I think is how I felt coming in just because there's a lot of things I had never thought about.

Elizabeth's reflection on the process of learning about different views on affirmative action illustrates critical thinking, openness to others, and the incorporation of multiple perspectives. Hearing opinions that were different from her own compelled her to think more critically and broadly about the issue.

Similarly, Evan said that he was pushed to rethink his perspective on how same-sex marriage should be legalized when his peers disagreed with him. He said he thought that the issue should not be put on the ballot for the public to vote on;

rather, it should be a law passed by the federal government. When some of the dialogue group members disagreed, Evan said:

[I] was compelled to think on whether or not I was okay with thinking people shouldn't have the right to voice their opinions on this issue at the ballot box. But then I found that I'm okay with people being denied the right to vote for that in particular because they elect people to speak on their behalf. There were no massive internal changes in how I felt. I thought it was still interesting because it got me to see the other half of what I was talking about.

Although Evan did not change his opinion, he said that he appreciated that the dialogue helped him gain awareness and understanding of other perspectives.

This desire to understand others and integration of multiple perspectives has also been incorporated into other aspects of participants' daily lives. Scott used the example of political affiliation. He said that he used to be more rigid in his opinions but now finds himself challenging his own perspectives. "I identify as a Democrat and I used to just blow off Republican ideals but now I can respect them and maybe integrate them into mine more so than I was last year." His example of integrating perspectives of two parties that are often perceived as opposites illustrates flexibility in his viewpoints and an increased willingness to understand others.

The participants also expressed a desire to gather multiple perspectives and challenge their own opinions on issues outside the Common Ground Program. Elizabeth talked about reflecting more on what she thought about issues, why she thought a certain way, and how her opinion was shaped. In discussing the importance of multiple perspectives, she said of her own opinion:

…maybe that's just not fully accurate, maybe I should learn more about what other people think. And then at the end of the day, if I still feel the way I did initially, that's fine. But at least I can say I thought it through and talked to other people and saw where they're coming from.

Elizabeth said she had previously researched topics on her own to formulate opinions. Through her experience in Common Ground, she began to value her peers' perspectives in developing her own viewpoints on controversial issues. Scott expressed a similar opinion on seeking out others' perspectives:

I have my opinions, I have my preset notions of things, but I learned with myself that I have to challenge them sometimes because maybe I'm not as open minded as I should be, maybe I haven't experienced enough to have the necessary knowledge to formulate total opinions.

Scott not only alluded to the importance of others' perspectives but also their experiences. He acknowledged that his perspectives were limited by his own experiences and that seeking out and understanding the experiences of others was important in formulating knowledgeable and informed opinions.

Participants expressed shifts in how they thought about and approached controversial issues. The effectiveness of dialogue was a theme throughout the interviews and reflective essays. The participants characterized effective dialogue as being able to speak from their own identities, experiences, and perspectives, learning about others' perspectives and how those perspectives were developed, and a mutual respect and openness in listening and understanding others' perspectives.

Willingness to Engage and Approaches to Dialogue

In reflecting on their willingness and ability to engage in dialogues on controversial topics as a result of the Common Ground dialogues, participants talked about actively seeking others' perspectives, using active listening skills, and having increased comfort and confidence in engaging in dialogue on controversial topics. Elizabeth talked about being more willing to "talk things through" with her peers:

> The other day, I asked some friends a question. I was like, "Am I wrong here? Am I judging this completely wrong?" So, just hearing three other people's perspectives on it, I was more able to form a more educated opinion just by hearing them where they stood and why.

She was able to initiate discussion, gather multiple perspectives, and formulate her own opinion based on what she learned from her friends. Ashley also expressed an increased willingness to listen to others' perspectives. While she was more vocal during the beginning of her Common Ground dialogue experience, she said she was now more flexible in her opinions. Ashley said that if she participated in a similar program again, "I would probably be more vocal at the end, because I would listen. I would say my opinion, but it wouldn't be so strong because I haven't heard anyone else's yet so [my opinion] could change." In her reflection on her experience, Ashley expressed a willingness to listen to others' perspectives as well as the importance of being flexible in her own opinions.

Several of the participants directly talked about listening as a skill they had learned during their Common Ground experience. Raelyn learned "to listen instead of thinking, 'This is what I'm going to say next to refute his idea,' but to actually

listen to hear what they say." Participants developed an intentional effort to listen to others and understand what they were saying. "I gained insight into how we listen and what it means to truly actively listen," Elizabeth wrote in her essay, "I'm more conscious of it now than I was before." In addition to listening to understand others, participants also mentioned other methods of gaining understanding. For example, Evan shared an example from a classroom discussion:

> In one of my discussions, we were discussing terrorism, and some people would say they felt this way about terrorism without really saying why, so it's [Common Ground dialogues] helped me to ask people, "Why do you feel that way?" It's helped me in discussions to understand people's perspectives.

Participants talked about a desire to understand others and utilize listening skills and ask clarifying questions to do so. For some of the participants, their willingness to ask questions of others in order to understand their perspectives was initiated by the example of civil dialogue that led to increased understanding and consensus during Common Ground.

Scott talked about an increased willingness to engage in dialogue because of his Common Ground experience: "… just to see the success of it, to see the way that it kind of made me think about my own opinions more… I think I'm more confident coming into the next dialogue." This confidence in stepping into future dialogues on controversial issues was echoed by several of the study's participants. Raelyn said that prior to her experience in Common Ground, she avoided conflict and discussions on controversial topics.

> [Common Ground] definitely gave me more confidence to actually throw

myself out there, or if I hear someone talking about it, maybe to actually include myself in the discussion rather than just being like, "Oh, I don't want to get into that, that's probably going to get into an argument," but actually taking the time to just sit there and hear their opinions and maybe I'll learn something new.

Talking about controversial issues in groups of peers in a civil manner in Common Ground proved that civil discussions on controversial topics were possible, according to Raelyn. Thus, she developed confidence in her ability to engage in future discussions with others.

Participants also found confidence through reaffirming opinions from their peers in regard to marginalized identities and perspectives. When peers expressed empathy or positive stances and perceptions of topics such as affirmative action or same-sex marriage, the students of marginalized identities described a sense of reaffirmation of their own identities and perspectives. For instance, Evan, who identifies as gay, said his participation in the same-sex marriage group made him more comfortable and confident in talking to others about LGBT issues. "It revealed not only that there was more support for gay issues than I might have suspected but that people understand." Evan's peers' understanding of "gay issues" challenged his assumptions and provided him with a sense of support. "It was reaffirming and reassuring to realize and understand that people had more knowledge and were more comfortable with homosexuality. That allows me to be more comfortable with discussing homosexuality and gay issues with other people." This reaffirmation of

opinions provided participants of marginalized identities with a sense of support and confidence to engage in dialogues on controversial topics.

Their experiences in Common Ground provided an example of how to talk through difficult issues. James said:

> I feel like if I had a one-on-one conversation with someone about a controversial issue, it can work the exact same way that Common Ground did… if there's any difference in opinion whatsoever then I feel like just like in Common Ground, you can lay out everything you think and so can the other person and then you start finding the points that you agree on.

For James, the Common Ground model provided a framework to work through controversial issues and conflicting opinions. Although Common Ground was a structured dialogue program, several of the participants mentioned that components of the model were transferable. James shared an example about a group of CIVICUS students who had participated in different Common Ground dialogue groups; the topic of abortion had come up in conversation and the students talked about the issue using the Common Ground structure. James attributed the mature nature of the dialogue to the students' participation in Common Ground. He also said that he was more willing to engage in dialogue with peers who had participated in Common Ground because of a shared understanding of the purpose and nature of dialogue. Participants talked about integrating learning from the Program into their interactions with peers but also questioned their abilities to recreate the Common Ground environment with peers who had not participated in the Program.

Although there was a level of uncertainty about how to recreate an

environment similar to Common Ground, the participants expressed approaching

dialogue in different ways. These shifts in how the students engaged in dialogue also

helped them "to not necessarily be so critical of people's beliefs," according to Evan.

Rather than approaching dialogue in a dualistic way, the participants talked about a

willingness to be flexible and open to others' perspectives.

> Since then, I haven't really been as combative in arguments, and discussions,
>
> and debates because I feel like now I've been following the approach of this is
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> what I feel, this is why I feel that way…it's helped me to be more descriptive
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> and elaborate in my rationale for believing certain things. And in being more
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> descriptive and elaborate … it makes you more effective, and it, in turn, forces
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> the other person to be similarly elaborate and descriptive.

Evan talked about his approach to dialogue, as well as how this approach influenced

others engaged in the dialogue. The increased willingness to engage and understand

on the part of the Common Ground participants also prompted them to hold their

peers outside these dialogues to higher standards when engaging in dialogue.

Summary

These five themes describe the students' experiences and learning as a result

of their participation in Common Ground, as well as their willingness, ability, and

skills in engaging in dialogue on controversial topics. Through their experiences in

the Common Ground Dialogue Program, the participants thought intentionally about

the concept and potential effectiveness of dialogue, negotiated conflict in dialogue

with peers, and discussed the relationships between identity, personal experiences,

and perspectives. This led to an increased ability and willingness to understand

others' perspectives and a value in challenging one's own opinion. The learning from the participants' Common Ground experiences has been integrated in several ways: proactively seeking multiple perspectives on controversial topics, consciousness of actively listening to others, and an increased confidence in ability to engage in dialogue on controversial topics.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I will present a discussion of the findings. This includes a discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions, as well as a discussion of the findings in relation to relevant literature. I will conclude this chapter with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Restatement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore undergraduate students' experiences as participants in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program. The research questions that guided this study were: (1) How do undergraduate students describe their learning and experiences as participants in Common Ground? (2) How do undergraduate students describe their willingness and ability to engage in difficult dialogues as a result of participating in Common Ground? I utilized a constructivist case study methodology to address these two questions. In the following sections, I discuss the findings in relation to these research questions and relevant literature that framed my study.

Discussion of Findings

Although there is increasing compositional diversity within institutions of higher education (Milem et al., 2005), the opportunity for students to engage in structured, civil dialogue on controversial topics with peers is still rare (Zúñiga et al., 2002). The participants in the present study illustrated the unique nature of their experiences in Common Ground through their interviews and reflective essays. They expressed how their expectations of dialogue were different than their actual experiences discussing contentious issues with their peers. In addition, they

described their perceptions of the effectiveness of dialogue and attitudes toward conflict and finding consensus among multiple perspectives. The findings of this study align with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, demonstrate some inconsistencies in the literature, and illuminate new insights into dialogue programs and diversity education.

Participants' Experiences and Learning

Although there is a significant amount of research on Intergroup Dialogue programs, the majority of these studies emphasize the outcomes of dialogue program participation (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin et al., 2004a; Nagda et al., 2003; Zúñiga, 2003) rather than exploring students' experiences and perceptions of dialogue. A major finding in the present study was participants' perceptions of the Common Ground model and how students can discuss controversial topics in a civil and effective manner. The participants described Common Ground as an "academic environment" characterized by "professionalism" and "a very mature, intelligent kind of feeling." Participants also emphasized how focused and task-oriented the dialogue was and valued the ability to speak from their own experiences during the dialogue sessions. Since the dialogue consisted of sharing their own perspectives, the participants' opinions, experiences, and knowledge were the foundation of the education process. This basis for education is a central component of Freire's (2000) concept of co-intentional education, which relies on students as active participants in the learning process.

The Common Ground Program emphasizes consensus as a goal of the dialogue sessions (Voorhees, 2008). With the intent of finding consensus on a

controversial issue, the participants utilized listening and paraphrasing skills in order to understand their peers' perspectives. In the process of finding consensus, the participants expressed acknowledgement and valuing of others' perspectives, as well as feeling that their voice was heard during the process. Through the process of finding consensus on the dialogue topics, the participants employed concepts of co-intentional education (Freire, 2000) and education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994) by engaging participants' perspectives and experiences as central, relevant, and valuable to the learning process.

The participants spoke extensively about their appreciation of and learning from diverse perspectives; however, the presence of demographic diversity prompted some of the participants to feel the need to censor their opinions. Scholars contend that compositional diversity increases the likelihood of exposure to multiple perspectives (Chang et al., 2004; Gurin et al., 2004a; Milem et al., 2005) and that this cross-cultural interaction can lead to increased acceptance of other cultures, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and social self-confidence (Chang et al., 2006). Although this study's participants expressed these outcomes, censorship was also a component of their experiences. When a student who was perceived as directly influenced by the topic was present in the dialogue, such as a gay student in the dialogue group on same-sex marriage, participants expressed hesitancy in voicing opinions that may have been offensive. Students did not share this same hesitation when referring to a heterosexual student who was a strong advocate for same-sex marriage and may have been offended by the same comment. Rather, the presence of students perceived to be more directly affected by the topic made the dialogue more

"personal" and delicate, according to James. Recognizing that the participants were first- and second-year students and that for many students, college was the first opportunity for meaningful interaction with diverse peers (Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin et al., 2004a), this censorship can be perceived as a desire to be culturally sensitive. In studying Intergroup Dialogue programs, Gurin et al. (1999) and Zúñiga et al. (2002) listed cultural sensitivity as an outcome of dialogue programs, along with increased interpersonal skills and awareness of one's own identity in interactions with peers of different backgrounds.

Considering that most of the research on dialogue programs in higher education focuses on the Intergroup Dialogue model (Voorhees, 2008), the known outcomes associated with dialogue programs are more closely related and applicable to Intergroup Dialogue programs. However, several of these outcomes overlap with the learning described by the participants in this study. Participants expressed recognition of multiple perspectives, increased self-awareness, complex thinking, clarifying beliefs through challenging perspectives, and stereotype reduction, which are also outcomes found in research on Intergroup Dialogue programs (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin et al., 2004a; Khuri, 2004; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001; Zúñiga, 2003).

A major finding in this study, which is consistent with the literature, is students' cognitive development as a result of interacting with diverse peers and participation in dialogue programs (Chang, 2003; Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Gurin et al., 2002; Nagda et al., 2003; Voorhees, 2008). Participants illustrated cognitive development in their recognition of multiple perspectives and challenging their own

opinions based on their peers' viewpoints. This shift from a dualistic mentality in

which answers were absolute to an acknowledgement and validation of multiple

perspectives is a significant step in the cognitive development process (Perry, 1968).

The participants discussed the importance of multiple perspectives in order to

formulate an opinion on a controversial issue. Several of them provided examples of

intentionally talking to peers about issues to gain multiple perspectives and develop

an informed opinion, rather than researching the topic online or adhering to what a

professor or parent said. In Perry's (1968) theory of cognitive development,

individuals shift from relying on authority members to challenging information and

adopting a more invested role in the learning process. Participants articulated

learning multiple perspectives as they listened to their peers' perspectives on the

dialogue topics.

In addition to valuing peers' perspectives, the participants also reflected on

how their own identities and experiences influenced their views on the dialogue

topics. The dialogue was largely based on their "authority of experience" (hooks,

1994, p. 89). This recognition of their own ability to construct knowledge, rather than

relying on authority figures, is part of the cognitive dimension of intercultural

maturity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). The findings of this study also connected

with the intrapersonal dimension of intercultural maturity, which King and Baxter

Magolda (2005) refer to as how individuals' experiences and identities influence their

decisions and how they interpret social identities. In their reflections on their

experience in Common Ground, the participants described coming into the Program

and being prompted to think about how their identity and experiences had influenced

their perceptions and to think critically about their perspective on the dialogue topic.

Several of them also said that they did not expect their opinions to be challenged.

Through the dialogue process, the participants engaged in self-reflection on their

perspectives, explored multiple perspectives, and emphasized the importance of

challenging opinions in order to develop more informed perspectives. The

participants also began to see within-group differences in social identities and were

challenged in their assumptions that social identity group membership determines

opinions. Several participants provided examples, such as White students being

proponents of affirmative action or students from religious and conservative

backgrounds being advocates of same-sex marriage.

The participants talked about their opinions being challenged through hearing

their peers' perspectives and then incorporating multiple perspectives into their own

opinion. They also said that they developed an ability to understand and articulate

other perspectives, even if they did not agree with them. Through their dialogue

experiences, the participants began to see legitimacy in multiple perspectives, which

is a component of the intermediate phase of the interpersonal dimension of

intercultural maturity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

Participants' Willingness and Ability to Engage

Several of the participants said they were more willing to engage in dialogues

on controversial topics because of the example of civil, effective dialogue about a

complex issue within Common Ground. This finding aligns with the existing

literature on Intergroup Dialogue outcomes, one of which is participants being more

likely to engage in informal dialogue on controversial issues with peers (Dessel &

Rogge, 2008; Nagda et al., 2003). In addition to a willingness to engage in dialogue, participants also expressed willingness to listen to and understand others' perspectives. They emphasized the importance of active listening, flexibility in one's own opinion, and gathering multiple perspectives, and provided examples of doing so with their peers outside the Common Ground Program. In discussing these examples, the participants illustrated how they were translating their learning from Common Ground into action beyond the dialogue.

Although findings on Intergroup Dialogue outcomes tend to focus on perceived and actual differences in regard to different social identity groups (Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin et al., 2004b; Zúñiga, 2003), the findings of this study illustrate perceived and actual differences in regard to individuals who hold multiple perspectives. Outcomes of Intergroup Dialogue include reduced anxiety in dealing with differences in terms of individuals' social identities and stereotype reduction about social identity groups (Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin et al., 2004b; Zúñiga, 2003). In this study, participants expressed reduced anxiety in engaging in discussions with individuals who hold different perspectives. While differences in social identities were discussed among the Common Ground participants in their dialogue groups, social identity group membership was not a central component of the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program as it is in Intergroup Dialogue. Rather, this study's participants spoke extensively about being more comfortable and confident in engaging in dialogue with individuals who hold different perspectives with the possibility of conflict within the discussion.

Conflict is a valuable component of dialogue in that it provides participants with an opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion about a complex and controversial issue (Zúñiga et al., 2002). Despite this assertion, several of this study's participants expressed anxiety or hesitation in terms of conflict and were apprehensive about how conflict would be managed among peers when discussing same-sex marriage or affirmative action. However, the participants' experiences differed from their expectations of conflict within the groups; while they expected heated arguments, raised voices, and rigid perspectives, their experience was described more as civil dialogue exploring multiple perspectives. There was conflict of perspectives during the dialogue sessions, but it did not create the uncomfortable environment that several of the participants expected. This finding corresponds with existing literature that asserts that students who engage in dialogue programs are more likely to have a positive perception of conflict in its effectiveness with dialogue due to increased self-awareness and comfort with intercultural interactions (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Gurin et al. 1999).

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, I have developed recommendations for student affairs educators to improve diversity education efforts in engaging students in meaningful dialogue about differences and contentious issues. These recommendations reflect programmatic implications for diversity education, as well as implications for student learning and development.

Several of the students talked about the importance of comfort in their willingness to engage with their peers during Common Ground. Although their

censorship and hesitancy decreased through the duration of the Common Ground Program, the comfort level was not enough for the participants to find censorship unnecessary. In order to establish an environment where participants are comfortable and more willing to voice their perspectives, there should be more time allocated to establish trust and build relationships among the dialogue participants. Students who are not as vocal may benefit from built-in individual reflection time or small group dialogue within the larger group.

Compositional diversity of the dialogue groups brings about the possibility of reaffirming opinions for individuals who belong to marginalized social identity groups, as illustrated by Evan and Ashley in Chapter 4. The dialogue in Common Ground has the potential to bring about empathy and reaffirm individuals' identities, values, and perspectives. Evan illustrated the significance of simply hearing heterosexual students talk about their connections to the LGBT community and being for same-sex marriage in increasing his comfort and confidence in engaging in dialogue with others on LGBT issues. This indicates the importance of the diverse composition of the dialogue groups and reflection on the relationships between identity, experiences, and perspectives. This finding is not only an implication for dialogue programs but diversity education. Meaningful interaction between individuals from different social identity groups can not only increase understanding of multiple perspectives but also reaffirm marginalized students' identities and perspectives. In regard to Common Ground, facilitators should be more intentional in structuring the dialogue so that students discuss the relationships between their identity, experiences, and perspectives on the topic.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the participants' willingness and ability to engage in dialogue as a result of their experience in Common Ground. In describing their perceptions of and new approach to dialogue, several of the participants also questioned the transferability of the Common Ground environment and their ability to re-create that setting in informal interactions with peers. In some ways, the experience in Common Ground was viewed as an isolated experience in civil dialogue. Furthermore, some said that they were more willing to engage in dialogue on difficult topics with peers who had participated in Common Ground rather than those who had not had that experience. James shared why he was more comfortable and willing to engage with other Common Ground participants:

> Without the specific training, and without seeing it in action for four weeks, you don't understand dialogue and that deeper level that I think you do if you participate in a Common Ground. Even if it's self consciously, I just think that you learn to treat controversial issues a little bit differently, you learn to be open to other opinions, and you learn how to find the common ground. So I think that experience definitely helped train us to have better conversations outside of Common Ground.

The Common Ground experience brought about different perceptions of and approaches to dialogue that emphasized listening and understanding when discussing controversial topics. James described this learning process as "training" and differentiated between those who had the experience and those who had not participated in Common Ground. Dialogue facilitators should be intentional in emphasizing transferable skills and provide time for participants to reflect on their

learning and develop ideas to transfer their learning to interactions outside the Common Ground Program.

Recommendations for Research

The limited research on dialogue programs outside of Intergroup Dialogue makes this area rich for future research possibilities. Although this study revealed insight into undergraduate students' experiences and learning in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program, further research is needed in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the components of dialogue that enable, encourage, and empower students to engage in civil dialogue on controversial topics and the learning that results from these meaningful interactions.

Throughout this study, participants discussed components of dialogue that made them more willing to engage, such as comfort with conflict, the civil manner of the dialogue, and knowledge of the topic. Future research should further explore these components. Future studies should explore components that can be part of the structure of dialogue programs, as well as components that the dialogue participants bring with them. For instance, Scott said he was confident in voicing his opinion because he had a strong stance on the topic; Evan viewed his participation in the group on same-sex marriage as valuable because he identified as gay; and Raelyn felt knowledgeable on the topic of same-sex marriage through an LGBT studies course she had taken. All of these students felt a sense of expertise in the topic but in different ways. Future research should explore these sources of confidence and how they influence students' participation.

This study consisted of participants in the Common Ground dialogue groups and did not include Peer Dialogue Leaders. Further research could include the dialogue facilitators as part of the case in order to gain an additional perspective on the case. This inclusion could bring insight into how the participants interact with each other during the dialogue sessions, changing approaches to the dialogue, and skills the participants use in their communication with each other.

The data collection for this study was conducted three months after the students participated in the Common Ground Program. Although this allowed time for the participants to reflect on their experiences and incorporate their learning into other aspects of their lives, a study that follows the participants more closely over a period of time could provide a more in-depth description of the students' experiences and process of learning. For instance, one of the findings of this study was the participants' perceptions of dialogue. A study that incorporates interviews prior to and after the students' participation in the Common Ground Program could provide a more comprehensive description of students' learning. In addition, a longitudinal study that includes data collection immediately after and at multiple points following the Program could provide insight into how students incorporate their learning over time.

Although Common Ground is not as focused on identity as Intergroup Dialogue, this study revealed that the influence of identity, personal experiences, and backgrounds was significant in participants' experiences. Studies on Intergroup Dialogue programs have explored whether there are different experiences and outcomes for White students and students of color within dialogue programs (Dessel

& Rogge, 2008; Gurin et al., 1999). Further research should focus on how one's identity influences their experience and outcomes in the Common Ground Program, as well as students' learning about social identity groups.

The participants in this study frequently mentioned the structure, setting, and environment of the Common Ground dialogue sessions, describing it as professional, intellectual, and focused. They emphasized the value in learning from their peers and said that this experience was a rare opportunity for them to engage in focused, civil dialogue on a controversial issue with their peers. Considering that a student's peer group is the most influential factor on students' cognitive and affective development (Astin, 1996), future research should further explore the students' learning from their peers. Common Ground's sole use of undergraduate students as facilitators should also be explored in relation to the significance of peer interaction and learning. How does the peer-led aspect influence the content and dynamic of the dialogue, students' willingness to engage, and students' learning as a result of their experience? Future research should seek to understand the significance of the peer-led aspect of the Common Ground Program.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore students' experiences and learning in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program, as well as how the students described their willingness and abilities to engage in dialogue on controversial topics as a result of their experiences. The findings revealed participants' positive perceptions of effective dialogue and new approaches to difficult dialogue that emphasize understanding and recognition of multiple perspectives. The seven

participants in this study illustrated cognitive development in their desire to understand others, initiative in incorporating multiple perspectives to formulate informed opinions, and valuing the importance of challenging their own opinions and beliefs. The meaningful interaction with peers through the Common Ground Dialogue prompted them to reflect on how their perspectives had been shaped by social identity and personal experiences, as well as challenge assumptions they had made based on others' identities. The experience they had in engaging in civil dialogue on a controversial topic provided them with increased comfort and confidence in engaging in these types of dialogues outside the Common Ground Dialogue Program.

The findings of this study contribute to the literature on dialogue programs and diversity education. The implications for practice include intentionality in the structure of dialogue programs to incorporate trust-building among the participants, self-reflection, reflection on students' learning throughout the experience, and how the learning can be transferred to interactions outside the dialogue programs. The recommendations for research suggest future study to further explore participants' experiences through a longitudinal study for a more in-depth understanding of students' learning and outcomes, the connections between students' identities, experiences, and perspectives, and the significance of peer interaction within the dialogue program.

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in Study

Dear [Insert Student's Name],

As a participant in a Common Ground dialogue group during Fall 2009, I invite you to participate in a research study exploring dialogue programs. The purpose of this study is to explore students' experiences and learning as a result of participating in Common Ground. Of particular interest to this study is how students describe their willingness and ability to engage in discussions on multicultural topics after participating in Common Ground.

The study will be conducted during the Spring 2010 semester. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a short reflective essay on your experience in Common Ground and participate in a 60-90 minute individual interview. The data collection will also include the participant evaluations that were completed during the last session of your Common Ground group. If you are interested, I can send you some of the initial questions in advance. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym for the study and your confidentiality will be protected as much as possible.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose not to participate at any time. If you are interested in participating, please send me an email at nmehta@umd.edu to confirm your interest. I will then send you a prompt for the reflective essay and schedule a time for us to meet for an individual interview. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Nicole Mehta
Master's Student, College Student Personnel Program
Graduate Coordinator, Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program
(301) 314-4276
nmehta@umd.edu

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Project Title	Understanding Student Experiences and Learning in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program: A Case Study
Why is this research being done?	This is a research project being conducted by Nicole Mehta at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you participated in a Common Ground dialogue group selected for this study. The purpose of this research study is to explore students' experiences and learning as a result of participating in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program.
What will I be asked to do?	You will be asked to complete one written essay and participate in an individual interview. The individual interviews will be documented through the use of digital audio recording and researcher notes. The total expected time for your participation will be 3 to 4 hours. You may also be contacted after the interview to assess the accuracy of the researcher's notes and to provide feedback on preliminary research results.
What about confidentiality?	I will do my best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, you will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used during the transcription of the interviews and analysis. Through the use of the pseudonym, I will be able to link your data to your identity. I will be the only one with access to the identification key. Data and notes will be kept in a secured location and I will remove any personally-identifiable information from essays and transcripts if requested. If I write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible.
	Considering the small number of participants in this study, there is a possibility that some of the data may not be completely anonymous due to unique identifying information associated with the individual. In order to alleviate this concern, you will have the opportunity to read the final report and add, delete, or correct any statement attributed to them.
	This research project involves creating digital audio recordings of your interview. The digital audio recording, accompanying notes, and transcriptions will be kept on my password protected computer. ☐ I agree to be digitally recorded during my participation in this study. ☐ I do not agree to be digitally recorded during my participation in this study.
	Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if I am required to do so by law.

Project Title	Understanding Student Experiences and Learning in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program: A Case Study
What are the risks of this research?	There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.
What are the benefits of this research?	This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about participants' experiences and learning in the Common Ground Program. This study will provide data on the experience of participants in the Common Ground Program from a perspective to improve practice and contribute to the existing scholarship on dialogue programs. In the future, other students may benefit from this study through improved understanding of the participants' experiences and learning as a result of the Common Ground Program.
Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. If you withdraw from the study, I will destroy transcripts, digital recordings, and notes of your data.
What if I have questions?	This research is being conducted by Nicole Mehta in the Department of Counseling and Personnel Services at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Nicole Mehta at: The University of Maryland, 2101 Annapolis Hall, (301) 314-4276, or nmehta@umd.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: **Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) irb@umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678.** This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.
Statement of Age of Subject and Consent	Your signature indicates that: • You are at least 18 years of age; • The research has been explained to you; • Your questions have been fully answered; and • You freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.

Name: _____   Date: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Date: _____

Pseudonym: _____

Welcome individual and thank her/him for participating.

Review Informed Consent Form that they have signed. Emphasize:
- Confidentiality
- Use of pseudonym (Ask participant to choose a pseudonym)
- Recording of interview
- Voluntary participation
- Freedom to discontinue participation, ask questions, decline to answer questions.

Ask participant if she/he has any questions.

Explain nature of interview – series of questions, no right or wrong answers, interested in participant's perspectives.

Questions:

1. Why did you decide to participate in the Common Ground Program?
   a. What were your perceptions of the program?
   b. What were your thoughts on the topic of the dialogue?

2. Tell me about your overall impressions of participating in Common Ground.
   a. What stood out for you? What challenged you? How did you feel during the dialogues?

3. What were your expectations of the Common Ground Program?
   a. How was your experience similar to your expectations of Common Ground? How was it different?

4. What was it like to discuss [insert dialogue topic] with your peers?

5. What did you learn from the other students in the group?

6. What did you learn from your experience in Common Ground?
   a. (Probe students on dialogue content, perceptions of self, approach to and perceptions of dialogue)

7. What assumptions, beliefs, or values were challenged during the dialogues?

     a. How did it feel when your own assumptions, beliefs, or values were challenged?

8. Tell me about your thoughts on dialogue and its usefulness.
     a. (Probe about perceptions of conflict within dialogues)

9. How has your perception of dialogue changed as a result of Common Ground? How was your approach to dialogue changed?

10. How has your experience affected your willingness to engage in dialogues on multicultural topics?

11. How have you used what you learned outside of Common Ground?
     a. i.e. with friends or family, in your job, classes?

12. Is there anything else about your experience in Common Ground you would like to share that I did not ask you?

Appendix D: Reflective Essay

The purpose of this essay is to reflect on your experience and learning as a participant in the Common Ground Multicultural Dialogue Program during Fall 2009. Please write 2-4 pages on your experience and learning in Common Ground, using the following questions for guidance.

- How would you describe your experience participating in a Common Ground dialogue group?

- What did you learn (e.g., about yourself, others, the topic) as a result of participating in this dialogue group?

- What did you learn about the process of dialogue?

- Describe any challenges you encountered, either for yourself or with regard to the group.

Please return essays to Nicole Mehta at 2101 Annapolis Hall or email to nmehta@umd.edu.

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