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## Understanding Social Justice Through a Living-Learning Program

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FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH A LIVING-LEARNING PROGRAM

By

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Michael and Stella Bukanc,  
who first taught me the power of small acts leading toward big change.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Cory,  
who not only supported me through this process, but also continues  
to teach me new ways of exploring and combatting inequality and injustice  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of knowledge on social justice learning outcomes in higher education and address the gap in the literature on students' perceptions of their own learning. Specifically, it explored transformative learning in regards to inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups for undergraduate students participating in a social justice living-learning community at a university in the Southeast. In doing so, the study provided a greater understanding of the complexity of how students learn social justice concepts such as oppression and privilege, which may lead teachers and practitioners to consider expanding tools for guiding students. Further development on effective facilitation and teaching may lead to students' increased skills in working with others in different settings as well as combating social inequality.

Thick and rich description of student transformative learning was provided through a qualitative case study approach. The case was bounded by the social justice leadership course and events within the program as well as by the 30 student participants. Data collection included two individual interviews for 15 students, a group interview comprised of three students, participant observations of 21 class meetings and two co-curricular programs, and assessment program documentation.

Findings included five themes: (a) understanding difficult concepts; (b) discussion as learning; (c) resistance; (d) change; and (e) social justice in action. Through these themes, students transformed their learning by navigating difficult concepts and making new meaning of them and challenging their own long-held beliefs. Results from these findings suggest educators consider the following: seek an understanding of complex concepts; explore resistance; facilitate dialogue for students to share their stories; and practice what you preach.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Higher education offers a multitude of benefits which reach beyond the economic realm. Research has shown benefits in terms of increased contributions to civic engagement through voting, volunteerism, community service work, charity giving, and diversity interaction (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Bowen, 1977, 1997; McMahon, 2009; Perna, 2005; St. John & Asker, 2003; The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998). These benefits directly relate to social change and justice as they involve the betterment of others and combating social issues. Increased attention toward justice goals is evidenced by initiatives to increase diverse enrollment (Adelman, 2006; Carey, 2008; Engle & Theokas, 2010), expand multicultural and diversity coursework (Banks & Banks, 2007), as well as social justice service and learning programs (Fuentes et al., 2010). Through an examination of learning within multiple class settings as well as within co-curricular programs and workshops and informal interactions (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002), diverse perspectives can be brought to light. In addition, studying diverse perspectives may lead to a greater understanding of the underlying forces which support unequal power dynamics which, in turn, may empower students to take further action to instigate change. Diverse perspectives of social inequality may include white privilege and experiences as a student in a targeted category.

Given the importance of social justice research in higher education, it is necessary for educators to explore how students engage and learn about social justice concepts. Social justice learning environments often emphasize critical discourse, interaction, and self-reflection (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Fuentes, Chanthongthip, & Rios, 2010). Thus an exploration should not only include an examination of student engagement within an

academic course setting, but should also examine co-curricular environments. Studying how students learn about social justice is not only important to gain a better understanding of complex issues in higher education, it is also useful in determining effective courses of action to achieve social justice goals for those who experience inequality and oppression. Social justice goals include providing equitable access to education, combating prejudice on campus and in the workplace, and creating collaborative environments where community members feel safe to engage in thoughtful conversations about issues related to oppression, diversity of experiences and power dynamics (Adams, et al., 2007; Alvarez, 2009; Baughman & Bruce, 2011; Hurtado et al., 2010; Jayakuma, 2008; Misra & McMahon, 2006). Identifying how social justice learning is being incorporated in and outside of the classroom may lead to new initiatives and practices which can expand students' learning experiences on campus. Specifically, a close review of how students develop competencies in interacting with individuals from different backgrounds may lead to combined efforts to effectively address inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups.

Although expansions have been made in implementing required courses, orientation workshops, diversity trainings, and other programs designed to address inequality and discrimination, these topics still remain relegated to the sidelines. As Lechuga, Clerc, and Howell (2009) emphasized, "(b)ecause a college or university campus is an educational community, it is not reasonable to expect students to bear the challenge of diversifying a campus and engaging in social justice issues on their own" (p.232). Instead, practitioners need to examine issues related to diversity and social justice while assisting students in navigating the process toward social change.

This chapter will provide an overview of the factors related to learning social justice. The chapter will include the purpose and nature of the study, statement of the problem, and the research questions. Operational definitions of social justice, diversity, transformative learning, and living-learning community will be explained. In addition, a brief review of the significance of the research will be included, which will be more fully explored in the literature review. The chapter will close with a summary of key points and an outline of the remaining chapters.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Social justice goals include providing equitable access to education, combating prejudice on campus and in the workplace, and creating collaborative environments where community members feel safe to engage in thoughtful conversations about issues related to oppression, diversity of experiences, and power dynamics. The existing literature has primarily centered on teaching and facilitating social justice (Ayers et al., 1998; Adams et al., 2007; Fuentes et al., 2010). In order to gain a better understanding of complex issues in higher education it is important to examine how students learn diversity and social justice. This study contributed to the body of knowledge on social justice learning outcomes in higher education by examining the nature of student perceptions of their learning about social justice concepts. Thus, this study addressed the gap in the literature on social justice in higher education about students learning social justice. Furthermore, this examination is also useful in determining effective courses of action to achieve social justice goals.

### **Research Questions**

Specifically, the central question for this qualitative case study asked:

1) What is the nature of transformative learning in regards to inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups for undergraduate students participating in a social

justice living-learning community at a university in the Southeast? Included are four sub-questions:

- a. In terms of transformative learning, how are students challenging their own long-held beliefs about social justice concepts?
- b. How are students making new meaning of these differences as they communicate and engage with their peers and faculty?
- c. How are students making meaning of social justice in terms of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups?
- d. How are students resisting learning and how does working through resistance foster learning?

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a qualitative instrumental case study design. The study focused less on the case itself (the living-learning community), and instead, examined how students learned about social justice through participating in the program. The research paradigm followed a social constructivist perspective by recognizing both the researcher and the study participants play mutual roles in the research (Creswell, 2007). There is no one essential way to view ideas and concepts related to the phenomenon under investigation. According to Merriam, (2009) “research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives” (p.1). In contrast to quantitative questions which propose hypotheses to be tested, qualitative questions are open-ended and are used to study phenomenon. In addition, although questions and pre-coding are designed prior to the study, qualitative research encourages emerging themes which will not be discovered until the researcher delves into the data through interviews, observations, and



analysis. This study focused on the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings individuals assigned to their learning about and understanding of social justice. This study increased an understanding of how students learned about social justice.

### **Problem Statement**

Programs in and outside of the classroom have been used to teach students about diversity and social justice (Adams et al., 2007; Adams et al., 2000; Denson & Chang, 2009; Ford & Malaney, 2012; Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin-Sands, Gurin, Nagda, & Osuna, 2012; Hu & Kuh, 2003); however, students may not be gaining a deeper and more complex understanding of the concepts. This problem impacts all higher education students since a lack of understanding and skills related to interacting with individuals from different backgrounds may lead to conflicts in the workplace (Alvarez, 2009; Baughman & Bruce, 2011; Hurtado, Newman, Tran, & Chang, 2010; Jayakuma, 2008; Misra & McMahon, 2006), as well as limited effective action toward social change (Dugan, Komives, & Segar, 2008). There are many possible factors contributing to a deficiency of student learning on diversity and social justice. One highlighted factor in the research is resistance (Rozas & Miller, 2009; Young, Mountford, & Skrla, 2006). Resistance took the form of ignoring or shutting out ideas oppressive forces that serve to benefit one group over another. Another potential factor is the differences in the way individual students define diversity and social justice (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Fuentes et al., 2010; Howard, 2011; Young et al., 2006). There appears to be a gap in the literature on student perceptions of their own learning on social justice. An examination in this realm can provide a greater understanding of the complexity of concepts such as diversity and social justice and may lead teachers and practitioners to consider using alternative ways to guide students.

## **Philosophical Assumptions and Interpretive Framework**

The phenomenon under study focused on transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990, 2000, & 2003; Young et al., 2006) of social justice concepts. The study examined student perceptions of their learning in a social justice living-learning community at a large Research I University in the Southeast. The broader context for this study arose out of literature and research on learning outcomes related to social justice and diversity. Given the terms social justice and diversity are often interchanged, this section includes an explanation of each. Key concepts related to the study are discussed below.

### **Social Justice**

A common theme in social justice theory related to higher education is the idea that social inequality exists and there is a need to create change in order to combat inequality and oppression. Many articles and books are dedicated to promoting social justice, training teachers, and creating activities for inside and outside of the classroom (Adams, et al., 2007; Adams, Blumenfeld, Castaneda, Hackman, Peters & Zuniga, 2000; Gewirtz, 1998; Lechuga, et al., 2009; North, 2006).

For the purpose of my study, the term social justice incorporated Rawls' (1971) definition of justice with Gewirtz' (1998) and North's (2006) expanded conceptualization. Resting on the notion of justice as the fair distribution of goods, rights, and duties, Rawls (1971) identified two principles of justice: 1) an equal right to liberty and 2) social and economic opportunities open to all. More recent works expanded on Rawls' description of justice and included discussion of the values and perspectives of individuals, as well as ideologies of groups (North, 2006), issues related to power dynamics and inequality (Gewirtz, 1998), as well as the notion that social

justice is “both a process and a goal” (Bell, 2007, p.1). Social justice assumes problems exist (here, social inequality) and need to be addressed through learning, understanding, and acting.

## **Diversity**

The specific problem within social justice this study examined involved social inequality. The concept of diversity is useful since it helps to explain not only differences of experiences in terms of gender, gender; ethnicity; socio-economic status; religion, ability/disability; sexual orientation, etc., but also social inequity between different groups. Learning about different groups and social inequity can be augmented by actual interactions between individuals from different backgrounds (Gurin et al., 2002).

Diversity in higher education often pertains to the student population, as well as to the make-up of faculty and staff and the campus climate or culture. Student, faculty and staff population diversity variables include but are not limited to: gender; ethnicity; socio-economic status; religion, ability/disability; and sexual orientation. Campus climate or culture often refers to the perceived mission of the institution as well as campus initiatives and educational outcomes (Hurtado et al. 2010). In addition, critical theorists discuss diversity as it relates to oppression, power and social justice and the importance of identifying strategies for combating inequality (Adams, et al. 2007).

Using both a review of the literature and assessment data from the University of Michigan, Gurin (1999) identified three components of diversity impacts. Structural diversity related to the number of diverse students on campus. Classroom diversity involved content knowledge learned from exposure to diverse populations in the classroom. Informal interactional diversity involved dialogue outside of the classroom amongst individuals from different backgrounds. Studies have focused on activity programs designed to increase a student’s

understanding of race relations, effects of diversity training on attitudes toward diversity and designing strong assessment models to determine if role-playing and immersion styles are more effective for students in learning diversity competencies (Gurin-Sands et al., 2012); Lechuga, et al., 2009; Muthuswamy, Levine, & Gazel, 2006; Schmidtke, Badhesha, & Moore, 2008).

Learning about diversity toward the social justice aim of combating inequality can also occur through reading texts and participating in interactive programs (Hu & Kuh, 2003; Fuentes et al., 2010; Young et al., 2006).

### **Transformative Learning**

A leading academic and author on transformative learning, Mezirow (1990, 2000, 2003) provided thick description of transformative learning as an active process involving self-reflective and critical thinking. Drawing from critical theory, particularly Habermas' (1984) conceptualization of communicative learning, Mezirow highlights the way in which transformative learning involves questioning and evaluating so-called absolute truths. For transformative learning to occur, the learner must “negotiate his or her own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings” (p. 10).

Mezirow (2000) emphasized the direct connection between transformative learning and social justice: “(f)ull development of the human potential for transformative learning depends on values such as freedom, equality, tolerance, social justice, civic responsibility, and education” (p.16). In addition, transformative learning involves recognition of a problem to be solved (Mezirow, 2000).

### **Communicative Learning**

Communicative learning (Mezirow, 2000) is an important component of transformative learning. For the purpose of this study, communicative learning was used as the framework to

understand how students communicated with and learned from others, as well as how they challenged their own previously adopted belief system. This concept of learning lends itself well to an understanding of social justice since social justice involves working and learning with others, as well as challenging and critiquing long-held beliefs which serve to maintain power structures. Mezirow (2000) listed communicative learning as one of the two specifications of transformative learning. Characterized as multifaceted and transformative, communicative learning incorporates both personal beliefs and socially constructed meanings (Mezirow, 1990, 2000; Young et al., 2006). At a basic level, communicative learning is defined as “understanding what someone means when they communicate with you” (Mezirow, 2003, p.59).

### **Living-Learning Community**

A living-learning community program was chosen for the purpose of this study since it has the potential to engage students in learning within the classroom, co-curricular settings, as well as within spheres of informal interactional experiences (such as a spontaneous conversation in the shared residence hall). Learning communities have been characterized as intentional shared experiences outside of a classroom setting (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Lichtenstein, 2005). Living-learning or residence learning communities have the additional characteristic of a shared living experience in a campus residence hall where students may attend classes and workshops, and engage in informal conversations together. A social justice living-learning community program offered the opportunity to explore the issue of social inequality through interactions between diverse students who participated in the program. The program also allowed students to examine issues related to diversity and social inequality through the use of course literature, guest speakers, and workshops.

## **Significance of the Study**

The role social justice plays in higher education has received increased attention as evidenced by the substantial literature on minority enrollment and retention (Adelman, 2006; Carey, 2008; Engle & Theokas, 2010) and assessing the positive impact of diversity on campus (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado et al., 2010). In addition, support for diversity is often included in institution mission statements and promoted through campus initiatives (Herzog, 2010; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 2010). Practitioners and researchers have also examined diversity in the workplace related to building competencies for understanding the global climate, effectively communicating with individuals from different backgrounds, and managing conflict when differences arise (Hurtado et al., 2010; Jayakumar, 2008; Misra & McMahon, 2006). While these studies provided valuable data and tools for understanding the impact of diversity on campus, little research has examined student perceptions of social justice concepts related to diversity.

Student affairs practitioners have the unique position of facilitating social justice learning activities that occur outside the classroom, where interactive dialogue, self-reflection, and critical-thinking may lead to transformative learning. Yet, in order to facilitate such programs effectively, practitioners must better understand how students learn about inequality and oppression. This study may not only provide insight into how to introduce social justice concepts to students but may also offer facilitators a greater understanding of how their interactions with students are situated in a larger context where power and positioning are at play. Not only is social justice difficult to navigate, discussing inequality and oppression may cause uneasiness to students since new ideas may challenge firmly held beliefs about democracy and freedom, which are sources of pride for many North Americans. However, resistance may actually serve an

important function in transformative learning (Young et al., 2006). When facilitating programs, student affairs practitioners may find it useful to keep in mind that although students may begin to question their belief-systems, resistance could arise even if the students are actively engaged in social justice.

The current study sought to help fill this gap by examining student perceptions of their own learning. In doing so, it provided a greater understanding of the complexity of concepts, such as diversity and social justice which may lead teachers and practitioners to consider using innovative ways to guide students. More effective facilitation and teaching may lead to students' increased skills in working with others in different settings (i.e., work, studies, civic engagement) as well as combating social inequality.

### **Summary**

Research on social justice and diversity in higher education is growing. However, a closer examination of students' learning about social justice is lacking. This study attempted to address this gap by exploring student learning through a social justice living-learning program. The study was designed to shed light not only on how students make sense of the intersecting relationships between diversity and social justice but also on how they best learn these concepts. In the process, the study may provide educators and practitioners with useful strategies for creating or expanding existing programs.

This qualitative case study approach provides thick and rich description to better understand the varied experiences of student learning of complex concepts related to diversity and social justice. The preceding review of key terms provided context for the phenomenon under investigation. The following chapter further describes the important roles of diversity and social justice in higher education through a review of the literature. The literature review outlines

five main areas in the literature connected to my study: expanding terminology and theory; transformative learning; benefits of diversity; teaching and learning about social justice through curricular and co-curricular programs; and the intersection of leadership and social justice. The methods chapter details the research design, data collection, role of the researcher, and data analysis. Chapter four and five provide the findings of the study and chapter six reviews the findings and their implications for practice and further research. Appendices include consent forms, interview and observation protocols, demographic questionnaire, and institutional review board approval documentation.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literature on diversity and social justice in higher education has focused on expanding terminology and theory, examining the benefits of diversity on campus, and promoting learning activities for teaching social justice. Less attention has been paid to evaluating the effectiveness of different learning activities both in and outside of the classroom. Recent literature specifically noted the importance of conducting further studies to evaluate the effectiveness of different social justice learning activities (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Cochran-Smith, Reagan, & Shakman, 2009). The current study examined student perceptions of their own learning. This study provided a greater understanding of the complexity of concepts such as diversity and social justice and may lead teachers and practitioners to consider using alternative ways to guide students.

Qualitative studies have provided the rich, thick description to help understand issues of social justice and equity, while quantitative studies have measured the value of programs utilized to promote and teach social justice. The following sections outline five main areas in the literature connected to my study: expanding terminology and theory; transformative learning; benefits of diversity; teaching and learning about social justice through curricular and co-curricular programs; and the intersection of leadership and social justice.

#### **Expanding Terminology and Theory: Social Justice in Context**

Leading thinkers on justice and social justice framed their writings in opposition to current social crises of the times (Counts, 1969; Dewey, 1916). In education, the roots of social justice can be traced to the progressive movement and the social reconstructionists. John Dewey (1916) spoke specifically to the idea of education and its relationship to strengthening

democracy. In this sense, education not only offered tools for students to become skilled and proficient in different areas of study, but also to question policies and political practice and to become an active participant in social change. A leader in the progressive movement, Dewey's (1916) political and philosophical work gave voice to future reform initiatives and the promotion of social justice and civic engagement in education.

For Counts (1969), education reform needed to focus on social welfare with a particular examination of power dynamics in the context of class inequality. Although criticism and debate ensued between and amongst the social reconstructionists and progressive theorists, some common themes remained. Stanley (1992) pointed to two specific commonalities: one, schools should contribute to the "reconstruction of society" (p.48) and two, the "school should have a definite social orientation" (p.49). Although political agendas differed, both movements addressed the importance of curriculum and institutional reform in order to create an atmosphere where students would move beyond passive recipients of social change.

More recent research on social justice has focused on promoting active and efficient change to combat inequity and oppression, which includes training students and teachers, and creating activities for inside and outside of the classroom (Adams et al., 2000; Adams et al., 2007; Gewirtz, 1998; Lechuga et al., 2009).

### **Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy**

Given courses on diversity and social justice have utilized critical theory and critical pedagogy to help students understand concepts of oppression and power (Bell, 2007; Cabrera, 2012; Closson & Rhodes, 2011; Quaye, 2012b), it is useful to briefly explore critical theory. In addition, critical theories provide the theoretical framework for my study. They offer tools to analyze and critique dominant ideology and a framework to identify and discuss relationships of

power, subject versus object, notions of universal truth and objectivity, and the complexity of oppression (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Gramsci & Buttigieg, 1992; Habermas, 1995).

Critical feminist theory, critical race theory (CRT), and queer theory broadened earlier critical theory writings to include the importance of lived experience based on gender and race. Whereas critical theory relies heavily on class experiences, critical race and critical feminist race theory points to the ways in which class relationships do not always explain gendered and racial experiences. Here, power relationships are identified, the intersecting and pervasive nature of oppression and inequality are explored, and examples of inequality are expressed through personal stories.

This section describes Solórzano's (1998) five crucial elements of CRT related to educational research (see also Matsuda et al., 1993, Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Although focused on race, these tenants are useful for capturing the ways in which dominant ideologies appear fixed and are difficult to challenge. The tenants can be applied to other areas of social identity in providing a conceptual model for helping to understand the challenges students may face when learning complex concepts related to inequality and oppression. The first notes how race and racism interact with other forms of subordination, such as gender and class discrimination. Oppression must be understood through examining the differing (and sometimes competing) ways social identity is constructed. Second, CRT challenges the notion of pure objectivity. It further rejects the belief and promotion of colorblindness since this belief distracts from the reality of dominant groups benefitting from their racial identities and minoritized groups suffering under the oppressive system. Challenging the dominant ideology involves exposing masks over power and oppressive relationships. Third, CRT is committed to social justice toward the aim of eliminating the subordination of minoritized groups.

Fourth, CRT utilizes personal lived stories to express the realities of racial inequalities and oppression. These are particularly useful in highlighting oppressive experiences which go unnoticed by dominant groups and in creating space to “challenge the universality of assumptions made about people of color” (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009, p.391). Fifth, CRT places emphasis on utilizing different disciplines and methods to help understand experiences of minorities as well as situating experiences in historical contexts.

Taking their cue from critical theory, critical pedagogy was developed in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Critical pedagogy is particularly relevant to educators as it examines the roles of power, knowledge, and ideology within education. Writers examined social inequality within education while simultaneously exploring and critiquing critical theory and its ability to explain inequality. Freire (1970) questioned a universal concept of knowledge and examined the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. His thoughtful analysis on the intersecting roles between education, teachers, and students have been highly influential to the study of social justice in higher education. Encouraged by Freire’s (1970) focus on an examination of power relationships (often between student and teacher/administration) and empowerment, Henry Giroux (1985) asked educators to:

develop a discourse that can be used to interrogate schools as ideological and material embodiments of a complex web of relations of culture and power, on the one hand, and as socially constructed sites of contestation actively involved in the production of lived experiences on the other (p.23).

Apple (2004) urged educators to give careful thought to the intricate ways education intersects with economic, political, and cultural power dynamics, which are crucial to a broader societal understanding of power and inequality. Again, the idea of knowledge as socially constructed rather than objectively attained remains a key concept. In addition, writers of critical pedagogy

focused attention not only on systems of control and the ways in which ideology is constructed but also on individual stories and the lived experiences of those who are oppressed.

**Resistance.** Brookfield (2005) drew connections to key critical theory concepts such as hegemony, ideology critique, power, and praxis. Through his writings on critical theory, Brookfield (2005, 2006) highlighted the role of resistance, stating, “my experience has taught me that the one fact on which I can depend in this work is that students will resist, often quite strongly” (p.358). Unlike critical thinking, which involves close examination of different and opposing viewpoints, resistance implies shutting out ideas and willful defiance against deeper analysis. Brookfield (2006) noted the complexity of resistance and listed at least ten potential explanations for why it occurs. His broader examples of resistance included situations where students come to campus with poor self-images, resistance due to conflicting learning and teaching styles, and frustrations in response to perceived insignificance of the material under investigation. The example that related most directly to the current study involved student apprehension toward change and entering unknown territory. This feeling of unease might lead to a denial of new ideas and a retreat toward what appears comfortable.

In addition, Brookfield (2005, 2006) offered ways for educators to best address situations where students resist learning. For example, in terms of navigating critical theory’s criticisms of capitalism, Brookfield (2005) outlined basic guidelines for mediating uneasy territory. Rather than work against the resistance, Brookfield (2005, 2006) urged educators to reflect on why resistance is occurring, to acknowledge that resistance is a normal part of the learning process (particularly when learning about critical theory), and to find ways to navigate resistance. He suggested introducing material in a way that all concepts come under scrutiny (including critical theory and Marxist theory). No view is seen as absolute or correct but each must be evaluated

closely. Second, capitalist ideology should be separated from how the roles function in the system and how individuals are impacted. This can be best accomplished by giving voice to the lived experiences of individuals. Research on resistance to learning related to social justice is explored further in the literature review under transformative learning, teaching and learning about social justice through curricular and co-curricular programs, and living and learning communities. The role of resistance will be further explored in the results and conclusion sections of this paper.

Critical theory, critical race, and critical pedagogy theorists not only identify relationships of power in order to understand the complexity of oppression, but also encourage the reader to actively work to resist and change the social structures supporting oppression and inequality. As Mark Poster (1989) noted, “critical theory springs from an assumption that we live amid a world of pain, that much can be done to alleviate that pain, and that theory has a crucial role to play in the process” (p.3). The concept of resistance further helps to capture ways in which students react to new ideas and navigate their understanding of complex concepts.

### **Transformative Learning**

Mezirow’s (2000) edited book, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* provided useful tools for educators, academics, and practitioners in understanding transformative learning and best practices for conducting research on this topic. Developed from the First National Conference on Transformative Learning at Teachers College, Columbia University, in 1998, the book offered insight into broadening and deepening a definition of transformative learning as well as identifying the ways in which the theory has been tested in research. According to Mezirow (2000), transformative learning involves the process of understanding one’s own long held personal beliefs and ideologies, challenging them and

eventually moving toward incorporating new ideas and beliefs. Daloz (2000) expanded on Mezirow's notion of transformative learning as it relates to social change. Specifically, Daloz (2000) described the necessary conditions for transformation: the presence of other; reflective discourse; a mentoring community; and opportunities for committed action. These characteristics appear present in the current investigation site of the social justice living-learning community. Taylor (2000) described transformative learning through the stories expressed by students. She also included possible reasons why some students transform and others resist which may help to illuminate different ways students negotiate learning.

Research on transformative learning has shed light on the connections to psychosocial development, transitioning through resistance, and critical self-reflection and discourse. In terms of capturing the process of transformative learning for college teachers, Robertson (1997) tied transformative learning to both cognitive learning and psychosocial development. In order for individuals to engage in transformative learning, they navigate resistance. The current study paid close attention to how students use resistance to foster their learning as opposed to simply restating what they learned from class. Lin and Cranton (2005) highlighted the transition students made from being the "good student" who takes information in without questioning to a "responsible scholar" who challenges traditional ways of teaching. Glowacki-Dudka et al. (2012) examined transformative learning for a diverse group of students and professionals who participated in a workshop about adult learning. They found the environment and learning activities fostered a sense of trust and a safe space to engage in critical discourse, which led to thinking about old ideas in new ways. Brown (2004) described the transformative learning process of educational administration graduate students. She also found critical reflection to be a crucial component of transformative learning. As one student reported, "...the biggest surprise is

my heightened awareness of my prejudices, my perceptions, and my ‘close-minded’ liberalism that shapes the way I live my life” (Brown, 2004, p. 24).

The research discussed in this section demonstrated the complexity of transformative learning as well as key components to examine. Important components of transformative learning include critical inquiry, rational discourse, and personal story-telling. Critical inquiry involves asking thoughtful questions that challenge preconceived notions of privilege and oppression. Rational discourse is demonstrated by respectful discussions where all students have the opportunity to present opposing views and actively listen to each other. Students also engage in personal story-telling when explaining how oppression impacts them. The current study examined transformative learning of social justice concepts by paid particular attention to the ways in which students reflected, managed resistance, and engaged with others. It also examined how students determined and defined “critical learning moments.” The current study paid attention to diversity of experiences and learning to expose the different ways individuals experienced and learned about inequality and oppression. Transformative learning takes into account the ways in which students adjust their belief system as they interact with students from different social identities. The following section will expand on the benefits of diversity to students’ overall learning capabilities.

### **Benefits of Diversity**

One area of study taught to students in social justice programs is social inequality between individuals of different gender, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, and other social identities (Gurin-Sands et al., 2012). It is important to note social justice is not synonymous with diversity. However diversity research has often been framed in the broader context of helping to meet the social justice goal of providing more equal opportunities to



students. In addition, the living-learning program under investigation in the study includes a course component where inequalities based on individual social identities are directly addressed. As the diversification of the student body in higher education in the United States increased, institutions of higher education created programs related to the topics of diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice (Banks & Banks, 2007). More recently, debates over the use of affirmative action policies in the 1990's led rise to research studies examining the positive impact of diversity on learning and skills outcomes (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado et al., 2010). Diversity benefits the individual and the institution as well as provides broader economic and societal gains (Milem & Hakuta, 2000).

The examination of higher education benefits to diversity have focused on three specific impacts identified by Gurin (1999): structural (percentage of diverse individuals on campus); curricular and co-curricular diversity (which includes content knowledge learned from diversity and multicultural themes within curricula or programs); and informal interactional diversity (interaction outside of the classroom amongst individuals from different backgrounds). These categories have proven useful to researchers and practitioners in developing research designs for understanding diversity on separate campuses and for institutional comparisons (Denson & Chang, 2009; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Hurtado et al., 2010; Misra & McMahon, 2006; Umbach & Kuh, 2006). These categories helped guide the current study in delineating curricular and co-curricular interactions which can lead to learning outcomes. The students participating in the social justice living-learning community enrolled in a social justice course, participated in facilitated workshops, and interacted with each other informally within the shared residence hall.

Research on diversity and learning outcomes has focused primarily on the positive impact of diversity on students' cognitive development and civic engagement (Denson & Chang, 2009;

Gurin et al., 2002; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Hurtado et al., 2010; Misra et al., 2006; Umbach & Kuh, 2006). Most notably, Gurin et al. (2002) utilized both a longitudinal national survey from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and a longitudinal institutional survey from the University of Michigan to examine classroom and informal interactional diversity and the learning outcomes of intellectual engagement, academic skills, citizenship engagement, and racial/cultural engagement. Their results showed diversity experiences on campus positively impacted learning and democracy outcomes with informal interaction having a stronger impact than classroom diversity. This study also concluded a diverse population alone was not the determining factor for learning outcomes, leading to the importance of interactive activities and programs to enhance learning.

Similarly, Hu and Kuh (2003) examined student background, institutional makeup, interactional experiences, and desirable college outcomes and reported a positive relationship between interactional diversity experiences and all students' learning gains with White students benefiting slightly more than other groups. Umbach and Kuh's (2006) study used National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data to examine student engagement, perceptions of the campus environment, and gains in general education and personal and social development. Their research confirmed earlier findings where "students who engaged in diversity-related activities more frequently reported higher levels of academic challenge, greater opportunities for active and collaborative learning, and a more supportive learning environment" (p. 183).

In terms of school-to-work competencies, interest has centered on understanding and communicating well with individuals from different backgrounds, and effectively managing conflict when differences arise. In describing their research on racial minorities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, Hurtado et al. (2010) reported stronger

social and academic adjustment when individuals experienced positive interactions with individuals from their own group and with individuals from different groups. The social and academic growth was experienced regardless of the group to which they belonged. Misra et al. (2006) examined structural diversity and its relationship to recruitment, retention, and relationship building for a university business center which actively recruited and retained diverse students. The authors reported positive results as well as increases in minority enrollment and retention. In addition, focusing on the impact specifically to White students, Jayakumar's (2008) study showed the positive benefits of structural diversity and a diverse campus climate on cross-cultural workforce competencies. Whereas these two studies examined the relationship between diverse student interactions and learning outcomes, the current study explored how students learned through interactive engagements about social justice issues and how they made meaning of concepts such as inequality and diversity.

In addition, studies on diversity workshops and activity programs have focused on the relationships between a student's understanding of race relations, effects of diversity training on attitudes toward diversity, and designing strong assessment models to determine if role-playing and immersion styles are more effective for students in learning diversity competencies (Lechuga et al., 2009; McCauley & Harris, 2000; Muthuswamy, et al., 2006; Schmidtke & Badhesha, 2008). Intergroup dialogues bring individuals from different backgrounds together to expand understandings of shared and differing life experiences and to work toward social justice (Gurin-Sands et al., 2012). Research on diversity exploration within intergroup dialogues has also contributed to an understanding of the benefits of diversity (Ford & Malaney, 2012; Gurin-Sands, et. al., 2012; Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Quaye, 2012a,b; Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007).

Although reports varied on the magnitude of the relationship between structural, curricular and co-curricular diversity on cognitive growth especially when using multivariate models (Denson & Chang, 2009; Herzog, 2010), research showed curricular and co-curricular diversity programs had a positive impact on learning related to cross-cultural understandings. These positive impacts may have direct and indirect impacts on meeting social justice goals. The next section will examine research on curricular, co-curricular, and interactional programs related directly to social justice.

### **Teaching and Learning about Social Justice through Curricular and Co-Curricular Programs**

Although limited, research has shed light on the role curricular and co-curricular social justice and diversity programs have played in expanding student learning and awareness. Howard (2011) utilized cognitive thinking, sociocultural, postmodernism, cultural relativism, and critical race theories to examine motivating factors for why privileged student organization members would engage in social justice. Although the author's qualitative study used a small sample size (15 students) from a selective northeastern liberal arts college, his findings provided rich detail on why students choose to not only study social justice but implement action toward achieving social justice goals. The author's three main themes for motivation included: guilt; understanding one's self as a resource; and being rewarded for social justice work. These themes provide useful tools for educators when considering how to motivate students to engage in deep conversations about social justice as well as how to develop student empowerment toward taking action to combat injustices in their daily lives or toward creating and joining projects designed to address a specific social problem. As he noted, "(b)y understanding and analyzing the thinking and motivational sources of particular students, educators can be more intentional in developing

strategies to meet students where they are and speak to their individual needs” (p.12). Howard’s (2011) discussions of cognitive thinking and student perceptions of social justice were particularly useful to an examination of similar concepts in my study. Specifically, this study explored notions of privilege and the ways students made meaning of challenges to their privileged positions. In addition, at least one of the participants discussed standing up to racial prejudice in the workplace.

Focusing on curricular education, Fuentes et al. (2010) examined student learning about social justice through surveys and observations of 18 first-year students who participated in a social justice course at the University of Wyoming. Their study pertains to the current study under investigation since it captured student learning on social justice related to diversity and multiculturalism. During the course, students were given interactive assignments to review topics such as the 1972 Black Panther Party Platform. The authors noted student self-reflections on what they learned related to racism, ethnocentrism, and institutional forces which served one group over another. The authors also reported how students delineated awareness versus action, and understood the importance of both pedagogy and content. All of these pieces related directly to student learning and awareness about social justice geared toward racial inequality. In addition, the study provided detailed themes for teaching tips (e.g., keeping it real; make it personal; attend to the practical; and inspire a vision of possibility). These themes call attention to the importance of understanding both the faculty and student’s role in facilitating learning. Although the methodology section would have benefited from defining key terms such as learning and social justice as well as an expanded discussion of how they coded the units, the authors spoke directly to the ways in which students make meaning of social justice in a curricular setting.

Also drawing from a study of coursework designed to focus on learning social justice and racial inequality, Young et al. (2006) used theories from social change, feminist theory, and postmodernism, to examine how students reacted to diversity topics in preparatory class for educational leaders. The authors used open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with constant comparative analysis and critical partner dialogue with 28 students from a state-wide Doctor of Education program. Their study is particularly useful to understanding students' communicative learning on social justice given the use of Mezirow's (1990, 2000) concept of communicative and transformative learning. The study focused specifically on the potential for transformative learning to occur when deeply-held beliefs are challenged. However, the authors also added the concept of resistance to their study to help explain why students did not transform in some aspects. Specifically, although students' beliefs changed as a result of reading and examining feminist literature, they resisted learning by distancing, opposing, and being swayed by intense emotions. The article provided a nuanced understanding on resisting learning about social justice and would be complemented by research and assessment on effective exercises and discourses intended to engage students toward effectively and critically examining their privileged status as well as further examination of how students define and learn about concepts related to social justice. Whereas this article provided some insight into resisting a deeper examination of learning about social justice in terms of gender inequality, the current study provided additional insight into how students defined and made sense of concepts related to diversity and social justice about other categories such as socioeconomic status, race, and cultural background as well as how they navigated resistance.

Using one of their own graduate level courses in the Higher Education program, Hytten and Warren (2003) conducted a qualitative case study to illuminate the ways in which white

students preserve whiteness in its position of power even when they openly seek to engage in discourse that is designed to disrupt the power dynamic. Their article provided educators concrete examples and rich qualitative description of how white students may inadvertently reinforce existing forms of oppression even when they actively seek to broaden their view of diversity and find ways to support social justice. In doing so, students resisted gaining a broader perspective of social justice. The data collected consisted of interviews, written reflections and direct observations during classes. The student composition of the course were a mixture of doctoral and graduate students from different disciplines where the majority of the students (14) were white and the remaining (2) were identified as African-American.

After reviewing the data, the authors detected four patterns that helped to explain how students “protected whiteness’s dominance: Appeals to Self, Appeals to Progress, Appeals to Authenticity, and Appeals to Extremes” (p.70). They discussed students’ reactions in terms of “enabling” features which were seen as positive and leading to a deeper understanding of power and social dynamics and “disabling” features which were seen as negative and leading down a path that reinforced whiteness’s dominance. Although personalizing the information in these ways could have enabling features in that they pointed to commonalities and utilized empathy, they also had strongly disabling features in that they focused more heavily on the self rather than a deeper focus on the relationships of power dynamics. For instance, the authors described how one of the students used his position as a gay man to identify with ethnic minorities.

Although the article was well-written, interesting and beneficial to educators, there are three areas that could have been improved. First, the methodology and design of the study raises concerns since the course was predominately white and taught by the researchers themselves. Given the authors close connection to the material and design of the class, the student responses

could have been influenced by the research design and study questions. The responses may have been different if the class composition was more mixed. Second, although the authors noted the limitations of their study, a broader discussion of intersecting diversity themes (race, gender, sexual preference, etc.) would have enhanced the study. The article's relevance is strong in that it provided a systematic structure for understanding student resistance to complex ideas that implicate them in the network of oppression. However, it did not provide a structure for navigating resistance. The current study further explored resistance as it played a role in students' learning about social justice and critically examining their privileged status.

### **Service-Learning**

Service-learning programs offer the unique ability to provide students with both curricular and co-curricular community-service experiences and to engage them in probing underlying contexts for social issues. As Cipolle (2010) outlined:

Service-learning is a learning strategy in which students have leadership roles in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet real needs in the community. The service is integrated into the student's academic studies with structured time to research, reflect, discuss, and connect their experiences to their learning and worldview (p. 4).

Research on service-learning has called attention to the special relationship to social justice (Bowman & Brandenberger, 2012; Cipolle, 2010; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Chesbrough, 2011; Jones, 2012). Specifically, service-learning programs allowed students to both engage directly with programs that address human suffering as well as reflect on their experiences and the larger context in which suffering exists.

Conducting a quantitative study with 387 students at a medium-sized Catholic university in the Midwest, Bowman & Brandenberger (2012) found increased interactions with students from different backgrounds led to an intensification of both positive and negative relations. The authors illuminated the importance of fostering environments which lead to growth and change



as well as recognizing the value of processing challenges and sources of conflict. Of particular relevance to my study is their exploration on the importance of learning through challenging students' previously held beliefs. Their study reported the need for students to be faced with opposing views and guided through mediating conflict of these opposing views in order for students to be motivated to increase their understanding of social responsibility toward social justice goals.

Similarly, through examining an AmeriCorps service-learning program, Einfeld and Collins (2008) examined student perceptions of inequality and social justice. Conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 students participating in AmeriCorps at a mid-sized Midwest public university, the authors found students needed to grasp concepts of equality and empowerment in order to understand the broader scope of social justice. Students also noted the importance of awareness and competence when building multicultural competencies. In addition, students who actually experienced inequality and interacted with those who experienced inequality had a greater awareness of the overall impact of inequality which indicates increased interaction with diverse individuals is an important component of learning about social inequality. Although the authors would have benefited from an expanded analysis of how students worked toward equality and how students acted as "change agents," the study highlighted the importance understanding how students define their experiences in engaging with social justice.

Focusing on gender differences in motivation for engaging in social justice service-learning programs, Chesbrough (2011) utilized a mixed methods design with students at a faith-based private liberal arts college in the Midwest. The qualitative data portion was gathered from five focus group interviews, individual interviews, and focus groups with four males and four

females. The quantitative study used surveys from 447 participants. His reported gender differences in motivations for engaging with service-learning with men externally motivated by the benefits the service may bring and women internally motivated based on personal feelings about needing to provide service. This study illustrated diversity of experiences with service-learning on social justice.

Incorporating an immersion program in service-learning, Jones et al.'s (2012) multi-site case study with interviews from 37 students at a large, research based university I in the mid-Atlantic, offered rich descriptions of how students recognized shifts in their own worldviews. Similar to Young et al. (2006), student learning centered on Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning and the importance of critical thinking and learning from others. One area of particular note from their study involved student reflections on how they learned from being exposed to the inequality experiences of individuals they provided service to (such as AIDS patients). The authors explored students' learning about social justice issues, which included homelessness, combatting stereotypes, one's own place of privilege, reexamination of access, and motivation to take further action after the trip (Jones et al., 2012). The issues of combatting stereotypes and exploring privilege provided useful groundwork for the current study under investigation as the article highlighted student learning and growth in understanding social justice.

### **Living-Learning Communities**

While the history of learning communities dates back to the 1920's (Stassen, 2003), they became an area of focus in the 1980's in reaction to criticisms of higher education (Browne & Minnick, 2005; Stassen, 2003). Learning communities were thus designed to increase student engagement and retain students (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Living-learning community research has centered on building

and expanding typologies (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010) as well as demonstrating benefits of these communities to learning outcomes (Browne & Minnick, 2005; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Jessup-Anger, Dowdy, & Janz, 2012; Lichtenstein, 2005).

Although research is limited, an investigation of living- learning communities' contribution to understanding social justice and diversity would benefit the current research. Given the wide range of opportunities offered to students participating in living-learning communities to learn about social justice in and outside of the classroom, an examination of these communities and social justice is warranted. Multicultural learning communities provide one area of diversity focus (Schroeder, 1993). In their review of a justice living-learning community at Cabrini College, a small liberal arts college outside of Philadelphia, Watterson, Rademacher, and Mace (2012) outlined the design of the program and the stories students told to demonstrate their learning. The authors illustrated the effectiveness of the living-learning community in building critical thinking skills for students related to learning about social justice. Jessup-Anger et al. (2012) used mixed methods to examine the sophomore-based Dorothy Day Social Justice Community program at Marquette University. Their authors provided a best-practice model in their case study which showed students benefited from their informal and formal interactions with faculty and discussions about social justice. Further research is needed to better understand how students learn diversity and social justice concepts while participating in a living-learning community.

The research in this section called attention to the need for close examination of how students learn social justice. Students learn through self-reflection on their position of privilege or minoritized status, through the role of resistance to challenging long-held belief systems, and

through understanding the relationship between facilitators and students. The current study further examined how students learned about social justice. The next section will explore the intersection of leadership and social justice which is a component of the social justice living-learning community program in my current research.

### **The Intersection of Leadership and Social Justice**

Studying the intersection of leadership and social justice is important to this study since the program at the institution under investigation offered instruction and dialogues related to developing leadership capacity. Students who participated in the living-learning program were required to participate in the Leadership for Social Justice course and a leadership development retreat. The Leadership for Social justice course examined social justice as it relates to leadership and paid particular attention to the ways in which leaders addressed issues of privilege, power, oppression, and difference. In addition, the course reviewed issues related to racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of forms of oppression. A review of the literature in this area provided a broader understanding of how leadership skills related to an understanding of how students learned about social justice. Specifically, given the important role leadership plays in student development and learning, a review of the literature on diverse student experiences with leadership and social justice is warranted.

Postindustrial, critical, socio-cultural and transformative approaches to leadership have called attention to concepts of diversity, social justice and social change, and have offered an examination of power and oppressive relations. Research has focused on training and preparing staff, faculty, and professionals to provide the best leadership resources and opportunities for students through becoming aware of biases and differences and incorporating creative programs for students (Capper et al., 2006; Hernandez & McKenzie, 2010; Jean-Marie, Normore, &

Brooks, 2009; Rodriguez, Chambers, Gonzalez, & Scheurich, 2010).

Rodriguez, et al. (2010) utilized a multiple case study to contribute to the body of literature on preparing educators for teaching social justice with a particular focus on evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of three programs which consisted of early childhood, leadership, and counseling. Drawing from a framework that included social change, leadership, and social justice, the article identified six themes: faculty; curriculum; program structure; program and student review and evaluation student recruitment and selection; student support; external relationships. The article noted that each program focused on diversity and social justice through their selection of faculty, students and courses. In addition, it reported that there was no best approach but instead, a variety of methods could be used to promote social justice and diversity. The article described resistance from students, faculty, and administrators. Students resisted an exploration of social justice. The article would have benefited from a section outlining key concepts of social justice, resistance, and faculty preparation as well as an expansion on the methods section to clarify their approach to cross case analysis the role of the researchers. This study provided useful tools for faculty and practitioners in evaluating and creating programs related to social justice and diversity and spoke to the importance of evaluating programs related to these topics. It would be further complemented by studies such as the current study which examined student perceptions of social justice and the ways in which they navigate resistance. In addition, for the purpose of my research, studies related to social justice programs and diversity of student experiences were more directly related.

In terms of understanding how different groups of students understand and approach leadership, research has examined differences based primarily on gender and race, with some work emerging on sexual orientation (Arminio et al., 2000; Barbuto & Gifford, 2010; Baughman

& Bruce, 2011; Dugan et al., 2008; Haber & Komives, 2009; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). Whereas gender differences in student leadership involvement were reported by Haber and Komives (2009), Barbuto and Gifford's (2010) study showed similar servant leadership abilities across gender lines. Arminio et al. (2000) reported perceived differences and attitudes toward leadership depending on ethnicity, noting negative perceptions from Black students who associated being a leader with being part of the oppressor group as well as multiple examples where the term "leader" was absent when Black students described their experiences on campus. Male and female students identified gender differences where male leaders were known to be direct in their communication and female leaders preferred to process information and elaborate on issue, whereas women of color also discussed the impact of being oppressed for both their gender and their ethnicity (Arminio et al., 2000).

Similarly, Kezar and Moriarty (2000) responded to critiques of earlier research which universalized the leadership experience based on white male perspectives and reported significant differences between gender and ethnic categories in understanding leadership. Their findings showed both White and Black males rated their leadership ability higher than their female counterparts (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). The types of campus interaction and involvement also yielded varying results for leadership development depending on gender and ethnicity as White and Black women were more responsive to a leadership class, Black men were more influenced by volunteer work and White men were the only group who found significance in being elected to public office (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000).

More recently, Dugan, et al. (2008), used the social change model of leadership development (Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), 1996) to examine students' scores on the seven leadership variables and the impact ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation on these

scores. The concept of social change maintains a strong presence within leadership studies. This is particularly evident in the use of Astin's work (1977, 1991, 1993) and in the use of the social change model of leadership development (SCM) (HERI, 1996). The concept of social justice includes the notion of corrective action to change an injustice. In addition, his use of social activism as a variable in examining the impact of college on students inherently focused on themes of social change and social justice as it specified student's involvement in "participating in community action programs, helping others who are in difficulty, influencing social values, and influencing the political structure" (Astin, 1993, p.115). Dugan et al.'s (2008) findings showed Black students scored higher than White students on Consciousness of Self, Controversy with Civility, Citizenship and Change, women scored higher than men on all variables except for Change and Asian American students scored lower than their counterparts in Consciousness of Self (Dugan et al., 2008). This illustrates diversity of experiences and the importance of further capturing how students learn about social justice.

Antonio's (2001) study of interracial interaction and its impact on leadership and cultural knowledge is of particular note since it lends strong support to the continued examination of the relationship between diversity variables, leadership, and social justice awareness. His research supported the claim that students benefit from socializing with groups different from themselves in terms of broadening their cultural awareness and leadership skills (Antonio, 2001). Given the importance of developing leadership skills as a learning outcome for college students, it makes sense to study leadership skill-building along with other learning outcomes, such as academic skills (writing and critical thinking, cultural awareness, and citizenship/democratic engagement). In addition, given the role leadership plays in developing strategies to combat social justice issues (such as minimizing inequality and combatting prejudice), studies need to go beyond

examining differences of experiences and consider the complexity in how students' define their own learning and understanding of concepts such as leadership and social justice.

Within the field of leadership and diversity, studies have focused on preparing professionals to effectively teach and lead students toward social justice goals (Capper et al., 2006; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Hernandez & McKenzie, 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2010) as well as examined relationships between diversity variables (such as gender and ethnicity) and leadership perceptions and involvement (Arminio et al., 2000; Barbuto & Gifford, 2010; Baughman & Bruce, 2011; Dugan et al., 2008; Haber & Komives, 2009; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000).

The reviewed literature highlighted the need to continue expanding research on diversity and social justice. Learning outcome benefits and diversity of experiences are varied. Living-learning communities continue to offer a wide range of opportunities for students to learn about social justice and expand their skills in working with diverse groups of people and for students to develop critical thinking abilities through a variety of experiences. The next section will review the research design for the study.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine how students learn about social justice while participating in a social justice living-learning community. This section outlines the research design, which includes a rationale for using a qualitative instrumental case study through a social constructivist perspective. The research design also includes a reiteration of the research questions and an explanation for the case selection and sample. The research design is followed by a discussion of the following areas: data collection (including individual interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and document data); role of the researcher; and data analysis.

#### Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative single instrumental case study design drawing from a social constructivist theoretical perspective (Creswell, 2007). A social constructivist perspective recognizes both the researcher and the study participants play mutual roles in the research. There is no one essential way to view ideas and concepts related to the phenomenon under investigation. According to Merriam (2009) “research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives” (p.1). Similarly, Creswell (2007) stated the following:

We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that can be measured, or hear silenced voices... We also conduct qualitative research because we need a *complex*, detailed understanding of the issue... We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study (39-40).

Focusing on the lived experiences of students, this study examined students’ understanding of social justice concepts as they progressed through the first semester of a living-learning program.

By giving voice to students' perspectives, it sought to capture the complexity of learning social justice.

### **Research Questions**

As specified in Chapter One, the questions guiding this study included:

1) What is the nature of transformative learning in regards to inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups for undergraduate students participating in a social justice living-learning community at a university in the Southeast? Included are four sub-questions:

- a. In terms of transformative learning, how are students challenging their own long-held beliefs about social justice concepts?
- b. How are students making new meaning of these differences as they communicate and engage with their peers and faculty?
- c. How are students making meaning of social justice in terms of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups?
- d. How are students resisting learning and how does working through resistance foster learning?

Although qualitative research recognizes the inherent subjectivity of any conducted research, it is important for the researcher to expose their position and potential biases. As Merriam (2009) noted, since the researcher collects and interprets data based on personal worldviews, it is important to explicitly state any potential biases and utilize various validity and reliability techniques. The techniques used for minimizing bias and strengthening validity and reliability will be discussed further in the role of the researcher and data analysis sections.

In terms of taking a single instrumental case study approach, Stake (1995) delineated this type of case study from an intrinsic case study. Single instrument case studies are issue based and tied to a bounded study. The case “serves to help us understand phenomena or relationships within it” (Stake, 1995, p.77). In addition, case studies provide the researcher the opportunity to collect data in a natural setting and to examine multiple data sources. For the purpose of my study, the issue was learning about social justice and the case was the social justice living-learning community at the chosen institution. Data was collected during the fall semester of 2013 and member checking occurred during the spring semester of 2014. In terms of analysis, pre-coding was used to narrow the broad scope of topic. In addition, reflections and initial coding were conducted soon after interviews and observations took place. Systematic analysis and writing proceeded from December, 2013 to February, 2014.

### **Case Selection and Sample**

A case “is a special something to be studied, a student, a classroom, a committee, a program, perhaps, but not a problem, a relationship, or a theme” (Stake, 1995, p. 133). A case study method was chosen for this study since the research questions examined how students make meaning of and learn about social justice. The instrumental case study approach provides the opportunity “to get insight into the question by studying a particular case” (Stake, 1995). The case itself provided rich detail in order to understand the research question rather than simply describing the complexity of the case.

In terms of selecting the case, the social justice residential learning community program at a Research I university in the Southeast was used due to its proximity to the researcher, its documented success, and its ability to “maximize what we can learn” about the issue of students learning social justice (Stake, 1995, p.4). As Stake (1995) noted, “(c)ase study research is not

sampling research. We do not study a case primarily to understand other cases...In instrumental case study, some cases would do a better job than others (p.4).” The social justice living-learning community program presented a strong case given it is designed to engage students in dialogue on social justice issues. A close review of these dialogues captured student learning social justice. The program clearly states learning objectives to students and it provides multiple venues for learning about social justice. These venues occur both inside and outside a classroom setting. Students enrolled in three courses related to social justice, were expected to participate in co-curricular activities, lived in the same residence hall, and attended a leadership development retreat. For the purpose of this study, the case was bounded by:

- 1) Events within the program: the Leadership for Social Justice course and required workshops and programs;
- 2) Students: the 30 students participating in the program and their experiences in the above listed events; and
- 3) Time: the 2013 fall semester

### **Data Collection**

Case studies involve data collection from multiple sources (Stake, 1995; Merriam 2009). The sources included: semi-structured individual interviews; a focus group interview; observations; and program documentation. The culmination of these sources produced rich material for better understanding how the students learned about social justice in the program.

**Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to explore how students learned about social justice from their own story-telling. I paid particular attention to how students approached and defined social justice; how they discussed their learning; which components of social justice they noted as important; and what changes they have seen in terms

of their own learning from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester as well as changes they noticed in other students. Interview questions related to how students were learning about social justice (see Appendix B). Eighteen students total were selected for interviews using purposeful sampling. There were 30 students enrolled in the program during the fall semester. A sample size of 18 students constituted a little over 50 percent of the cohort and provided enough rich detail for the study without going beyond a saturation point. Purposeful sampling is commonly used for qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). All 30 students were contacted and requested to serve as participants with the expectation of interviewing 15 students for individual interviews and four to five students for a group interview. Nineteen students responded agreeing to participate. Thus, 15 students were selected for individual interviews and 4 were selected to participate in one group interview. However, one student from the selected group interview did not attend the interview, which brought the actual focus group to three participants.

Although diversity was demonstrated in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, birth order, and first-generation status, there were a higher ratio of female, white, first born, and non-first generation students. The results section of this paper provides additional details on the demographics of the living-learning community cohort and the interview participants. Access to participants was gained by working with staff from the program under review. I coordinated meetings with staff to determine the best approach for contacting students. Then I met individually with each student for the interviews. In order to maintain the most naturalistic setting possible, each interview took place in a meeting room within the same building where the Leadership for Social Justice course was taught.

Semi-structured interviews were used. This type of interview provides an overall structure where each student was asked similar questions but also allowed for flexibility in

capturing nuanced responses. As Merriam (2009) noted, “(l)ess structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (p. 90). Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity for the interviewer to adjust language in order to best give the participant the space to expand on topics relevant to the research questions.

Interviews were audio-recorded with a digital recorder, transcribed, and coded. I transcribed the data myself using traditional methods (without using voice commands). Although the transcribing involved time and commitment, it was important to spend as much time with the data as possible in order to observe all possible themes. In addition, I prepared “ample time and space immediately following the interview to prepare the facsimile and interpretive commentary” (Stake, 1995, p.66)

In order to ensure ethical standards when working with participants, I prepared consent forms and interview questions prior to the study which were reviewed by the dissertation committee (see Appendixes A and B). Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality of the participants. All of the students in the program were asked to complete a Demographic Questionnaire (see Appendix C). However, only 28 students completed the questionnaire since two students left the program.

***Individual Interviews.*** Individual interviews were conducted at two separate time periods: once toward the beginning of the semester and once toward the end of the semester. Both interviews were conducted to capture transformative learning that occurred throughout the semester. Each interview lasted 30 to 60 minutes in order to provide enough time for rich data, for the interviews to be manageable for the researcher, and for the time not to be too burdensome for the students.

***Focus Group Interview.*** A focus group interview included three students in order to allow for diversity of perspectives since students may reveal additional information in a group setting that they may not otherwise report in an individual interview. The three students were selected through convenience (based on student availability) from the 19 that responded and did not come from the same group of the 15 interviewed individually. The focus group also helped me observe communicative learning between students as they communicated and interacted with each other in providing detailed information about the program they were participating in.

I created a format to “encourage all participants to talk and to monitor individuals who may dominate the conversation” (Creswell, 2007, p. 133). An ice-breaker was not needed since by the time of the group interview, rapport had already been established between the three students and between me. The group interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

***Observations.*** As Merriam (2009) noted, “observation is a major means of collecting data in qualitative research. It offers a firsthand account of the situation under study, and when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allows for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 136). I observed the Leadership for Social Justice course and two of the programs students are suggested to attend during the fall 2013 semester. As soon as I received IRB approval, I visited the next class on September 10, 2013 and secured consent to observe classes. I began observations on September 12, 2013 and concluded on December 9, 2013, with a total of 21 class observations. The course met twice a week during the fall 2013 semester and ran for approximately 60 minutes. I arrived at least 10-20 minutes prior to class in order to observe any informal conversations where students may discuss what they are learning about social justice, to help develop my rapport with the cohort, and to arrange times for interviewing.

In terms of the programs, I attended a co-curricular residence hall event facilitated by the second-year live-in mentors which lasted two hours and involved interactive activities, discussions, and socializing. This event allowed me to observe learning behaviors and also serve to establish a deeper rapport with the students. During the event, I paid particular attention to critical moments, which included: students noting learning something new; showing surprise about an idea; and making an important connection. I also paid attention to expressions of resistance and frustration as well as expressions of excitement (see Appendix B) and to the differences in communication inside and outside the classroom. In addition, I attended the end-of-the semester pot-luck celebration where current and previous students and mentors, staff, and faculty were in attendance. Here, I observed students interacting in a relaxed and informal setting.

Using Gold's (1958) terms, during the class and program observations, I acted as an observer. My role was well-known to the students and they saw me and interacted minimally with me during the classes and programs. However, my role was not to participate directly in the program. In order to minimize intrusion, I did not audio-record the observations and instead took field-notes, which were then transcribed and coded. The class ended before 5:00pm, which provided me ample time to write down thoughts and reflections immediately following the class.

**Document Data.** In order to better understand the program and its design to assist students in learning and engaging with social justice, I reviewed program documents. Documents included previous assessment data collected by the office overseeing the living-learning community program (student survey; program application questions; related course syllabus; and compiled assessment data regarding individual sessions staff held with students participating in the 2012-2013 Social Justice Residential Learning Community).



Detailed information on the history of the social justice living-learning community program was collected through documentation and a meeting with the Program Director. Criteria and process for selecting students to the program, the social/living environment and structure, staffing model and requirements of participation (i.e., living space, enrollment of class, participation in workshops and programs, etc.) was collected from documentation and a meeting with the program Assistant Director. This information provided overall context to the case as well as a greater understanding of how students interacted with the material.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Shank (2002) expressed that each researcher comes to the investigation with basic skills of observing, conversing, participating, and interpreting. However, as also noted, the skills are not merely instinctively applied and instead are crafted through figuring out which tools to use and how to best interpret the data by drawing on related literature and conceptual frames. These skills, coupled with lived experiences and theoretical frameworks formulate a researcher's unique position. To use Shank's terms, as a qualitative researcher, I "prefer terms like 'rich,' 'deep,' 'thick,' 'textured,' 'insightful,' and, best of all, 'illuminative' (p. 7). I started out studying anthropology and spent a good deal of time reading ethnographies to learn about particular cultures and social issues in different parts of the world. The flexibility of qualitative research allows me to learn more about the subject at hand but also to learn more about how I am progressing as a researcher and (hopefully) as a leader. I also recognize the potential my role had to influence student learning as my questions to students could have sparked self and critical thinking.

Given my work with the student conduct process, I also live and breathe the expression 'there are at least two sides to every story' so I am actively looking to hear different points of

views and different versions of the “truth.’ These experiences helped my data collection related to the social justice living-learning community. Critical theory helped guide my study by reminding me individuals have differing social identities and belief systems and dominant belief systems serve to oppress those belonging to minoritized groups. Critical theory is essential to understanding concepts of social justice and particularly to understanding how the marginalization of groups of people are situated (and perpetuated) based on dominant principles and ideologies. In addition, I came into the study with an understanding that resistance to questioning dominant ideologies may occur and transformative learning related to social justice may be difficult to uncover.

I am a White, female graduate student, who was raised by two educated parents (one earned a Bachelor’s and the other a Master’s degree) and thus I have experienced both privilege and oppression. In addition, my grandfather and father both survived the Jewish Holocaust and their stories have shaped my own interest in social justice and assisting others in exploring ways to combat inequality. My experiences traveling/studying (Israel, Nigeria, Singapore, Malaysia, and Germany) and working abroad (Taiwan) have helped me to understand cultural differences and the importance of building relationships with diverse groups of people. In terms of educational background, I studied sociology and gender studies as an undergraduate and anthropology as a Masters student. Related work experiences include teaching English as a Second Language in Taiwan for two years and serving as a Student Affairs professional since 1999, where I have facilitated diversity programs and retreats. I also believe in the importance of social action and being part of change – particularly toward goals related to social justice.

Given my background and exposure to theories and research related to diversity and social justice, I may have a tendency toward deductive rather than inductive analysis. Therefore,

I tried not to approach the qualitative research study with a set of absolute predetermined themes. I am also sensitive to sexist, racist, and/or culturally insensitive language. However, my work with the student conduct process has helped me strengthen my skills in carefully listening to students without presenting judgments. Throughout the study, I maintained awareness of my relationship with students and my position of power on campus. Although I did not work directly with any social justice programs on campus, my position as an Assistant Dean and working with student conduct might have impacted how students responded to my questions. Also, given my interaction and involvement with student leaders, further areas of bias could have arisen.

In order to mitigate these issues, I checked with selected interviewees to determine whether or not there were biases I would not otherwise be aware of. This question was asked of each interviewee (both the individual and the group interviewees). I also created a list of pre-codes to use for the data and later re-examined them after data was collected. I also reviewed these emerging codes with my advisor and peer colleague to determine whether or not the codes appeared to be a natural fit. Information on the participation waiver form included potential ethical issues (see Appendix A).

## **Data Analysis**

### **Coding Procedure**

After the data was collected, the material was transcribed. In order to spend close time with the data, the first round of individual interviews (15 total) were transcribed by hand. The second round of individual interviews (15 total) and the one group interview were sent to an outside company for transcription. This allowed me to connect closely with the data while at the same time not taking time away from analysis by doing all the transcriptions by hand. This section provides an overview of the evolution of my coding process. Drawing from general ideas

on coding schemes and pattern coding from Miles and Huberman (1994), I began the process with creating pre-codes related to my research questions prior to beginning my interviewing and observing as follows:

**Table 1 Initial Pre-Codes**

Social justice definitions (delineated by type)	Discussion as essential part of learning	Resistance to learning	Different learning activities (discussion, interaction, writing, projects, service)
Different types of social interactions (debates, arguments, challenges, agreement)	“ah ha” moments (to capture learning)	Learning from diverse perspectives	Cognitive dissonance
Key concepts within social justice	Interaction with privilege	Interaction with oppression	

Prior to interviewing, I adjusted the codes as follows:

**Table 2 Pre-Codes Reorganized Prior to Interviewing**

Background information of student (BIS)	Social justice definitions (SJD)	Complexity of social justice (CSJ)	Discussion as learning (DL)
Resistance to learning (RL)	Learning activities (LA)	Social interactions (SI)	Critical moments (CM)
Learning from diverse perspectives (LDP)	Interaction with privilege (IP)	Interaction with oppression (IO)	

Once I began utilizing NVivo 10™ qualitative research software (QSR International, n.d.) to categorize the results and manage the large data sets, I created memos of important and recurring ideas as I transcribed and reviewed the material. Below were the memo titles:

**Table 3 Memoing While Transcribing and Analyzing**

Critical Moments	Critical thinking	Cultural Plunge Activity	Difficult concepts
Diversity in the program	Exam responses	Example of insensitive comments	Frustration when others don't see it or change
Good quotes on learning	"How can people not know this?"	"I never thought of that before"	Knowing the importance of having diverse relationships but not doing it
Lack of understanding	Leadership	Learning from diverse perspectives	Learning from personal experiences
Learning something new	Learning something new in class	Learning through personal experiences versus from class reading	Living-Learning
Conflict	Expectations prior to entering the program	Focus of discrimination	Strong bonds
Transformative learning	Opposing views on diversity in the program	Optimism	Privileged versus oppressed experiences
Resistance to a critique of capitalism	Social Justice Definitions	Social Justice in Action	Student Development
Taking a stand that's not popular	Tolerance	Understanding terminology	Utilizing terms and applying
We're all the same	White privilege and resistance		

After completion of all transcribing and re-reading the transcriptions, I re-examined the memos and again reviewed the research questions and pre-codes. After a closer examination of the data, I reorganized the codes based on a stronger connection to the research questions and recurrence. This was followed by reorganizing the codes and creating hierarchies. The following code schema was created:

- 1) Changes:
  - a. Changes in attitude
  - b. Changes in beliefs
  - c. Changes in confidence
  - d. Changes in viewing a concept
- 2) Complexity of Social Justice
- 3) Critical Moments
- 4) Leadership
- 5) Learning
  - a. Discussion as learning
    - i. Connection to personal lives
  - b. Learning from diverse perspectives
  - c. Personal experiences versus class reading or lecture
  - d. Reflection
  - e. Resistance
    - i. Resistance and conflict
    - ii. Resistance and privileged and oppressed experiences
  - f. Social justice in action

- i. Application of social justice terminology
    - ii. Conflict
      - 1. Mediating conflict as practice
      - 2. Respect
    - iii. Confronting others
  - g. Social justice definitions
  - h. Understanding difficult concepts
- 6) Living-Learning
- 7) Views on diversity in the program
- a. Privileged versus oppressed experiences

During the data collection process, I used memos to note reflections, possible codes, and important ideas and thoughts that related to the study. Memos were most often entered directly into NVivo 10™, but were also hand written after interviews or during meetings. The next step of the coding and analyzing process involved connecting the most salient codes to the research questions. Saliency was determined by congruence between the code language and research question language as well as frequency of references within the codes. The sub-questions are listed below detailing the ways in which the codes connected to each question.

Sub questions:

- a. In terms of transformative learning, how are students challenging their own long-held beliefs about others who are different from themselves? Nodes: Changes (in attitude, in beliefs, in confidence, in viewing a concept); Critical Moments seen through the action of confronting others.
- b. How are students making new meaning of these differences as they communicate and

- engage in interactions and conversations with their peers and faculty? Nodes:  
Discussion as learning; learning through diverse perspectives, personalized  
experiences.
- c. How are students making meaning of social justice in terms of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups? Nodes: Understanding difficult concepts and application
  - d. How are students resisting learning and how does working through the resistance foster learning? Node: Resistance

### **Strategies for Validating Findings**

In order to minimize familiarity with the participants, I included statements in my email and consent form communication with them. I specifically asked them to alert me if they were familiar with me in my role (see Appendix A). I also sent the interview transcriptions to the 18 students and provided them an opportunity to provide me feedback. Three of the students responded to let me know that the transcriptions were accurate. The remainder did not respond. In my review of the literature, I paid particular attention to examples and ideas for best practices related to my type of study. After coding and writing the initial dissertation draft, I sent the pseudonym, participant profile, and a list of the themes to the 18 students for possible feedback. Seven students responded to let me know they thought the information was accurate and thanked me for including them in the study. One student relayed to me in person that a group of participants compared notes and talked about liking their pseudonyms. The student informed me the group responded positively to the material and did not have concerns. The remainder of the students did not respond.



The following techniques were used to increase reliability and validity: 1) triangulation (my advisor and a colleague reviewed my coding material and results); 2) member checks (students reviewed the transcriptions, codes, and findings; 3) documenting and journaling (I entered notes as memos using NVivo 10™ to document my process and separate out personal thoughts/reflections from quoted data; 5) audit trail (I used NVivo 10™ to keep track of all pieces of data and created a “tracking log” to show when I completed coding).

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **OVERVIEW OF CASE SITE AND PARTICIPANT PROFILES**

This chapter provides an overview of the case study site and brief participant biographies. Although the research focused on how students within the residential community learned about social justice, an understanding of their learning is “considerably enhanced by knowledge of the setting” (Stake, 1995, p.138). The social justice residential community at the chosen institution provided a strong case in that it engaged students in dialogue on social justice issues both inside and outside of the classroom. Students enrolled in courses related to social justice, participated in co-curricular activities, lived together, and attended a leadership development retreat. A description of the case site includes context in terms of the institution and its mission (related to social justice and overall learning outcomes) as well as the mission of the residential community. Data and assessment on the program, staff and faculty involvement, and program history are also included. Participant profiles included general information for almost all 30 participants in the program. More specific details are provided for the 18 interview participants.

#### **Site Description**

The social justice residential program under investigation was situated at a large Research I University in the Southeast. The concept of embracing diversity was included in the university’s mission and vision statement. Recent strategic goals also gave specific voice to increasing and maintaining a diverse student population as well as fostering an inclusive environment. Through its mission, vision, and values statements, the student affairs division promoted celebrating and learning through difference as well as civic engagement. Student affairs’ strategic goals included ethical leadership, student engagement, and inclusion. One of the departments under student affairs worked directly with students in building leadership skills,

creating opportunities for civic engagement, and social justice education. This department not only offered programs and resources related to these topics, but also a forum and process for addressing concerns regarding incidents of discrimination and bias. For the purpose of this study, the department pseudonym is referred to as the Center for Leadership and Engagement (CLE).

The university houses multiple residential learning communities related to general learning, music, health and medicine, public affairs, and women and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Whereas academic affairs directs the other residential learning communities on campus, the CLE and Housing partner in directing the Social Justice Residential Learning community (SJRLC). Marketed as a program that offers space to discuss social issues, the SJRLC specifically highlights issues related to social inequality based on race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability and related identities. Staff described the program as helping students to “break down how to create change and become leaders who advocate.” The goals of the program include providing students with content and academic background, creating a space for building relationships and friends, and assisting first-year students in transitioning. Transitioning includes navigating how to become a successful member of a community and mediating conflict between peers. The program is designed to nurture students’ interest and care toward important social issues and to provide them tools in enacting social change. Although the program does not always attract a diverse population that mirrors the institution and surrounding counties, it strives to create a diverse space where students learn from each other and speak across difference.

First proposed in 2007, the establishment of a SJRLC sought out to create a diverse, democratic community that enhanced student retention and increased awareness on local community issues and broader social structures. The community was first offered to 40 first-year

students and required that students live in the same residence hall, attend related programs and workshops, and enroll and participate in a weekly English course. Over the last six years, the program has changed and evolved, moving residence hall locations, restructured programming, and developed a leadership class focused on social justice.

The SJRLC 2013 application specifically noted the focus on social justice issues related to gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, ability, age, and class. The application asked first-year admitted students to explain how their experiences led them to advocate for social justice. Expectations for students included maintaining respect for other students, actively participating in the community through required coursework, staff meetings, presentations and programs, living in the community residence hall, exploring social justice and social activism and the foundational concepts of social justice. One of the required classes for the program related to social justice and leadership, which I observed during the fall semester. The course syllabus was intentionally designed to teach students about complex concepts related to social justice, to engage students in discussions on the topics of inequality and injustice in order for students to learn from each other, and to allow students to discover their own path toward enacting social justice. Learning outcomes of the course included: explaining the meaning of social justice in a societal and leadership framework; recognizing and identifying issues in society surrounding social injustice, including privilege, power, and difference; reflecting critically personal cultural identity and background, connecting personal history and experience to larger social and historical forces; and planning as well as acting toward the creation of inclusive and just communities through applying the knowledge, values, and skills gained in class.

## Participant Profiles

The study included class and co-curricular observations of all 30 participants in the program. In addition, demographic data was collected from almost the entire cohort (28 out of 30 students) as well as demographic data for the 18 interviewed students (see Table 4). Students self-reported the demographic data (see Appendix C). In order to maintain confidentiality of the participants, specific demographic information for the institution is not provided. However, discrepancies between the program and general population representation are noted. General demographic data is followed by participant profiles.

All of the program participants were first-year traditional aged students ranging from 18 to 20 years old. The program consisted of more female students (16) than male (11) and students predominantly from households where at least one parent had earned a college degree. Although racial/ethnic differences existed, many of the students came from White backgrounds. Noticeably absent (as referenced in class by students and faculty) were students who identified as Asian. In addition, although four students identified as Black/African American or Black/Caribbean, there were no males who identified in these categories. One student discussed her experiences as hearing impaired and three students referred to themselves as bisexual. Even though the cohort included diverse backgrounds, it was not representative of the university population. Similar to the cohort, the overall university population consisted of more females than males, but by a smaller margin. The majority of the students at the institution were White, but Black and Hispanic students made up a larger portion of the student body than represented in the research cohort. In addition, the student body population included a small number of students from Asian and Native Indian backgrounds.

Fifteen of the interview participants completed two individual interviews and three participated in one group interview. Interview participants consisted of ten female students and seven male students. Only three interview participants self-identified as first-generation college students. The largest representation were first from White and then Hispanic backgrounds. Ten students came into the program with previous social justice experience (such as maintaining a leadership role, volunteering for a project, or taking a class during high school) and eight students arrived without previous social justice experience. Students relayed different reasons for choosing the university and for selecting to apply to the SJRLC.

The university attracted many students for its in-state status, specific programs, and scholarships offered. The institution is known for offering many resources and programs but still providing students with an atmosphere of intimacy and close guidance from faculty and staff. Many students noted that they loved the school, knew about its reputation long before applying, and felt very good about their decision to join and the connections they had made in the few short weeks of coming to campus. In terms of the SJRLC, students who held active social justice roles in high school knew they wanted to join a program that focused on social justice. They often heard about the program from peers and/or from university recruiters and student ambassadors. Some researched the different residential learning options before deciding on the SJRLC. A few students openly admitted that they were not very interested (or even interested at all) in social justice, but were hoping to secure living arrangements in an appealing and popular residence hall. Others noted connections to their major, the idea of joining a group that could help them acclimate to university life, and gaining broader leadership skills. These differences in experiences prior to coming into the program and their reasoning for joining the program will be

discussed later under the themes section, particularly in relation to the theme of learning from diverse perspectives and changes in attitude and beliefs.

**Table 4 Participant Demographics**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity (as identified by students)</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Generation</b>	<b>Social Justice Experience</b>
Adrielle	19	F	White	No	Yes
Dylan	19	M	White	No	Yes
Leanna	19	F	Black/African American	Yes	Yes
Ethan	19	M	Hispanic	No	No
Luis	18	M	Hispanic	Yes	No
Maggie	18	F	White	No	No
Jenna	19	F	White/Egyptian	No	Yes
Neil	19	M	White, Irish/Norwegian	No	No
Ben	19	M	White	No	Yes
Sierra	19	F	Mixed White and Black	No	No
Juliana	18	F	White/Hispanic	No	Yes
Heather	18	F	White	No	Yes
Gabriella	18	F	Latin	No	Yes
Kamaria	18	F	Black/Caribbean	No	Yes
Tera					No
Talia	18	F	West Indian and Croatian	No	Yes
Marco	18	M	Hispanic, Cuban	Yes	No
Zachery	19	M	Hispanic	No	No

### **Adrielle**

Adrielle is a 19-year-old student who identifies as White and female. Adrielle originally wanted to attend college outside of the state, but decided on the current university since she had received numerous in-state scholarships and was attracted to the university’s art school. The SJRLC program appealed to her given her previous experiences with service-learning and her interest in social justice. Her previous social justice experiences in high school included working for Habitat for Humanity and the Salvation Army, participating in Model United Nations, and

taking a theory of knowledge class. When she discovered two different learning communities had both accepted her application, she chose the SJRLC since she liked the idea of attending a retreat where she could “get a more in-depth learning experience” and because the related courses aligned more directly with her interests.

### **Dylan**

A 19-year-old identifying as a White bisexual male, Dylan detailed his experiences with social justice prior to entering the program. Dylan learned about the SJRLC from a high school peer and felt it was a good fit. Previous experiences included holding an officer position for the Social Justice Club, starting the Gay-Straight Alliance at his school, and participating in the Environmental club. During class and his interview with me, Dylan made many references to his experiences attending private Christian schools prior to entering a public high school. He noted that “seeing all the differences and all the things I’ve never been exposed to,” helped him decide to work toward social justice goals.

### **Leanna**

A 19-year-old Black/African American female, Leanna was one of the focus group interviewees. She is a first generation college student and identifies as Christian and heterosexual. She was attracted to the SJRLC after starting a program back home related to teen dating violence. She liked that the SJRLC program was “geared to changing different issues.” Leanna also mentioned that she wanted to live in the assigned Residence hall.

### **Ethan**

Ethan identifies as a Hispanic 19-year-old male. He also considered schools outside of the state, but determined they were too expensive. Although Ethan did not come into the



program with any specific social justice experience, he was attracted to the SJRLC since it seemed like a “new field” to him and coincided with his Psychology major.

### **Luis**

A first generation 18-year-old college student, Luis identified as a Hispanic male. He was accepted to the three in-state schools as well as an out-of state institution. He discussed his discomfort with the out-of state institution since he felt they were actively recruiting him for his Hispanic background and believed they did not offer a diverse or welcoming environment. He learned about the SJRLC from one of the university’s campus ambassadors and decided it would be a good fit. Luis came in with no prior social justice experience, noting that his small town had no social justice clubs. He also described the county he grew up in as a place where he was the “only Hispanic friend.” Noting that he never really identified himself as Hispanic, but still felt prideful of his heritage, he was often seen by others as White.

### **Maggie**

Identifying as a White 18-year-old female, Maggie came into the program with “very limited knowledge of social justice.” She began to look into the SJRLC after hearing about the program from her older sister’s friend. She also noted that she had a pretty strong housing priority number so she could have chosen any of the residence hall options open to first-year students. Emphasizing that she “honestly had no interest in social justice,” Maggie decided to join the program after hearing that residential learning programs “made your first year so much easier” and being “worried about making friends my first year.” She ultimately made the choice for the community, and “not necessarily for social justice.” Maggie participated in the focus group interview.

## **Jenna**

Jenna is a 19-year-old who identifies as White and Egyptian, as well as Christian. She never considered going to a university outside of the state because her “family culture” frowned on girls attending out of state. She was accepted to all three of the schools to which she applied. After narrowing down her list to two schools, Jenna created a pro/con list and initially chose the other school. She ultimately chose the current institution because she kept thinking about the institution and didn’t want to have any regrets. Her leadership and involvement in high school aligned with the SJRLC. Experiences included leadership roles and participating in debate teams focusing on social issues. She expressed her interest in continuing to build on her leadership and community service skills. In addition, she noted the benefits of living in the assigned residence hall.

## **Neil**

Neil identifies as a 19-year-old male White male of Irish and Norwegian background. He also identifies as heterosexual. The current university was his first choice. In terms of the SJRLC, he actually signed up for the wrong program. He laughed about it later and when he realized what had occurred, he decided to stay on in the program. Neil came into the SJRLC without any prior social justice experience. However, he relayed experiences with a pre-military organization.

## **Ben**

Ben identifies as a 19-year-old White male. Ben learned about the SJRLC from a friend and he responded by thinking, “Wow, that sounds really cool because we did a lot of mission work together in high school.” He hesitated at first since the program was not directly connected to his major. He thought about it again later after finding out that his housing number was low

and living in the assigned residence hall appealed to him. Ultimately he applied and joined the program realizing he was interested in the topic. Ben joined Leanna and Maggie in the group interview.

### **Sierra**

Sierra identifies as a 19-year-old female of mixed White and Black race. When applying to universities, Sierra did not want to live closer to home and also heard that the current university had a good dentistry program. Sierra applied to two residential learning communities, but did not get into her first choice. Having no prior social justice experience, her interest in the SJRLC drew from wanting to be part of a group and preparing her to speak for and help others.

### **Juliana**

Juliana is an 18-year-old female who identifies as White and Hispanic. She considered out-of-state schools, but decided they were too expensive. She noted that the university “was always my favorite.” She was attracted to the SJRLC for it being “a like-minded community but diverse at the same time.” Although she was never part of a specific social justice group in high school, she attended a progressive Catholic school, where she took a World Religions class that discussed different social issues and worked with volunteer projects. She classifies herself as a conservative when it comes to most government policies, but highlighted the fact that she supports gay marriage. She saw herself as more conservative than her classmates. When talking about her family, she described shifts between middle and upper middle class.

### **Heather**

Heather is 18 years old and identifies as a White female student. She was interested in applying to in state schools for the scholarships and chose the University for its Art and Education programs. She liked the SJRLC since it provided an opportunity to meet people with

similar interests. During high school, Heather volunteered for two different programs working with individuals identified as disabled.

### **Gabriella**

Gabriella is an 18-year-old female who identifies herself as “Latin.” She grew up moving around and lived outside of the United States. Gabriella applied to colleges out of state and to two colleges in state, and chose the university for its family atmosphere and for its Arts department and study abroad programs. Her decision to apply to and join the SJRLC stemmed from the fact that she wanted to live with roommates who shared similar interests. The SJRLC allowed her “to address social issues” and to “discuss and try to work on making the places more socially just, for all kinds of groups.” Gabriella took a theory of knowledge class. Other experiences with social justice came from conversations with peers about injustices. This led her to research the “Human Rights Campaign” and “Straight but not Narrow.”

### **Kamaria**

Kamaria is an 18-year-old female who identifies as Black/Caribbean. When first thinking about higher education, Kamaria did not have any particular schools in mind. She decided to look only within state since going out of state would not have been financially practical. She noted that something just “clicked” for her with the current university and then when she visited, she felt “embraced” and “really fell in love with the campus.” Having previous experience with debate teams researching controversial issues in high school and wanting to help others, Kamaria chose to apply to the SJRLC. She noted the importance of understanding other people to help them as well as the importance of learning tolerance.

## **Tera**

Tera is an 18-year-old student who also referred to herself as from a privileged background as she was “heterosexual, Christian, White, upper middle class, and able bodied.” Tera was accepted to all the schools to which she applied and chose the current institution since “it felt familiar” to her and housed a strong Psychology program. Tera learned about the residence learning communities from a sibling. She liked the idea of joining a community connected to social work. She also wanted to live in the assigned residence hall. Attending a private Christian high school, Tera came to the university with no prior experience with social justice.

## **Talia**

Born outside of the country, Talia is a female 18-year-old student who identifies as Jewish, and as West Indian and Croatian. Some of her family members previously attended the institution and she fell in love with the university when visiting. She applied to the SJRLC since she “always wanted to make a difference in the world.” Her early experiences with social justice started when she was in middle school when she served as a mentor to other students. She later served as the Social Action Vice President in high school and always wanted to continue activism.

## **Marco**

Marco is an 18-year-old Hispanic/Cuban male first generation college student. Marco attended a top performing high school and served in the school’s marching band. He applied to four in state schools and was accepted into all but one. Both the school he did not get into and the current university were his top two choices. He researched the residential learning communities and after seeing no communities related to law, chose the SJRLC since it interested

him and due to the attractiveness of the assigned residence hall. Marco came in with no direct experience with social justice but with leadership experiences through the marching band.

### **Zachery**

A 19-year-old Hispanic male, Zachery looked for schools that held prestige, a program in communication, and a school that had pride. The pride aspect played an important role in his choosing the university. Zachery did not look into the SJRLC prior to joining a service leader seminar a week before school started. An administrator approached Zachery and encouraged him to apply since he seemed like a natural fit and since they had a recent opening. He discussed it with a close friend and decided to join the program. He explained that it was a difficult choice for him since he wanted to live with his friends in a different residence hall. However, his friend made him realize that he “had a responsibility for things like this, like social justice” and “she said it would be fairly irresponsible” of him “not to take this opportunity.” Zachery came into the program with no prior experience with social justice. However, he discussed his passion for issues related to gay rights since his brother is gay.

This section provided an overview of the site of study and background information for the program participants. The history, philosophy, and purpose of the program provide context to the case study and to the lived experiences of the students who participated in the program. The participant profiles presented a picture of the composition of the program as well as offered a brief contextual framework for some of the themes presented in the next section.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

As the SJRLC description from the previous chapter highlighted, the program offered many opportunities for students to learn about social justice, particularly as it relates to the topic of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups. The student biographies demonstrated diversity in social identities and experiences with social justice. This current chapter addresses the research questions and demonstrates how students learned about social justice. Students were observed discussing and demonstrating their learning during the leadership class and co-curricular events. Interview participants also provided rich details of critical learning moments, examples of when and how they learned best, as well as transformations they noticed in themselves and in their classmates. Five emergent themes from the study will also be discussed in this chapter.

#### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of knowledge on social justice learning outcomes in higher education and address the gap in the literature on students' perceptions of their own learning. In doing so, it provided a greater understanding of the complexity of how students learn social justice concepts such as oppression and privilege, which may lead teachers and practitioners to consider expanding tools for guiding students. Further development on effective facilitation and teaching may lead to students' increased skills in working with others in different settings as well as combating social inequality.

#### **Research Questions**

The central question for this qualitative case study asked: What is the nature of transformative learning in regards to inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups for

undergraduate students participating in a social justice living-learning community at a university in the Southeast? Included were four sub-questions:

- a. In terms of transformative learning, how are students challenging their own long-held beliefs about social justice concepts?
- b. How are students making new meaning of these differences as they communicate and engage with their peers and faculty?
- c. How are students making meaning of social justice in terms of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups?
- d. How are students resisting learning and how does working through resistance foster learning?

Students provided answers to the research questions as observed in their classes and co-curricular activities as well as in direct responses during their interviews. Students transformed their learning on the topic of inequality as discussed in the section related to themes below.

### **Themes**

Five primary themes emerged from the data: (a) understanding difficult concepts; (b) discussion as learning; (c) resistance; (d) changes; and (e) social justice in action. Each theme included sub-themes. For understanding difficult concepts, students often noted their deeper understanding of oppression, privilege, and the “isms” (racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.). Under discussion as learning, personalized experiences and learning through diverse perspectives were most salient. Resistance took form through personal responses as well as witnessed in others. Students resisted a systemic understanding of oppression. However, resistance provided positive results as students navigated challenging others. Students also witnessed a lessening of resistance throughout the semester. Change was seen through attitude, confidence, and beliefs.



Finally, social justice in action took the form of mediating conflict as practice, confronting others, and applying social justice concepts.

Themes are identified using quotes from interviews and previous assessment data as well as observation descriptions. In addition, the themes are represented directly through the leadership and social justice course which was designed to “explain the meaning of social justice in a societal and leadership framework” through activities that encouraged discussion and critical analysis. This rich description provides insight into the research questions. Specifically, it demonstrates how students learned and understood about inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups through the social justice residential living community experience. It also sheds light on their transformations, where they challenging their previous long-held beliefs, made new meaning about social justice through diverse interactions, and navigated their own and other’s resistance.

It is also useful to note that although these five themes emerged from the data, they often overlapped. When coding the data, many of the comments were coded to multiple themes. For instance, a student may have indicated resistance at the same time as highlighting the importance of learning from others and learning through discussion. Even though the overlap existed, it did not appear to emerge as a theme in and of itself.

### **Understanding Difficult Concepts**

Students made meaning of social justice in terms of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups through engaging with the material, challenging ideas, and working through the complexity of the interrelated concepts. All of the 18 participants made references to learning complex concepts. Observations of student struggling and learning the concepts were also seen in class. As students emphasized their understanding and managed difficult terms, they also

indicated the connection from understanding to taking action. Learning the “philosophical foundations of justice” is a key goal for the SJRLC. Specifically, as noted in the syllabus, the Social Justice Leadership course was designed to provide students with the tools to evaluate and enact social change. The course introduced students to “theoretical frameworks in the field of social justice” where “the notions of privilege, oppression, power, and difference will be explored.” The course syllabus outlined required course readings on social justice, which included Adams et al. (2013) and Sensoy & DiAngelo (2012). Although students were not expected to delve deeply into each topic during the course (but encouraged to dig deep into areas of interest), the rigorous course covered a broad range of concepts. These included critical social justice, social identity, critical theory, socialization, prejudice, discrimination, oppression, power, privilege, forms of oppression as isms, intersectionality, social change, the cycles of socialization and liberation, allyship, and resistance.

During the course of the interviews, through my class observations, and noted in the program’s assessment report from the prior year, the importance of first understanding complex social justice concepts was highlighted. This first step was often seen as crucial to moving forward with change. Many students directly spoke to the value of understanding difficult concepts in order to work for change. As Adrielle noted, “(b)ecause if you don't understand the mechanics of what's happening, you can't reverse it, or make any movement to change it.” Adrielle captured what many of the students demonstrated in class and during the interviews when she emphasized the importance of learning “more about the politics of social justice, like what vocabulary to use and different pronouns.” This notion of learning the building blocks was echoed by other students. Dylan discussed the need to know “how they all fit together.”

In addition, students talked about connections between different social justice concepts as well as their expanded understanding of the complexity of social justice. This showed how their understanding of social justice and inequality grew. As Gabriella shared:

I didn't know that the whole system of oppression and prejudice and discrimination was so interlinked and complicated...I always had this presumption that discrimination and prejudice were interchangeable and I had never really given much thought to oppression except for when you hear things like, "oh the Black community is highly oppressed by the White community."

Students highlighted the complexity of social justice concepts and their own confusion over specific terms. However, they felt it important to rise to the challenge to learn the basics. Luis spoke of this when discussing the midterm exam:

The vocabulary terms oftentimes can be very confusing especially when it gets to the gender identities like cisgender, transgender, transsexual...oppression and power because I feel like a person should be able to understand these terms then use them when talking about social justice because it is social justice. This is why there's a course for it. It's not simple.

This example showed what students learned in terms of difficult social justice concepts as well as an expanded understanding of the importance and complexity of social justice.

Some social justice concepts seemed more salient than others. Students discussed the importance of understanding oppression, privilege, and the isms (such as racism, sexism, and ableism) when gaining an overall sense of social justice. The section below describes these three subthemes.

**Oppression.** Elaborated conversations on oppression occurred in six of the interviews and were also observed during class discussions. Students noted that they may have had a vague sense of what oppression meant before entering the SJRLC, but gained a broader perspective through the class, activities, and discussions with other students. As Neil stated, "I had thought of oppression in a sense of like the 1960's Civil Rights protests...I had never thought of it...in

modern society.” Their transformed understanding of oppression helped them better grasp issues related to inequality and reconsider best practices for enacting social change. Students’ discussions and questions highlighted the fact that they were highly engaged with the material, challenging ideas, and working through the complexity of the concept. For instance, at one point, Luis asked “what about the oppressed, how do they have/get their power?” Students also struggled with the idea that reverse racism does not exist. They found it difficult to understand how people from different social groups or even within the same groups could make comments and jokes that were insensitive and racist, and how that did not equate with oppression. Juliana commented, “every ethnicity has racism.” Tera asked, “so minority groups can’t be racists?”

Other students responded by reminding without power, it would not be considered oppression. Dylan noted that while men were the minority in this class (in numbers), “who actually has the power?” Similarly, Zachery stated:

To be honest I never really thought about what oppression meant and I kind of always just assumed that I knew what it meant and moved on. But before coming here I never really thought about it. And now that I think about it, I realize the importance of power. People can discriminate, individuals can discriminate and put people down, but it’s not oppression without power.

Reactions to Adichie’s (2009) video on the dangers of relegating the “African experience” to a single story demonstrated their transformed understanding of oppression. Heather recognized that although she might have had experience with social justice through volunteer work prior to entering the SJRLC, in terms of understanding the concept of oppression, she “hadn’t really understood fully before.” She went on to describe that although a person in a minoritized group could make someone feel uncomfortable, they could not oppress someone from a dominant group. Similarly Luis described ways in which his understanding of oppression deepened in relation to the idea of the single story:

A lot of times it made me realize that I partake in all of this injustice...I say I'm for social justice but...I'm being a part of oppression or continuing the single story. That just makes you more aware, more conscious of what you're saying and doing and thinking.

Students often picked oppression as one of the most important terms to understand inequality. Their transformed understanding of oppression included seeing it as an encompassing term tied to other concepts as well as in juxtaposition to other concepts such as prejudice and discrimination. Ben highlighted his understanding of oppression as an “umbrella term” tied to other concepts and used in the context of oppressed and privileged experiences. Kamaria learned that “oppression has to have a background, historical context” and pointed out that other students struggled with the differences between oppression and discrimination. She responded by telling me: “I know oppression takes discrimination but discrimination can't take oppression...whether we realize it or not, it's a very complex subject and I see that in a lot of points in it.”

Students also noted how they used their transformed understanding of oppression to analyze situations where other students did not appear to appreciate systemic forces. Neil relayed the discussion after watching Spurlock's documentary detailing a Christian male (Spurlock, 2005) living a life of a Muslim for 30 days. He expressed to me how he felt other students in class did not understand the context of the film in terms of understanding oppression as a systematic force. He explained:

The other day we were talking about religious oppression, and people began...to say the Islamic family was not helping the man...I disagreed with them there because I think the project was to see if he could change himself since he was part of the dominant group.

His description was confirmed by my observations of the lively discussion during class where students reacted to the film and to the idea of privileged and dominant groups. Reactions from students during that particular class will be later discussed under the resistance theme. In addition, the SJRLC 2012-2013 assessment report also supported the theme of understanding the

difficult concept of oppression as it referenced comments from students who learned about oppression and its invisibility. The report noted one of the students “learned about different oppressions. She has now realized that it is so many other things other than racism/sexism.”

**Privilege.** All 18 interview participants provided details on their understanding of privilege and many connected an understanding of privilege to the importance of understanding inequality. Luis and Zachery both referenced Sensoy and DiAngelo’s (2012) description of privilege as “swimming in a stream and having the current with you (p.101).” Students talked about the idea of refusing privilege and how to manage doing so. Ben provided an example where if “you are offered a promotion but you know that a woman was more qualified and worked longer, you could ask, why not give the position to her?” The professor also asked students to stand and recite a pledge on not taking personal responsibility for the isms and that even if some of us benefit from it, we should not feel guilty. The professor intentionally guided students away from personal reactions to notions of privilege and power and tried to help them examine the larger contexts to understand the structure of inequality.

Students often reflected on their own privileged backgrounds. They also highlighted their understanding of the invisibility of privilege and the fact that people do not directly talk about it. Students noted the importance of recognizing ones privilege and taking steps toward change. As Jenna relayed:

I feel like those who are privileged don't see that they're privileged, and if they were to take an insight...that would take us one step forward to seeing the other end of the spectrum, those that aren't privileged, such as homosexuals, the non-abled, and other minority groups. I feel like if they took a stand...to see how they benefit...I feel that that would tighten the gap between those who feel like they are equal and those who feel that there isn't much equality.

Expanding on this, Gabriella noted how privilege plays a role in unequal relationships, “privilege represents a lot of what makes our society unequal in terms of the way we treat each other...that

causes a negative impact for the people who don't get something because they don't fit within that.” Ben also highlighted his shifts in analyzing privilege:

I think the thing that a lot of us struggled with was that we felt like it was a personal attack on ourselves, that we were in trouble for being privileged and it's not that. It's just being aware that that privilege is there...I think people tend to understand it better throughout the readings...

Students discussed having both privileged and oppressed experiences. Ethan referenced differences between oppressed and privileged experiences as well as the importance of “seeing how when you are part of a dominant group, how it gives you advantages and opportunities in life that other people in minoritized groups don't have and just recognizing that and not taking it for granted and just seeing how the other side lives.” Leanna described differences in understandings based on oppressed experiences: “... some of our peers...don't seem to try to understand where we're coming from.” One student reflected on the complexity of privilege by noting its invisibility, how her status differed from others in oppressed groups, as well as the fact that her privileged status might change after coming out as bisexual: “I had straight privilege even though I wasn't straight just because I didn't tell anyone...I don't know how that's going to change in the future...the thing about privilege is you never think about it.”

Students shifted their understanding of privilege as being “lucky and blessed” to an understanding of relationships of power. Juliana realized that by saying she is lucky and blessed: “It's kind of like flaunting the fact that I'm in the dominant group.” Similarly, Gabriella noted the problem with letting privileged and oppressed experiences go unexamined:

A lot of times...what we know as privilege, people refer to as blessings...Those are things that they've taken for granted in their life because they never realized that, they never stopped to think that maybe others don't have that and sometimes you think it's because we have the opportunity or we have the chance or because you work hard for it. But it's not necessarily.

...**Isms.** In addition to oppression and privilege, all 18 students referenced the importance of learning the different “isms,” such as sexism, racism, and ableism. Discussions in class reviewed different experiences through what they reported on in their class assignment of spending time with a group they were unfamiliar with. They also described their deeper understanding when detailing the midterm exam. As Ethan noted:

All the different terms, of course, like racism or heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, and then actually having the prompts where we had to write, oh like, what example is this? That was good because it shows whether or not you can actually tell what issues are affecting these people.

Students also made references to knowing little to none about ableism, ageism, and adultism before entering the program and recognizing later their significance. As Jenna highlighted:

In the beginning, I thought that we would be talking about just gay rights and stuff like that, but I didn't realize how many isms there are out there...I never even thought of ableism as something that we can talk about or ageism or even adultism. I never even knew what adultism or ageism was...when they were talking about how the mascots could be offensive, I didn't realize that something like that could be offensive. So something like that comes into a broader perspective.

Similarly, Ben stated:

I never thought about the areas where people couldn't get access to or the fact that adultism existed. There's a whole bunch of topics because you think that you're socially just when you know about racism and gender equality and sexual equality and there's a lot more than that.

These examples demonstrated students' transformed understanding of the different social issues and identities related to social justice.

In terms of understanding more widely known issues such as racism, students noted an expanded understanding and recognition that problems still exist. Tera commented:

It makes me think about how our society, still there's inequality and before coming into this I never really thought about how things still exist...I know racism is still alive and well but not on the scale that I really have learned about in this class.



Students demonstrated greater awareness and understanding of racism as they worked through reasoning why terms such as “reverse racism” are problematic. In addition, the 2012-2013 assessment report revealed students’ broadened awareness of racism and the other isms.

Overall, many students discussed the theme of understanding difficult concepts and their transformed learning of oppression, privilege, and the different isms. Students explored social justice in terms of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups through applying reading material, challenging their own and other students’ ideas, and working through the complexity of the interconnected terminology. As students began to develop greater understandings of key concepts, they also indicated the connection of understanding to taking action. The next theme reviews how students used discussion to enhance their learning.

### **Discussion as Learning**

All 18 participants referenced using discussion practices as learning. When asked which activities most engaged them, students often brought up discussion. They particularly appreciated small group discussions with their peers. Students described how discussion helped them talk out their ideas, incorporate class material, and learn from others. During class observations, students appeared engaged for the most part during the small group discussions, especially after reacting to a video they watched or answering a question that asked them to share personal stories. Even during the large class discussions, students participated in lively discourse on topics including but not limited to affirmative action, reverse racism, sexist images portrayed in Disney movies, religious oppression, transgender and transsexual experiences, perceived equality or inequality in American K-12 education, the concept of a single story (Adichie, 2009), and privilege in terms of socioeconomic class. In addition, during the co-curricular program in the residence hall facilitated by the second year mentors, students engaged in both small and

large group discussions on a variety of topics. During this co-curricular program, they shared their own perceptions of what social justice means, identifying values, SJRLC expectations, conflict issues, and respect.

Dylan valued the professor's focus on discussion: "it's really good to see him facilitating the discussion and turning it around, and getting us to kind of talk through it ourselves, you know, to figure it out ourselves." Similarly, Ethan emphasized the importance of discussion as "especially for social justice, it's definitely needed." This was also referenced by Luis who stated: "So it's very important because...if one person had shared something a little more serious, then it kind of snowballs and everyone will be sharing deeper things." Students even marked discussion as the most important part of the program. As Jenna stated:

I feel like without participation, the program can't go on...the purpose of the community is to be able to understand social justice, to be able to understand social injustice, be able to take action plans towards that. But if we don't have any communication, how are we supposed to reach our goal?

The importance of discussion was confirmed by Heather, who also noted the significance of discussion in talking about ideas and learning from others:

Obviously the lectures, we need them to learn...but it doesn't really matter unless we act on it. And I think discussing it is a big step towards that... you're voicing what you believe...you really integrate it in yourself because you have these thoughts floating around, like they're kind of intangible and fleeting. But if you say it and talk about it and teach each other, then you got it down and then vice versa; you're getting new things from other people too.

Some students included examples of how class discussions were expanded on after class. They also related discussions to campus activities and ways for students to join current initiatives. As Dylan relayed:

We'll have discussion all the time outside of class about issues that we went over. Or about just issues in general that have to do with social justice or politics... Like we've been talking about trans genders and transsexuals a couple classes ago, then in the school newspaper...there was an article on...how they're changing some of the bathrooms in the Union to transsexual, transgender friendly bathrooms...so I grabbed one of the papers.

The theme of discussion as learning showed how students learned from talking out their ideas, learning from others, and comparing views and experiences. It demonstrated how students made new meaning of social justice concepts as they engaged in conversations with their peers and faculty. Two subthemes emerged under discussion as learning. First, students expressed personalizing experiences. These sometimes took the form of students sharing their own personal experiences or the stories of their friends and families. It also included listening to a story (such as told during a video or guest speaker) and discussing the experiences and what that meant to them.

**Personalizing Experiences.** The role of personalized experiences played an important role in students' understanding social justice concepts and understanding how inequality is manifested in society. By telling their stories, students tied the personal to the theoretical. Twelve of the participants described ways in which personalized experiences enhanced their learning. Students were particularly captivated by the guest speaker who spoke about her life as someone who identifies as transgendered. This was evidenced by the comments made during their interviews, the way they actively listened during her class visit (without whispering to classmates, checking their phones, and moving around in restlessness in their seats). Some students relayed their own personal stories. During a class on racism, Marco told the class that he didn't realize his own grandma was Black until he was 16. He shared this to demonstrate his early conceptualizations of race. Other students referenced this comment during their interviews. As Dylan pointed out, the story helped him understand the concept better and also to care more about the issue of race and racism:

You can watch a video about a student at Illinois getting persecuted because of their ethnicity and their race and everything all day, but it's just not personal to you...it's so much better when someone, when Marco, comes up and says, "I didn't see my grandma

as a Black until I was 16”... there's starving kids in Africa, we know this, it's there...if there's starving kids across the street, it impacts you so much more.

Talia related her personal experiences to the single story (Adichie, 2009):

Well it's happened to me before. I have been the character of a single story so I was somewhat able to relate to her. That she was a single character of a single story with her American roommate saying, “Oh you speak African.” I'm Jewish. And people have said, “Oh, you're cheap, you save money, you don't spend much because you're Jewish.”

Talia's example showed how students applied and processed social justice concepts through discussing their personal stories. Similarly, Adrielle talked about a friend “who was trans and she really helped me understand what it was and she was like, of course it's difficult for you to fully get it, you've never had any experiences that you can connect it to.” Students also talked about their learning through meeting and discussing issues with others during the activity where they spent time with a group they had limited exposure to before. As Ethan expressed:

I did mine on disability...I definitely have a greater understanding of the problems that they face today. I went to some of those different events. I do know a lot of little stuff like the bumps on the side of the road are called tactile paving and that's for people who are visually impaired.

These personalized experiences provided students with direct contact, which they noted augmented their learning.

In addition to learning from classmates' stories, students also highlighted discussions that occurred in reaction to watching a story that was told through video. As Jenna relayed:

I know that one point that I was really engaged in was that movie that -- the Christian man, he indulged into the Muslim community (Spurlock, 2005). And I was so interested in that because it is so hard to just put your religion to the side and be able to just explore into this completely new one.

Neil also referenced one of the stories told through video when he shared his belief that individuals should interact respectfully with others from different backgrounds:

I mean I think at a very fundamental level, if you're trying to become someone that's more open-minded, then I think you do have to have a very high level of respect for

others...we watched that TED talk (Lesser, 2010) with the lady that was the very liberal-minded lady and she went with the Tea Party friend of hers, and I think they both had a very high level of respect and they were able to better communicate their ideas.

These two examples showed that students engaged with a story being told through video almost as strongly as those told in person.

Sierra pointed out her appreciation for the professor's ability to share his own personal experiences in class:

I think it's very important that we have the facilitator there, especially for someone like Lamar who can relate to some of the things that we're talking about. So it makes it more credible, more real, more not, "I'm talking from the book, but I don't know what this is, I can't relate to this."

Thus, lecturing on a topic was not seen as valuable as connecting the material through personalized storytelling.

The importance of personalized experiences was clearly salient to their learning and caring about a topic. Students shared personal stories about their privileged and oppressed experiences which expanded on their overall understanding of social justice and inequality. The stories connected to concepts of oppression, privilege, and the "isms." The next subtheme relates to how students learned from diverse perspectives.

**Learning from Diverse Perspectives.** All of the participants discussed how they learned from diverse perspectives, whether through their classmates or through stories told by guest speakers and through video stories. Diverse interactions occurred during group discussions, projects, and co-curricular activities. Students also referenced learning through their experiences and interactions living in the residence hall. They made new meaning learning from classmates who came from different social identities.

Many of the comments related to learning from diverse perspectives were extensive and rich in detail. Students noted the importance of learning people's stories, and examining both the

similarities and differences they shared with others. Some students contrasted learning through diverse perspectives with learning through texts and lecture. As Ben stated:

I feel like working with students was a lot more helpful than actually reading the book. It was very interesting to read the book and see from other sides...I felt like we were getting a much more broadened idea of how people think in our demographic...interacting with the different students and hearing their ideas is I think what helped me learn in the class.

Adrielle also compared learning from classmates to learning from class material:

the biggest thing that I am learning from is my classmates, because I'm learning through different perspectives as opposed to learning the technical textbook material...I feel like you get your horizons expanded so much more when you understand where people are coming from

Participants noted how the program fostered learning from diverse perspectives in a way that was different from their high school experiences. They pointed to learning from students who came from different social identity backgrounds. This appeared particularly relevant for some students of privileged backgrounds. As Dylan pointed out:

As a middle upper class White male...I never really could see from other people's perspectives, until I started spending a lot of time with all different kinds of people and that really just got me interested in the whole ideas of equality whether it be marriage equality or the feminist movement ...it seems like the people that I identified with were primarily one type of person, female, social justice activist type people and they all kind of shared those same identities.

They also approached other classmates from different backgrounds to learn about their experiences in a minoritized group (such as those who identified as bisexual or of a minoritized racial identity).

Activities that occurred inside the class as well as during the co-curricular programs such as the "Cross the Line" activity were highlighted as strong sources of learning since it gave a window into other individuals' lived experiences. During "Cross the Line," students were read a series of statements, starting with "step forward if you..." and stepped forward to reveal deeply

personal information about themselves. Questions included those relating to social identities (racial, sexual orientation, religious, etc.). Students were also asked to step forward if they had been discriminated against, struggled with self-image, ever went hungry, or felt unsafe at home. In reaction, students often felt compelled to reflect deeper on a social issue. As Ethan noted regarding the co-curricular program:

Because when you don't know it affects these people you think, "Oh, it's not a big deal," but when you actually have the visual representation of someone who is affected by a certain issue, you can tell, "Oh, this is a serious issue."

Other students described how diverse perspectives helped them learn more about topics such as ableism, racism, and heteronormativity. They also noted how learning from diverse perspectives made their commitment to social justice even stronger. As Leanna emphasized, "it just fueled the passion I already had."

Students highlighted discussion as a key part of their overall learning experience and noted how personal stories and diverse perspectives transformed their understanding social justice and inequality. The next section explores the theme of resistance and how students reacted to social justice concepts and ideas that challenged their long-held beliefs.

## **Resistance**

As discussed in the literature review, Brookfield (2005, 2006) referred to resistance as a normal part of the learning process particularly when students approach topics related to critical theory. Examples of resistance were witnessed during class observations in terms of students' personal responses, student descriptions of how they met resistance from others, and resistance to a greater understanding of systemic descriptions of power and oppression. Resistance occurred when students discussed being attacked for being a part of a dominant group or misunderstood for being part of a minoritized group. Students also resisted by staying within their own social

group. In terms of navigating resistance, class engagement through lively debate was strongest when students experienced resistance. Students confronted classmates inside and outside of class when they heard or saw resistance.

**Personal Responses.** Personal responses of resistance took the form of laughing, making jokes (and light of a situation), sarcasm, rolling eyes, and similar actions. These actions occurred when the class discussed discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping. During the co-curricular program in the residence hall, students discussed and debated perceived problems with respectful communication. While some students shrugged off the use of joking about trigger words and making light of concepts such as oppression, others voiced their disappointment with the joking and asked students in the group to take the ideas seriously.

**Resistance from Others.** In addition to actions during class and during the co-curricular program that demonstrated resistance, students also discussed the role of resistance as it related to the course as well as examined resistance they met from other individuals. The Social Justice and Leadership course included a class session on resistance. For the resistance section, students were required to read a chapter from Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) on common objections to critical social justice. The authors outlined examples of resistant claims on the neutrality of education, the naturalistic nature of oppression, seeing humanity through the lens of sameness, denying the presence of intersectionality, ignoring structural power systems, and refusing to recognize language as politically constructed. Students were also required to read Johnson's (2006) chapter on denial and resistance, which illustrated ways in which individuals deny or minimize oppressive situations, blame the victim, use softer language, blame larger and complex problems on a few bad individuals, and succumb to the idea that the reality of oppression is too overwhelming and exhausting to manage. During the class on resistance, students were asked to



provide examples of resistance they witnessed. The faculty member specifically picked the discussion on resistance to occur after returning from a holiday break, since he expected students to have discussed some of the social justice topics with family members and friends. Students shared how they were met with resistance when they shared some of the ideas they had learned in the program. One student relayed a story of her grandmother's reaction to seeing a same-sex couple walking in the mall holding hands. The student told her grandmother, "You do realize they are real people just like you and grandpa." Another spoke of being ridiculed by her mother after the student confronted her brother for making insensitive comments.

**Resistance to Systemic Understanding.** During the class discussion regarding the Spurlock documentary (2005) where a Christian male lived as a Muslim for 30 days, some of the students expressed how they felt bad for the Christian and thought the Muslim family was too aggressive. Students talked about their own religious experiences and defended Christianity. Talia told the class that she felt distanced from the experience and that, "since I'm Jewish, I couldn't relate to either of them" and referenced the Muslim stereotype of hating Jews. Leanna also noted that she and Talia were both uncomfortable with the portrayal of Christians. Two other students shared that they felt the main character was doing a good job and that the Muslim family attacked his beliefs. As noted in the section on the theme of understanding oppression, Neil believed that the students were resisting a greater understanding of how oppression was in operation.

Similarly, when the class explored the concept of reverse racism, some students shared the sentiment that "racism is racism" rather than looking at the nature of racism where dominant groups actually benefit from an unequal relationship. During the class conversation on sexualized female images in Disney films, students resisted this idea. As one student put it, "for

me, Ariel wasn't about giving myself up to a man, it was about following my heart – uniting people.” Students also commented that the movies discussed in class were made a long time ago and that the current Disney movies show strong female characters. The students engaged in a discussion back and forth about how the female characters might have improved (in terms of taking action without the direct assistance of a male character), but issues still existed where female characters remained overly sexualized.

Resistance also occurred during the class discussion on the topic of affirmative action where students debated about whether or not affirmative action gave unequal preference to individuals of minoritized groups. Some students argued that race should not be a factor. One student noted, “I don't want this to sound bad, but they have more opportunities over whites.” Still others responded by arguing that was not true. Marco emphasized the fact that “dropouts for minorities are higher” and that “you have more of chance of getting a job if you are White.” Resistance to examining social identity also seemed to occur as students appeared to be more comfortable sharing their differences in terms of personality (such as introverted versus extroverted) than on social identities.

Although students may have resisted an idea or topic (such as the conversations related to affirmative action and sexualized Disney characters), they learned from each other through debate and heated discussions. Points of views were both expressed and listened to. Some students commented that they never thought of it that way before, while others seemed resigned to hold on to their position. Regardless of the interactions in class, students seemed to be excited to share their stories, were engaged, and for the most part, were also respectful of others. In addition, toward the end of the semester, students were given the opportunity to talk directly about resistance and to explore why it occurs as well as to confront their own and others

resistance.

**Resistance and Privileged and Oppressed Experiences.** Resistance appeared prevalent when students discussed privileged or oppressed experiences. Some students noticed marked resistance from classmates who came from privileged backgrounds and at the same time noted how these students struggled to respect others and to find their voice. Adrielle described the experience of one of her classmates:

I think he was trying to say that White people were oppressed too or something...which, made sense, you know, he's a White straight male...but at the same time...some of the people in class were like, "uh"? But he recovered it really well. Because he was trying so hard to stay respectful.

This example indicated that although students resisted a deeper understanding of the relationships between power and dominant and oppressed groups, they continued to dialogue and learn from each other.

On the other hand, resistance came in the form of strong and forceful defiance. Luis shared that some of these students reacted strongly to the class, making comments such as "I don't want to go to class today. I don't want to...I hate that class." Although many students felt comfortable sharing their views, some felt silenced. As Jenna described, "I had one individual come and tell me, I'm just not gonna speak in that class anymore because every time I say something, it's like, well, you don't understand, because you're White." Resistance also took the form of maintaining comfortable peer relationships and not going outside one's social group. While some students mentioned they were spending time with diverse individuals and people they "never would have been friends with" before, others noted that students were grouping together based on social identities. As Tera stated, "it's easy to just stay with the group you are in and not really venture out."

**Navigating Resistance.** In terms of navigating resistance, students confronted themselves through reflection. They also confronted classmates inside and outside of class, which is exemplified under the social justice in action theme. Although students resisted, they also learned from each other through challenging discourse. Students often felt the program offered a safe environment to voice their opinions as well as offered multiple venues to listen to others. Some students commented that they never thought of a particular topic in that way before, while others stuck to their position. Examples of how resistance lessened over time were also evident. Ben explained:

I totally at first struggled with privilege because being a white male, it was always really annoying for me to hear about how privileged I was...but basically, the way I think about it now is...having certain things...when you are that dominant group...there are things that you don't have to overcome that others do.

Class discussions that appeared to have the most resistance (related to deconstructing Disney characters, affirmative action, and reverse racism) also involved student attention and engagement. In these ways, students mediated resistance and enhanced their learning of social justice and inequality. The next two themes (changes and social justice through action) touch on some of the ways in which students directly navigated resistance.

## **Change**

Students experienced specific changes in terms of their growth and learning, which were tied to the transformative learning process. During classes, the co-curricular events, and interviews, students discussed changes they had made after participating in the program. They also noted changes they saw in other students. Class observations revealed change as well. When examining the data to identify transformative learning, three areas of change seemed significant: changes in attitude and approaching a situation; changes in confidence; and changes in belief. These transformations demonstrated how students questioned their own long-held beliefs about

social justice concepts and began to take action toward social change. It also helped to demonstrate student's learning of social justice as a process and a goal (Bell, 2007).

Change occurred in how students interacted with others as well as how they approached situations with greater empathy and awareness of diverse perspectives. Students made particular note of attitude changes within themselves and from classmates who chose the SJRLC for the residence hall. Whereas some of these students started out either disengaged or openly frustrated, they began to participate on a larger scale and contributed to the class and to the community. Changes were identified from students in both dominant and minoritized groups.

**Changes in Attitude/Approach to a Situation.** Students made particular note of their own attitude changes in terms of coming into the program believing they were “pretty sojust” to realizing that they “still had a lot to learn and grow from.” All 18 participants made references to some type of change (either their own or other classmates) involving attitude. For example, Dylan stated: “I see myself as a socially just person or I try to, but I still recognize that I have prejudices.” Some students also recognized the impact their interactions had on others and made changes to communicate more effectively. Sierra highlighted students being “more respectful towards people and to really understand where other people are coming from.”

Luis gave an example of how he learned to approach conversations differently and to pay more attention to his language as well as his observation of others doing the same:

I offended this one student...so then the next time I saw the guy in passing, I was like, “I'm sorry sometimes I come across too strong in what I believe in”...we're more careful about what we say now...I've seen other people do that...we are being more conscious.

Examples of these changes in awareness and communication often related to lessening the use of “trigger phrases.” Jenna noted:

I know that my roommate for example, she has been talking to me about it. And she feels that she has cut down on all the trigger phrases that we used to say, like...“you're gay” as

a negative...But I have completely stopped saying that and my roommate has cut down...I feel like because we realize that that does cause tension. That does cause more inequality in society...Why can't we just say something else?

In addition, shifts in attitude toward not caring about the program or social justice (joining for the residence hall) toward taking a direct interest and participating in the program were witnessed. Adrielle explained: "there are a couple of people who definitely stood up at the beginning and were like, "I like the hall," but have been real assets to the community and discussions." Heather characterized this as "having a change of heart."

Attitudes of students from both minoritized groups and dominant groups shifted as they moved from spending the majority of their time with the same group to "hanging out" with others from different backgrounds. Ethan spoke about seeing other students moving outside of their social group and also how he started to have "conversations with some of the people who I haven't been close with these past two weeks...I've been also sitting in different groups and talking to more people."

**Changes in Confidence.** During class students talked about their growing confidence to confront racist and insensitive jokes and comments. Twelve of the participants referenced their own or other students' changes in confidence. Change was noticed in class in terms of speaking up more. Some students expressed their own confidence directly and for others, I witnessed how they approached the class or topics during the interviews. Ethan noted feeling more confident and "outspoken not necessarily in a bad way...there have been times when some people have said very negative things in the community, and I will go over to them and I will confront them." Similarly, Neil tied his building confidence to gaining education and that it is a process he is working on:

I feel more confident in my own beliefs just because I feel like I've been more educated...I don't think I ever had the confidence to really step up and back that. I think I'm not there yet, but I think I'm gaining that.

Sierra also relayed how her learning and confidence grew: “I really didn't have a real opinion on anything so now I'm just in the process of learning about everything and forming my own opinions...I've been trying to participate more.” Similarly, Kamaria gave an example of having the confidence to cross the line when asked personal questions during the co-curricular activity:

I know personally for me, it was big -- stepping with some of the things...I don't really express things to people who are really close to me. My best friends, they still don't know something about me and there are stuff that I crossed the line for that I'm not going to talk about, but even the fact that I admitted to it was a really big deal.

In addition, a student spoke about having the confidence to “come out” after feeling comfortable in the community:

Before I came to the university, I was in the closet...it was a really supportive environment for that because so many of the people in here are really open-minded...no one's going to get on me about that or become a phobic or mean...I'm more comfortable with who I am in that respect now.

**Changes in Beliefs.** The theme of students changing beliefs tied directly to transformative learning. Eight of the eighteen interview participants provided examples of critical moments where they changed their belief on a particular topic. One student gave an example of a suitemate changing her belief and another gave an overall reflection of how his belief had changed, stating, “I changed how I view myself...I feel like the program, it definitely helped me grow...I have the fundamentals in place in me where I can be aware and see it.” Each of these examples illustrated how their beliefs changed as a result of interacting with others during the SJRLC. During the class discussion after Adichie’s (2009) video on the problematic notion of believing the African experience as a single story, students talked about being “called

out” and noting that they grew up wanting to help the poor people in Africa. Two students referenced this “calling out” during their interviews. Heather explained:

I felt kind of called out because she mentioned people in the United States, they get this idea of Africa as being this beautiful land with beautiful landscapes with these confusing people that are just waiting for this White person to come help out. I kind of felt called out on that because I've always wanted to join the Peace Corps...so we definitely need to broaden our scope, it's something I myself was guilty of.

Tera also felt “called out” by the video: “like I'm like one of those...when she's talking about it and she's calling it out right now.” After watching and reacting to the video, both students noticed their transformed belief in viewing “the other.”

During one of his class assignments, Marco met with a student feminist group on campus. He talked to his classmates and during his interview about transforming his beliefs on feminism:

It put in the firsthand experience the fact that most stereotypes or discriminatory statements are usually false. And I found that one out truly with the feminist group because I picture parades or -- not riots but marches of women or rebellious protests. That's not what it is at all. That's like the one percent. They just want gender equality and peace and love, what most people want in the world.

During class, he noted that the way he heard it explained from the group he visited, he could even see calling himself a feminist. This demonstrated his transformed view on feminism and what it stood for. It also demonstrated his action steps toward working for social change, which ties to social justice learning as being both a process and a goal (Bell, 2007).

Neil gave an example of misreading one of his classmates and assuming that everyone in the SJRLC was liberal-minded. In doing so, he reflected on his own assumptions and stereotypes and indicated these were changing as a result of the program and his interactions with other students:

I was saying, "Oh, we could plunge into like the Republican thing" because I'm pretty liberal and he's like, "Well, I'm a Republican." That threw me for a loop a bit, but I'm glad that I got to learn that because I guess it threw my assumptions off. I had that weird assumption that all Republicans are going to fit this stereotype. And of course, we're



learning more in class now that's obviously wrong...I'm not always going to be interacting with people that are just like me.

In addition, Neil pointed out that other students came into the program with the mindset that the classmates came from the same socio-economic background and realized later that was not the case.

Two students discussed shifts in how they viewed social and political issues which demonstrated transformative learning. On the topic of gay rights, Jenna stated:

In the beginning I was so against gay marriage and stuff like that. And now looking at it after the whole class, I feel like I want to do something because it's not right...I want to do something...for that around my community back home.

Similarly, Juliana noted shifts in her political views:

I'm very pro-life. I still am. But talking to a lot of people here...some people said it's like, "well, yeah, I want life, but I don't think that a middle-aged white man should be able to tell me what I could do with my body,"...Although I'm still pro-life, I get a better understanding of where that's coming from...if...I see a really great liberal candidate who has a lot of views to vote liberal if that's what I feel.

Both students came into the program with firm beliefs on their respective social issue and began to transform their understanding of the social issue after interacting with other students and engaging in program activities.

One student talked about how he used to believe that affirmative action benefitted minorities unfairly over White applicants, but changed his belief after speaking about the topic with a friend of a minoritized identity. Zachery explained:

My best friend...is Black and she has taught me a lot since I've been here. And I used to be on that whole bandwagon that had to do with Black people getting into universities because of their skin...First of all, you can't even make up that situation because every single person is different...And second of all...a lot of schools...are 80% to 90% white. So it's not like they're doing minorities a favor.

During a class prior to the interview, Zachery had used the same example to explain to another student what he had learned and how individuals from dominant groups should look at the issue

from the perspectives of students from minoritized groups. He noted that at least one student valued his viewpoint and began to question her own belief on the topic. This demonstrated that not only did Zachery transform his own belief on the social issue of affirmative action and how power and oppression play crucial roles to understanding race relationships in society, but also showed that his transformed understanding had an impact on other students' learning.

Maggie described her critical moment to the class and during the group interview and her story was referenced by other interview participants as an example of a change that they noticed in others. One of her classmates responded in class, telling her, "I'm so proud of you." She told the story of her dramatic shift in not only caring about the issue of inequality, but moving toward the act of confronting others:

I mean when I joined the program, I had a very limited knowledge of social justice... So I just think like it expanded my worldviews and I think it's made me a better person... before I was in this program, if someone tells a racist joke or something, I wouldn't do anything about it... after going through this program, I was with a girl and she said something like a racist joke and then she's saying how she would never want to live with a black person... I said, "that's not okay. You can't just say that. That's totally inappropriate for you to do that." I would never in a million years have said that before I went through this program. But now it actually offended me when she said that. So I think just that's changed right there, the fact that I was offended, that something that definitely affects me.

Maggie's transformed belief coupled with strong action demonstrated transformative learning and the role that action plays in social justice learning.

Talia shared a story that illustrated a change in belief by one of her classmates related to religion:

And so this girl is realizing that there are other beliefs out there and just because someone else has a different belief, doesn't make them weird, doesn't make them strange... And she asks me a lot of questions about Judaism. But I like that because that means she wants to learn more and she wants to understand more.

This showed that students were aware not only of their own transformations but the transformations of others and the value of community discourse. The next section outlines the fifth theme of social justice in action.

### **Social Justice in Action**

During classes and interviews, students expressed their desire for more action. They emphasized their engagement during service projects and noted how they looked forward to the following semester since it signaled a shift from learning about the concepts to putting the concepts into practice. Three areas of action seemed most important. The first dealt with putting theory into practice: application of social justice concepts. The next two subthemes involved utilizing leadership skills: mediating conflict as practice and the act of confronting others.

**Application of Social Justice Concepts.** As noted previously, understanding complex social justice concepts were key to students learning and to transforming. In this section, the theme of applying social justice concepts is explored. Fifteen participants referenced the importance of applying social justice concepts to real situations. Similar to the theme of changes, applying social justice concepts capture the action part of learning social justice and acting to “practice what you preach.” Students made references to the need to “apply the different concepts, apply the different theories, and apply the different vocabularies that we’ve been learning every single day in class.” Luis expressed the importance of understanding concepts and utilizing them to support your cause and “being able to eloquently voice your opinion.” When discussing the midterm exam, many students believed the portion that asked them to apply the definitions to real life situations was the most beneficial. Ethan captured the overall sentiment: “(i)t’s one thing from the book, knowing things from the book and then being able to catch it in a real-life situation.” Ethan also appreciated the class final group project for its

application: “(i)t's a really good way to end the course because now we have all the tools like how are we going to go out there and change it.”

Some students even felt that the application was more important than remembering definitions of particular concepts. During the group interview, Maggie discussed how her performance on the midterm exam did not provide a strong indication of her actual learning: “honestly, I don't think the purpose of it is so we can like rattle off all these vocab terms. I think it's the fact we changed and we're a better person at the end of it.” During the group interview, Ben agreed with her assessment:

Since... the class is called Leadership for Social Change, it's about social learning. And so when I'm 70, I might not be able to tell you the differences between adultism and ableism, but I can teach those ideas certainly...with racism, I can teach them morally what I've learned in this class versus a definition.

Leanna also supported Maggie and Ben's sentiments: “so you got an A on the exam but in real life you actually -- like you have an F...because I feel like if Maggie took something, if something stuck out for her in class about one topic that we learned, I think that counts more for some textbook definitions.” The three students passionately explained the value of applying social justice concepts to real-life situations and highlighted the need to go beyond mere conceptual understanding and act toward social change.

Jenna discussed this transition from learning and understanding terms to applying them:

I know the last time we were understanding the problem. Now we're actually taking action towards the problem... We know about the social injustice that's going on in the world...making small changes around your environment and understanding a diverse amount of people...gathering all the information, collecting, formulating a plan...all these little small changes will eventually make a big change.

**Mediating Conflict as Practice.** Fourteen participants referenced mediating conflict as a practice toward achieving social justice goals. Students discussed conflicts that existed between students in the residence hall and in class. Strained conversations were also prevalent during

classes. Students discussed the role of conflict in social justice and the importance of mediating conflict. This appeared to be an important early step in working toward social change and a valuable leadership skill. It led to “good practice for being able to have a structured kind of conflict with someone without getting heated” in order to “be better prepared to do it when we start doing leadership work.” Students saw these practices in mediating conflict as building skills for working on larger social justice aims or projects. Some provided specific guidelines on how to best approach a conflict by giving “yourself the space you need and think about it.”

Some of the students acknowledged that although the ability to mediate conflict was important, they struggled with finding the courage to take action. Some students specifically pointed out feeling stressed when conflict arose and wanting everyone to get along. However, they also talked about reflecting on the need to better navigate conflict and noting it as a work in progress and that they needed to “work on it.” Students also discussed the need to react appropriately to conflict and to learn how to “choose your battles.” Gabriella highlighted the importance of addressing the hard issues:

I think that conflict is always going to exist in the quest for achieving social justice in society because in order for you to start change...you need to first address the hard issues that people always try to avoid...how are you supposed to be effective in anything if you cannot start a dialogue and a conversation about...that conflict needs to develop into a form of constructive plan of action.

Constructing a plan of action was relevant to mediating conflict and building the skills to work on social justice issues. The next subtheme demonstrates how students acted through challenging other individuals when they witnessed behavior that worked against social justice goals.

**Confronting Others.** Finally, the subtheme of confronting others emerged as important to social justice action. Sixteen participants referenced confrontation in relation to social justice in action. Students expressed it was not enough to learn the material and understand the way in

which injustices persist. Instead, once the learning is manifested, individuals have an obligation to act when they witness an injustice and lead others by example. Students stressed the “need to learn the terminologies and learn how to confront certain situations and identify problems in order to be able to communicate with the world.” They discussed an awareness of this importance as well as provided examples of their own confrontations. Maggie’s description in the previous section noted not only her shift in changing her belief but also the importance of the act of confrontation. Ethan also described an experience where he confronted another student for his insensitive remarks:

I always knew sexism...existed before but since actually talking about it in class and hearing everyone's own personal story of how they're affected, I was definitely more inclined to confront the issues...I don't think anyone should be judged negatively for something like that, for something like their weight or for other issues.

Leanna also spoke of two separate experiences confronting classmates who had made insensitive comments related to race. The first incident involved a joke related to Trayvon Martin and resulted in Leanna explaining to the other student why the joke was offensive. The second incident involved two students asking her, “is this a Black thing?” during a debate between the three of the students. Leanna responded, by stating, “calling you out on something you're doing that's foul and trying to actually correct your behavior, that's a race thing, or is it just human behavior?” By confronting others, students transformed their learning of social justice by taking what they learned in the program and acting on these new ideas.

Confronting one’s own behaviors also came up in the interviews. Adrielle discussed the importance of confronting one’s own skewed perceptions:

I found out that I'm a lot more judgmental than I'd like to consider myself. I pretty much consider myself open to whatever. I don't have stereotypes, but we all have stereotypes to an extent, and I think confronting those is really important in (your) development as a person.

By reflecting on and confronting the way they believed stereotypes or judged others, students transformed their understanding of social justice issues and developed a greater awareness in order to make different choices and take action.

Even students who rarely or never confronted others, spoke of the power and importance of speaking one's mind. Although he recognized his own lack of confronting action, Luis noted the importance to confront as soon as possible: "I think it's important to confront something when it initially happened because if not, it's just going to create resentment." Kamaria also struggled with confrontation, but recognized its importance: "I'm really passive when it comes to confronting people about things, no matter what it is... I feel like it should happen." Additionally, the topic of choosing one's battles and "knowing when to confront" and when to hold back if it may seem "badgering" or "forcing."

Social justice in action was an important theme for students participating in the program. These examples demonstrated how students "put theory into practice" and how they transformed a deeper understanding and connection to social justice. In doing so, the students demonstrated the importance of social justice as a process and a goal (Bell, 2007) as well as showed direct steps of the transformative learning process. Students' actions toward mediating conflict and confronting others demonstrated their development of leadership skills. The next chapter further discusses the findings in relation to previous research and discusses future implications.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **DISCUSSION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS**

This paper utilized a qualitative case study design to explore how students transform their learning about social justice with a specific focus on social inequality. The research centered on students participating in a social justice living-learning community at a large Research I University in the Southeast. This section provides a brief summary of the case study and is followed by a discussion of the findings. This section concludes with implications of the findings and suggestions for further research.

Although research on social justice and diversity in higher education has grown, a closer examination of students' learning about social justice is lacking. This study addressed this gap by exploring student learning through a social justice living-learning program. In doing so it illuminated how students make sense of the intersecting relationships between diversity and social justice as well as on the transformation of their learning. Critical theories and specifically critical race theory provided the theoretical framework by providing the tools to analyze and critique dominant ideology and to identify and discuss relationships of power, subject versus object, notions of universal truth and objectivity, and the complexity of oppression (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Gramsci & Buttigieg, 1992; Habermas, 1995).

Giving voice to the varied experiences as students navigated and transformed their understanding of complex concepts related to social justice and inequality, this study provided thick and rich descriptions. The literature review outlined five main areas in the literature connected to the: expanding terminology and theory; transformative learning; benefits of diversity; teaching and learning about social justice through curricular and co-curricular programs; and the intersection of leadership and social justice. The literature highlighted the



need to not only continue to expand an understanding of the complexity of social justice concepts, (Adams et al., 2000; Adams et al., 2007; Gewirtz, 1998; North, 2006) but also to conduct further exploring students interaction with learning and acting on social justice goals (Bowman & Brandenberger, 2012; Cipolle, 2010; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Chesbrough, 2011; Howard, 2011; Jones, 2012). When examining how students learn about inequality as they interact with diversity, it is also important to examine the learning outcome benefits of diversity and to note that experiences are varied (Chesbrough, 2011) Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin-Sands et al., 2012; Hurtado et al., 2010; Lechuga et al., 2009). In addition, living-learning communities provide unique opportunities for students to learn about social justice and interact with diverse groups of people (Jessup-Anger et al., 2012; Watterson et al., 2012).

### **Research Questions**

The questions that guided the study related to transformative learning, diverse interactions, and navigating resistance: The questions asked were:

1) What is the nature of transformative learning in regards to inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups for undergraduate students participating in a social justice living-learning community at a university in the Southeast? Included are four sub-questions:

- a. In terms of transformative learning, how are students challenging their own long-held beliefs about social justice concepts?
- b. How are students making new meaning of these differences as they communicate and engage with their peers and faculty?
- c. How are students making meaning of social justice in terms of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups?

- d. How are students resisting learning and how does working through resistance foster learning?

The research paradigm followed a social constructivist perspective where both the researcher and the study participants played mutual roles in the research (Creswell, 2007). Concepts of transformative learning pulled from Mezirow (1990, 2000, & 2003). Specifically, transformative learning involves moving from previously held beliefs about certain concepts to a new understanding of those concepts. The transformative learning process includes critical thinking, examination, and shifts in worldviews. The study focused on the lived experiences of the students in the programs and the meanings they gave to their learning and transforming ideas about inequality and social justice.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The themes as reviewed in chapter four included: (a) understanding difficult concepts; (b) discussion as learning; (c) resistance; (d) changes; and (e) social justice in action. Through these themes, students transformed their learning by navigating difficult concepts and making new meaning of them and challenging their own long-held beliefs. Transformative learning took place through a process of learning from diverse perspectives and connecting to personal stories. Transformations also included recognizing and working through resistance, shifting attitudes, confidence, and belief systems, as well as applying what they had learned in order to confront others and mediate conflict.

### **Understanding Difficult Concepts**

Social justice is complex and difficult to conceptualize. Expanded notions of Rawls' (1971) description of justice included issues related to power dynamics and inequality (Gewirtz, 1998). North (2006) discussed the ways in which redistribution relates to the movement of

tangible and intangible goods (including, but not limited to wealth, language, rights, and education). Recognition captures individual relationships and the values and perspectives of individuals as well as ideologies of groups. She noted “three social justice categories of redistribution/recognition, sameness/difference and macro/micro as multidirectional, intersecting spheres” (North, 2006, p. 509). Social justice involves promoting active and efficient change to combat inequity and oppression, which includes training students and teachers, and creating activities for inside and outside of the classroom (Adams, et al., 2007; Adams, et al., 2000; Gewirtz, 1998; Lechuga, et al., 2009) as well as it involving “both a process and a goal” (Bell, 2007, p.1).

Associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory, critical theory provides a framework for social change. The theory openly critiques the oppressive relationship between social classes under a capitalist system (Horkheimer, 1972). Critical theorists not only identify relationships of power in order to understand the complexity of oppression but also encourage the reader to actively work to resist and change the social structures that support oppression and inequality. Writers of critical pedagogy focus attention not only on systems of control and the ways in which ideology is constructed but also on individual stories and the lived experiences of those who are oppressed. CRT was particularly useful since it highlighted the importance of lived experiences and storytelling (Harper, et al., 2009; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Matsuda et al., 1993).

For understanding difficult concepts, students participating in this research study often noted their deeper understanding of oppression, privilege, and isms. They also acknowledged their previous lack of understanding and how the SJRLC helped them gain a better understanding. Students made meaning of social justice in terms of inequality and

disenfranchisement of minoritized groups through engaging with the material, challenging ideas, and working through the complexity of the interrelated concepts. As students emphasized their understanding and tackled difficult terms, they also indicated the connection from understanding to taking action. They noted that “for us to be effective activists or social justice people, we do need to learn the terminologies and learn how to confront certain situations and identify problems in them in order to be able to communicate with the world at large.” This appeared to be an important and necessary stage of their transformative learning.

### **Discussion as Learning**

The fourth tenant of CRT (Solórzano, 1998), which emphasized the importance of shared personal experiences in the form of stories, gives voice to the realities of racial inequalities and oppression. This research study supported this claim as students described how they learned through both in-class and outside of class discussions. Students talked about being more engaged when listening to a classmate’s story or when watching a video that told a personal story. They also described how discussion helped them clearly formulate ideas, understand dense reading requirements, and learn about different perspectives. Students were particularly captivated by the guest speaker who spoke about her life as someone who identifies as transgendered. This was evidenced by the comments made during their interviews, the way they actively listened during her class visit (without whispering to classmates, checking their phones, and moving around in restlessness in their seats). Lively class discussions on affirmative action, sexist images portrayed in Disney movies, and affirmative action allowed students to share their own stories, debate ideas with others, and in some cases, carry on the conversations outside of the classroom.

Students made new meaning of understanding social justice and inequality as they communicated and engaged in interactions and conversations with their peers and faculty. They

did this by sharing personal stories about their own interactions with privilege and oppression. They even talked about the personal connections they made to a story or idea after watching a video. Some students noted being “called out” by the storyteller who cautioned against the single story. It was also important to the students that the professor also share their own stories and engage the students personally in the class material.

Not only did students learn from personalized experiences and story-telling, they also expressed how they learned through diverse perspectives. In terms of interacting with students who were different from themselves, students talked about the small and large group discussions, group projects, and co-curricular activities as well as their living with other students in the program. Many also referenced the variation in the program and it being more heterogeneous than where they had grown up. Students made new meaning learning from classmates who came from different social identities. One student highlighted the fact that students came to him to learn more about bisexuality. Students referenced the Cross the Line activity and how it helped them to learn about others and their experiences.

The current study supported prior research noting the importance and benefits of diversity (Ford & Malaney, 2012; Gurin-Sands, et. al., 2012; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Hurtado et al., 2010; Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Umbach & Kuh, 2006; Zuniga, et al., 2007). This study also expanded research on personalized stories of students engaging with social justice, such as Howard’s (2011) study which utilized critical race theories in looking at student involvement. Whereas his findings provided motivations for choosing to participate in social justice work, the current study provided details on how students learn about social justice through discussion and interaction. Previous research, such as Fuentes et al. (2010), examined student learning through a social justice course at the University of Wyoming. Although not directly presented in their themes,

their study also highlighted the importance of pedagogy, content, and practice as well as the role of personal stories in engaging the students.

## **Resistance**

In his writings on critical theory, Brookfield (2005, 2006) discussed the role of resistance and suggested that educators address resistance by first gaining an understanding of why students may resist learning. Resistance was explored by Young et al. (2006) where they found that although students' beliefs shifted after examining feminist literature, students resisted learning by distancing, opposing, and being swayed by intense emotions. The current study complemented the research by detailing how students define and make sense of concepts related to diversity and social justice and cultural background as well as how they navigate resistance. This study also expanded on research such as provided by Hytten and Warren (2003) who described the ways in which White students unintentionally reinforced oppression even when actively sought out social justice involvement. The current study further explored resistance in students' learning about social justice and critically examining their privileged status.

Students in the SJRLC showed signs of resistance through personal responses by downplaying the seriousness of particular issues through joking, sarcasm, and through their body language, such as rolling their eyes, as well as not listening to other students. This was not only observed during class but also openly discussed during class and during the co-curricular activity when addressing the importance of giving respect to classmates. The concept of resistance was explored by students as they reflected on how family member and acquaintance reacted to social justice ideas. Students also demonstrated resistance to examining the systemic nature of racism and oppression when responding to discussions on reverse racism, religious oppression, and affirmative action. Resistance seemed most prevalent when they discussed privileged and

oppressed experiences. Students described the difficulties faced by students in the dominant groups and how they felt attacked as well as identified ways students grouped off based on social identities.

In terms of navigating resistance, students confronted each other inside and outside of class. They “called out” other students for not taking a topic seriously or making insensitive jokes. Students also shared examples of how they navigated resistance from friends and family members after home visits. Although students resisted, they also learned from each other through debate and heated discussions. Students felt empowered to voice their opinions and listened to other viewpoints. Some students commented that they never thought of it that way before, while others seemed resigned to hold on to their position. In fact, discussions that appeared to have the most resistance also involved the most engagement. In addition, the class included a specific discussion on the topic of resistance which allowed them to reflect on their own acts of resistance as well as how to mediate resistance from others. In these ways, students worked through resistance to foster their learning.

## **Change**

Transformative learning involves not only an understanding of enduring beliefs, but a process whereby an individual questions his/her beliefs and makes a shift in viewing that belief (Mezirow, 2000). Previous research examined transformative learning as it relates to social justice and diversity (Brown, 2004; Daloz, 2000; Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2012; Lin & Cranton, 2005; Taylor, 2000). SJRLC students challenged their own long-held beliefs about social justice concepts and experienced changes in their attitude and approach toward a topic, changes in their confidence level, and changes in their beliefs. These changes can be understood as part of their transformative learning process. In terms of attitude, students “recognized their own prejudice,”

and reflected on how they came into the program feeling “sojust” and then realizing they had more to learn.

Change occurred in how they listened to and respected others as well as how they approached situations with greater sensitivity and with a more open mind. Students made particular note of attitude changes from classmates who had joined the program in order to live in the popular residence hall. Whereas some of these students started out resisting learning, they later went on to engage in the class and became “real assets to the community.” Change was also seen in attitudes from students who identified in dominant groups and had originally felt attacked. They later integrated more with the program and participated more in class. Attitude shifts also existed for those identified in a minoritized group as they shifted from spending most of their time secluded from their classmates to “hanging out” with others from different backgrounds. Students also grew more confident and empowered to confront others when witnessing unjust acts.

The most relevant change to transformative learning occurred when students changed their beliefs. These took the form of critical moments where students later reflected during class or during the interview (or discussing in both settings). Two students first understood their change in belief when being “called out” by Adichie’s (2009) notion of the African single story. Whereas they once believed that their desire to help Africans was good-natured, they later recognized the belief as patronizing and stemming from stereotypical portrayals of “the other.” Neil shared how he made the casual assumption that everyone in the SJRLC were liberal-minded democrats like himself and later learned this was a form of stereotyping. Students critiqued their own previous assumptions that everyone in the class came from the same middle class socio-economic background.



Students also noted making changes on how they viewed a hot button topic such as abortion or gay rights. Zachery talked about how he changed the way he viewed affirmative action and how that broadened his overall perspective of racism and oppression. Marco discussed his changed view on feminism after visiting a student group on campus for his class activity. Talia described the ways in which her suitemate changed her beliefs about religious diversity. Finally, Maggie described her transformation from not only caring about the issue of inequality to confronting a sorority sister's racist remarks.

### **Social Justice in Action**

SJRLC comments about social justice in action tied directly to the notion as social justice as being a part of a process (Bell, 2007) and the action steps included within transformative learning. Students expressed their restlessness with learning about social justice concepts and the need to take more action. Their desire to engage with the material through activities, discussions with others, and involvement in service projects all connected to action. Three areas included: applying social justice concepts; mediating conflict as practice; and the act of confronting others.

Students noted the importance of understanding complex concepts but highlighted the application of the concepts as crucial to enacting change. Students discussed this when talking about the portion of the midterm exam that asked them to discuss how social justice concepts tied to case study examples. Students even emphasized that the application of terms was more important than being able to define them, since an important part of social justice involves recognizing problems and working to address them.

Mediating conflict and confronting others were two leadership skills that students developed throughout the program. Astin (1977, 1991, 1993) highlighted the importance of social change as an important component of leadership. This has also been further strengthened

through social change model of leadership development (SCM) (HERI, 1996). The current study supported Antonio's (2001) research that diverse interactions lead to broadening leadership skills. Students participating in the SJRLC demonstrated leadership skills in taking corrective action against injustice by appropriately "choosing their battles" and developing plans of action. In terms of mediating conflict, students noted that conflict was an inevitable and even essential part of social justice. Given that social justice involves identifying problems and working to solve them, students highlighted the value of mediating conflict. They provided examples of this mediation in the form of listening to others, taking a step back, and confronting others when appropriate.

Students also confronted others for racist and sexist comments. Confrontation took the form of speaking out when someone made an insensitive remark as well as confronting one's own stereotypes and resistance. Even students who admitted they lacked the courage to confront others expressed their desire to build greater confidence and skills in this area. Confrontation was seen as an important step in their transformative process toward understanding and learning social justice. Students expressed the need to move beyond simply "memorizing" terms and understanding the way in which injustices manifest themselves in society. They believed in the obligation to act toward combating injustices.

### **Implications**

The findings from this study suggested that students transformed their learning on inequality and social justice through understanding difficult concepts as they discussed topics with their diverse peers. Discussions involved story-telling, as well as listening and responding to stories from their peers, class guests, and through social media. Students navigated resistance as they engaged in these discussions as well as changed their attitudes, confidence, and beliefs.

Students did not passively engage with the material, and instead took action in the form of applying the concepts they learned, mediating conflict, and confronting others.

These findings suggest that leadership plays a role through the form of social justice in action. As students mediated conflict and confronted others, they not only enhanced their own leadership skills, they also lead the way for others and demonstrated to other students successful actions toward social change. The findings also indicate that living-learning communities offer multifaceted ways for students to engage in learning through shared class experiences and interactions in the residence halls. The close time students spent with each other engaged in different learning activities may have contributed to their overall learning about social justice and may also have provided greater space and opportunity for students to develop relationships with individuals who came from different backgrounds.

In reviewing the findings, new ideas for engaging students in dialogue and interactive activities related to social justice emerged. Although many of the examples pertain to academic courses on social justice, the lessons learned apply to student affairs practice. Proposed guidance for student affairs professionals includes: seek and understanding of complex concepts; explore resistance; facilitate dialogue for students to share their stories; and practice what you preach. These four suggestions are discussed below.

### **Seek an Understanding of Complex Concepts**

There exists a complexity of thought within the literature on social justice, diversity and curriculum that takes considerable time and energy to unpack. The challenge for educators is on the one hand, to provide a clear, consistent and useful conceptual framework in order to make meaning of oppressive situations and to enact change. On the other hand, there is a need to allow for the intricacy and evolving landscape of power, inequality, and oppression to be realized in

order to truly appreciate diverse positions and points of views. When preparing to facilitate a social justice program, it is important for student affairs professionals to first familiarize themselves with the literature on social justice and critical theory. This can be accomplished through a close reading of the literature, attending conferences, discussing the literature with colleagues and faculty, and taking courses related to critical theory. Critical theory, CFT, CRT, and queer theory have been criticized for not reaching a broad enough audience given the writings' often abstruse language. However, given the complexity of the concepts under investigation within critical theory (such as dominant ideology, hegemony, and oppression), it is difficult to convey meaning to the concepts without problematic explanations. As Brookfield (2005) emphasized, "(t)o be able to understand a complicated but powerful vocabulary of critique and to be able to render this in an intelligible and meaningful way to those outside that discourse is a crucial educational role" (p. 366).

In addition, as Zamudio, Rios, & Jaime (2008) noted, a deeper understanding of relational and historical analyses leads to an examination of one's own experiences compared to others in order to better understand complex oppressive relationships. Similarly, Einfeld and Collins (2008) found that students needed to first understand concepts of equality and empowerment in order to understand the broader scope of social justice. Spending time working through critical theory literature may not only provide insight into how to introduce social justice concepts to students but may also offer facilitators a greater understanding of how their interactions with students are situated in a larger context where power and positioning are at play. Professionals can also draw from local resources by partnering with faculty who engage in research and teaching on critical theory, diversity, and social justice.

## **Explore Resistance**

Not only are the theories difficult to navigate, they may cause uneasiness to the reader since they challenge firmly held beliefs about democracy and freedom, which are sources of pride for many North Americans. However, resistance may actually serve an important function in transformative learning. When facilitating programs related to social justice, student affairs practitioners may find it useful to keep in mind that although students may begin to question their belief-systems, resistance could arise even if the students are actively engaged in social justice. In addition, it is important to note that a program that attracts a diverse population may lead to greater rewards in engaging on social justice concepts. While students may benefit from interacting with others, they also may experience tension. Bowman and Brandenberger (2012) found that increased interactions with students from different backgrounds led to an intensification of both positive and negative relations. Their study illuminated the importance of creating environments that foster growth and change but that also embrace challenges and conflict. Their study reported that students need to be faced with opposing views and guided through mediating conflict of these opposing views in order for students to be motivated to increase their engagement with social responsibility toward social justice goals. Their article highlighted the need for professionals to develop skills that effectively provide students the space to work through negative emotions and responses while at the same time also provide students a safe environment. This can be best accomplished by giving voice to the lived experiences of individuals, which is discussed next.

## **Facilitate Dialogue for Story-Telling**

Zamudio et al. (2008) noted the importance of examining students' lived experiences which allowed them to view, understand, and critically evaluate dominant ideologies (in terms of juxtaposing lived experiences with dominant notions of race, gender, class, and other social identities). The current study demonstrated the importance of story-telling. As educators continue to engage students in social justice education, they should offer students opportunities to explore complex material through the use of dialogue and story-telling. Activities where students share in both small and large groups as well as react to videos personalizing experiences may lead to broader understandings of complex ideas.

Faculty and practitioners should develop better practices for facilitating dialogue about sensitive social issues and enabling students to share their own experiences. Faculty and student affairs professionals also need to practice “getting real” with students by sharing their own stories related to oppressed and privileged experiences. Talking through critical incidents that occur on one's campus can lead to examining the systemic nature of social justice issues and can make students feel supported as well as empowered to effectively confront students who may be perpetuating a particular problem.

## **Practice what you Preach**

Ultimately, it is necessary for campus members to work together in exploring the study of power, equality, and social justice. Institutions need to practice what they preach by fully implementing policies and practices that address their mission and value statements on social justice, civic education, and embracing diversity. Ideally this would involve examining social justice beyond a one-course model. In my experiences, the topic of social justice is too often separated into a special program, workshop, or course. These programs and courses attract a

small population of students and are not reaching the wider student population. Institutions of higher education need to incorporate social justice into the broader curricula and programs by providing students the knowledge and tools to understand where and how injustices are occurring and empower them to confront others. Faculty can do this as they facilitate any course subject. Practitioners can continue to expand on trainings and programs geared toward diversity and social justice by utilizing a critical theory approach.

In terms of creating expanded curricula, a beginning course would first introduce and define related concepts and offer guided dialogue to help unpack the dense material. This would be followed by courses designed to elaborate on specific social issues and followed again by coursework designed to put theory into practice. In addition to academic coursework, on-going programs (including workshops and service projects) and retreats should be established to provide campus members the opportunity to put what they are learning into practice. These steps would not only enhance students' overall learning and understanding of social justice, but would also add to their becoming more civically engaged members of society, which is an important benefit of higher education (Baum, et al., 2010).

In addition, further collaboration should be established between student affairs professionals, faculty (including but not limited to faculty who teach classes related to diversity and/or social justice), other staff, students, and institutional researchers. As Hu and Kuh (2003) noted, "(s)tudent affairs professionals are often acknowledged as the diversity experts on a campus" (p.331). It is important to expand partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs. Collaboration between these different staff and faculty may help to augment the current research and also strengthen implementation of new initiatives and programs related to combatting injustices.

Steps toward establishing strong partnerships may meet its own forms of resistance since social justice and diversity education faces opposition from critics who view the underlying agenda as indoctrination. Bok (2006) listed “Living with Diversity” and “Preparation for Citizenship” as two of his eight purposes of higher education. He supported the role of education in combating inequality but dismissed educators who speak from a particular position. Bok expressed concern with the ideas of agendas that “oppose corporations and promote a progressive welfare state agenda” (p.63). However, if the educator is required to present an “objective” view and provide all sides of an argument as equally plausible and valid, the outcome may lead away from a deeper analysis of oppression. Social justice education rests on the notion that there are injustices that can be identified and that there are ways of combating the injustice. The theories are rooted in a critique of dominant ideology and dominant culture. If higher education teachers and practitioners ignore these ideas in order to maintain “objectivity,” what are the consequences for creating social change and combating oppression? In addition, when educators openly support diversity and social justice education, they run the risk of being viewed as undermining the university mission as they may question or implicitly encourage students to question university policies, practices, and funding agencies. When navigating this sometimes treacherous territory, it is important to draw on students’ stories and to promote the programs they are requesting.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited to students who participated in the social justice living-learning community at one particular institution. The institution is a large, research school situated in the Southeast. While results are not generalizable, the rich data collected and presented may shed light on the complexity of student learning and issues related to social justice and diversity.



Although the living-learning community under investigation was unique and could be offered as a best-practice model, the use of single-case study design limits the scope. Although I was able to interview 15 students for the individual interviews, only three students were included in the group interview. In addition, the students chosen for the group interview were based on convenience. A more diverse group of students for the group interview may have led to richer results and may have shed greater light on how students learn from diverse experiences and how they mediate resistance and conflict.

The students who participated in my study may have been more interested and open to learning about social justice. In terms of resistance, students who may have been more resistant to learning may not have chosen to interview. In addition, all of the students who participated in the SJRLC chose to join the program and thus may have already been predisposed and open to learning about social justice as well as open to changing their views and beliefs. Although some diversity was present, the participants of the program were not representative of the larger student body (in terms of ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, etc.). The cohort was somewhat representative in that it consisted of more females than males, but the overall institution's margin of difference was smaller. Similarly, the cohort comprised of mostly White students, which is consistent with the population of the institution. However, Black and Hispanic students made up a larger portion of the student body than represented in the cohort. In addition, the student body population included those from Asian, Native Indian, and Asian backgrounds, which were not included in the cohort.

Although the students were unaware of my role on campus when I first was introduced, once they became aware of this role, their responses might have biased the results. Two of the students left the program before I was able to gather demographic data from them. Additionally,

the study examined more of the formal learning in the classroom rather than the informal learning outside of the classroom. Although students shared stories about the out-of-classroom experience in their interviews, less was observed in those settings.

### **Areas of Further Inquiry**

This study focused on the transformative learning experiences of students participating in a social justice living-learning community. Research can also be extended to other living-learning communities and to other programs and classes related to social justice. Research in this area is still limited and deserves further examination. Although students in the SJRLC came from somewhat diverse backgrounds, further research should examine programs offering greater diversity. Research in this area may expand further on how students learn from diverse experiences as well as how they navigate resistance. Conducting both qualitative and quantitative research would be helpful in examining the relationships between social identities and learning social justice concepts as well as potential connections between social identity and the process of acting toward social justice aims.

Given the opportunity for residence learning communities to provide rich data sources within the living environment, co-curricular activities, and classes, research in these environments should be further developed. Research can include specific social justice programs but also can involve further exploration into how students learn through diverse experiences and through story-telling in any residence learning site. In addition, further research on service-learning or other activity-based programs is needed to better understand the ways in which students learn from diverse experiences.

In terms of social justice research, attention should be paid to courses, programs, and workshops with members who experience a wide range of student awareness on social justice.

The current study looked at students who chose to join a program that specifically focused on social justice. Further research may want to explore differences in programs that are mandatory and might include a larger population of students who have no previous knowledge or interest in social justice issues. Specifically, the role of resistance may shift in programs where students have been less exposed to topics related to diversity and social justice.

Finally, research should continue to examine how students learn about the topic of social justice. Longitudinal studies are needed to further investigate students' learning throughout the college years and to examine factors that may influence their learning. This paper highlighted a gap in the research regarding how students transform their learning about social justice as it relates to inequality. Further research is needed to explore how structural, curricular/co-curricular, and informal interactional forms of diversity (Gurin, 1999) interact learning about social justice. Discovery in these areas may lead to stronger practices that could serve to strengthen campus involvement with combatting injustices, which, in turn, could enrich the overall learning experiences for students and lead to greater competencies that extend beyond the college years.

**APPENDIX A**  
**INFORMED CONSENT**

**Recruiting Email to Potential Participants**

Dear Participant:

My name is Rachel Bukanc. I am a doctoral student at the Florida State University in the College of Education under the supervision of Dr. Kathy Guthrie. You are invited to participate in a research project entitled: Understanding Social Justice through a Living-Learning Program. The purpose of this research study is to look at how students learn about social justice. This study has been approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

This case study was developed to ask you a few questions regarding your learning about social justice during this program. If you choose to participate, you will receive a \$10 gift certificate to the University bookstore. In addition, your name will be entered into a drawing for a \$100 gift certificate from the bookstore. The drawing will occur around December 5, 2013. Because of the expected number of participants, the possibility of winning is 1:20. All participants will be notified of the winner. The disbursement of the \$10 gift certificates will occur around October 1, 2013 and disbursement of the \$100 gift certificate will occur no later than December 5, 2013. You may choose to withdraw from the study without penalty to withdrawing from the drawing and without need to refund the \$10 gift certificate.

It is my hope that this information can provide information on how students learn about social justice which may lead to new teaching, facilitation, and training ideas for educators. There are no identified risks from participating in this research.

The interview is confidential. Participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop at any time without consequence. The interview will take approximately sixty minutes to complete. Responses to the interview will only be reported anonymously to protect the identity of respondents. The study is being conducted as part of a dissertation project and will be published as such.

If you are interested in participating, please contact:

Rachel Bukanc  
xxxxx@xxxxx.edu

Thank you for your consideration.

Rachel Bukanc

## **Informed Consent for Interviews**

Study: Understanding Social Justice through a Living-Learning Program

You are invited to be in a research study of how students learn about social justice while participating in a social justice living-learning program. You were selected as a possible participant because you are enrolled in the program. You can decide not to participate. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Rachel Bukanc, Doctoral Student, xxxxx@xxxxx.edu.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, the participation will be in the form of two individual interviews (one at the beginning of the fall 2013 semester and one at the end of the fall 2013 semester) that should last about an hour. The interviews will take place on campus. This procedure involves my asking you questions related to your thoughts and reflections on social justice related to your experiences in the living-learning program. The interview will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. Additionally, you will be asked to fill out a demographic sheet that will include demographic information.

### **Risks and benefits of being in the Study:**

The study has no known risks as it does not require the participants to engage in any tasks or activities beyond the interviews.

The benefits to participation are providing information on how students learn about social justice which may lead to new teaching, facilitation, and training ideas for educators.

### **Ethical Considerations:**

It is important to disclose any connections students have to the researcher prior to the study. If you have connection to the researcher that she may be unaware of, make sure to discuss with her, or a living-learning program facilitator.

### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private and confidential to the extent permitted by law. In any sort of report recorded, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records (transcribed notes of written observations) will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. The data will be published as part of the dissertation. The information obtained during this study may be published in social science journals or presented at social science meetings but the data will be prepared as aggregated data.



## **Informed Consent for Focus Group Interview**

Study: Understanding Social Justice through a Living- Learning Program

You are invited to be in a research study of how students learn about social justice while participating in a social justice living-learning program. You were selected as a possible participant because you are enrolled in the program. You can decide not to participate. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Rachel Bukanc, Doctoral Student, xxxxx@xxxxx.edu.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, the participation will be in the form of a group interview that should last about one hour. The interviews will take place on campus. This procedure involves my asking you questions related to your thoughts and reflections on social justice related to your experiences in the living-learning program. The interview will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. Additionally, you will be asked to fill out a demographic sheet that will include demographic information.

### **Risks and benefits of being in the Study:**

The study has no known risks as it does not require the participants to engage in any tasks or activities beyond the interviews.

The benefits to participation are providing information on how students learn about social justice which may lead to new teaching, facilitation, and training ideas for educators.

### **Ethical Considerations:**

It is important to disclose any connections students have to the researcher prior to the study. If you have connection to the researcher that she may be unaware of, make sure to discuss with her, or a living-learning program facilitator.

### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private and confidential to the extent permitted by law. In any sort of report recorded, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records (transcribed notes of written observations) will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. The data will be published as part of the dissertation. The information obtained during this study may be published in social science journals or presented at social science meetings but the data will be prepared as aggregated data.





## **Informed Consent for Participant Observation**

Study: Understanding Social Justice through a Living-learning Program

You are invited to be in a research study of how students learn about social justice while participating in a social justice living-learning program. You were selected as a possible participant because you are enrolled in the program. You can decide not to participate. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Rachel Bukanc, Doctoral Student, xxxxx@xxxxx.edu.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will not need to do anything specific such as an interview or activity. This procedure involves the researcher's observation of activities in the program, such as participation in the course, attendance at workshops and programs, and conversations in the residence hall. Additionally, you will be asked to fill out a demographic sheet that will include demographic information.

### **Risks and benefits of being in the Study:**

The study has no known risks as it does not require the participants to engage in any tasks or activities beyond the interviews.

The benefits to participation are providing information on how students learn about social justice which may lead to new teaching, facilitation, and training ideas for educators.

### **Ethical Considerations:**

It is important to disclose any connections students have to the researcher prior to the study. If you have connection to the researcher that she may be unaware of, make sure to discuss with her, or a living-learning program facilitator.

### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private and confidential to the extent permitted by law. In any sort of report recorded, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records (transcribed notes of written observations) will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. The data will be published as part of the dissertation. The information obtained during this study may be published in social science journals or presented at social science meetings but the data will be prepared as aggregated data.



## Permission from Instructor

August 30, 2013

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter serves as formal permission for Rachel Bukanc to observe the XXXXX course. Ms. Bukanc will be provided an opportunity to first visit the class in order to present her study and begin the recruitment process. It is my understanding she will contact the students via email following her visit to the class. In addition, in the event that any of the students indicate they do not wish to be observed, observations may still take place but would exclude observation of the students who decline observation. For instance, observations could still occur in group break-out settings. It is also my understanding that the study poses minimal risk and would not disrupt the flow of the course.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

XXXXXX XXXXX  
Instructor/Assistant Director  
XXXXX University  
xxx-xxx-xxxx  
xxxxxx@xxxx.xxx.edu

## APPENDIX B

### METHODS PROTOCOLS

#### Individual Interview Protocol

Date\_\_\_\_\_ Time\_\_\_\_\_ ID\_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym\_\_\_\_\_

Timeframe: 60 minutes

#### Introduction

- Introduce yourself
- Discuss the purpose of the study
- Provide consent form and obtain signatures.
- Provide structure of the interview (audio recording, note-taking, and use of pseudonym)
- Ask if there are any questions
- Test digital audio recording equipment
- Make the participant comfortable by smiling, paying attention to my own body language, and actively listening

Main Research Question:

- 1) What is the nature of transformative learning in regards to inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups for undergraduate students participating in a social justice living-learning community at a university in the Southeast?

Sub questions:

- a. In terms of transformative learning, how are students challenging their own long-held beliefs about social justice concepts?
- b. How are students making new meaning of these differences as they communicate and engage with their peers and faculty?
- c. How are students making meaning of social justice in terms of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups?
- d. How are students resisting learning and how does working through resistance foster learning?

Question topics (pre-coding)

Background information of student (BIS)

Social justice definitions (SJD)

Complexity of social justice (CSJ)

Discussion as learning (DL)

Resistance to learning (RL)

Learning activities (LA)

Social interactions (SI)  
Critical moments (CM)  
Learning from diverse perspectives (LDP)  
Interaction with privilege (IP)  
Interaction with oppression (IO)

1. Tell me about how you got to be a student here? (BIS)
2. What attracted you to the Social Justice Residential Learning community? (BIS, 1)
3. What does the term “social justice” mean to you when you think about inequalities between different groups of people? (1, d)
4. Did you have experiences learning about social justice before this program? (BIS, CSJ, a)
  - a. If yes, what were those experiences?
    - i. What did you learn?
    - ii. Was there anything about the activities that helped you learn best? (LA)
5. Could you share what you have learned in the program so far (CSJ, 1)
6. Which activities most engaged you? (LA, CM,1)
  - a. Why do you think those were the most engaging for you?
7. When the class participated in \_\_\_\_\_ class activity, how did that make you feel? (LA, CM, 1)
8. How about the \_\_\_\_\_ activity? (LA, CM, 1)
9. The course has examined prejudice, discrimination, oppression, power, and privilege. Which topic or topics do you think are the most important to understanding inequality? Why did you pick this/these? (CSJ, SJD, 1, b, d)
10. Have you changed the way you think about \_\_\_\_\_ (the topic/s they chose)? (CSJ, SJD, CM,1, b, d)
  - a. If yes, talk about these changes
11. During the class on prejudice and discrimination, did you disagree with any of the discussions? If so, please explain. (RL, CSJ, CM, 1, c, e, f)
12. Did anything in class make you upset? Could you share what upset you? (RL, CSJ, 1, c, e, f)
13. How about the other students? Did you notice any arguments or tensions during \_\_\_\_\_? What was that like for you? (RL, CSJ, 1, c, e, f)
14. What is your understanding of privilege? (IP, IO, 1)
15. If students come from different backgrounds and some may be seen as more privileged than others, how do students talk about this with each other in class? (IP, IO, DL, SI 1, b, c, d)
16. What do you do when you hear information about something that is different than what you believe? (RL, CSJ, 1, a, c, e, f)
17. How would you characterize your classmates? (LDP, 1, c)
18. What is a typical interaction between you and other students? (LDP, 1, c)
19. When you are discussing something related to inequality with other students, what do you talk about? (LDP, 1, c)
  - a. What did you learn from these conversations?
20. In looking at the other students, can you think of any examples where you noticed they learned something new about the topic of inequality? (LDP, CM,1, c)
  - a. Describe

- i. What do you think led to their learning the new thing?
21. Is there anything else you would like to add or share about your experiences in this program in terms of learning about social justice that you feel is important for me to know?
22. Additional follow up questions as needed.

**Concluding Remarks**

- Thank them for their participation
- Ask if they would like to see a copy of the results (explain there will be an opportunity to review the transcription of their interview to check for errors)
- Record any observations, feelings, thoughts and/or reactions about the interview

## Individual Interview Protocol: Second Interview

Date\_\_\_\_\_ Time\_\_\_\_\_ ID\_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym\_\_\_\_\_

Timeframe: 60 minutes

### Introduction

- Reintroduce yourself
- Remind the student about the purpose of the study
- Remind the student about the consent form
- Explain that the structure will be similar to the first interview
- Ask if there are any questions
- Test digital audio recording equipment
- Make the participant comfortable by smiling, paying attention to my own body language, and actively listening

Main Research Question:

- 2) What is the nature of transformative learning in regards to inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups for undergraduate students participating in a social justice living-learning community at a university in the Southeast?

Sub questions:

- a. In terms of transformative learning, how are students challenging their own long-held beliefs about social justice concepts?
- b. How are students making new meaning of these differences as they communicate and engage with their peers and faculty?
- c. How are students making meaning of social justice in terms of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups?
- d. How are students resisting learning and how does working through resistance foster learning?

Question topics (pre-coding)

Background information of student (BIS)

Social justice definitions (SJD)

Complexity of social justice (CSJ)

Discussion as learning (DL)

Resistance to learning (RL)

Learning activities (LA)

Social interactions (SI)

Critical moments (CM)

Learning from diverse perspectives (LDP)

Interaction with privilege (IP)

## Interaction with oppression (IO)

1. Since our last interview, what new things (if any) have you learned about inequality? About your understanding of social justice? (SJD, CSJ, 1)
2. Since our last interview, the class has reviewed the topics of \_\_\_\_\_. Which topic/s most engaged you? Could you share more on how topic/s were interesting to you? When the class participated in \_\_\_\_\_ class activity, how did that make you feel? (LA, CM, 1)
3. How about the \_\_\_\_\_ activity? (LA, CM, 1)
4. Have you changed the way you think about \_\_\_\_\_ (the topic/s they chose during the last interview)? (CSJ, SJD, CM, 1, b, d)
  - a. If yes, talk about these changes
5. Have you attended any of the SJRL programs? If yes, which one/s? During the \_\_\_\_\_ program, what did you think about \_\_\_\_\_? How did that make you feel? (LA, 1)
6. Do you think your interactions with classmates are different in the classroom from interactions in the Residence Hall? If so, please explain. (DL, SI)
7. The classes on oppression covered a range of “isms”: sexism, heterosexism, transgender oppression, racism, classism, religious oppression, ableism, and adultism. Which class did you enjoy the most? Can you share more about that? Did you disagree with any of the discussions? If so, please explain. (RL, CSJ, CM, 1, c, e, f)
8. Can you recall a time when you felt frustrated during the program? (RL, CSJ, CM, 1, c, e, f)
  - a. If yes, tell me about it
9. Did you notice anyone else’s frustrations? (RL, CSJ, 1, c, e, f)
  - a. If yes, tell me about it
10. Have you gotten close to any students in the program? If yes, talk about some of the similarities you share and some of the differences. Think about this in terms of what you learned in class with social identities (gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, religion, privilege, etc.). What have you learned from them (or him/her)? (IP, IO, DL, SI 1, b, c, d).
11. Now that you have been in this program for a few months, do you see yourself working for social justice? In any particular area? What motivates you to work toward this? (BIS, CM, 1)
12. How would you describe your leadership style? (1)
13. Has that changed at all during this class? If so, can you share that change?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add or share about your experiences in this program in terms of learning about social justice that you feel is important for me to know?
15. Additional follow up questions as needed.

## Concluding Remarks

- Thank them for their participation
- Ask if they would like to see a copy of the results (explain there will be an opportunity to review the transcription of their interview to check for errors)
- Record any observations, feelings, thoughts and/or reactions about the interview



## Focus Group Interview Protocol

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_ Timeframe: 90 minutes

### Pseudonym and ID Numbers of Participants

Pseudonym

ID Number

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### Introduction

- Reintroduce yourself
- Remind the students about the purpose of the study
- Remind the students about the consent form
- Explain that the structure will be different from the individual interviews in that some questions will be facilitated by the researcher but the students are encouraged to speak with each other and ask each other questions related to learning about social justice
- Ask if there are any questions
- Test digital audio recording equipment
- Make the participant comfortable by smiling, paying attention to my own body language, and actively listening

### Main Research Question:

- 1) What is the nature of transformative learning in regards to inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups for undergraduate students participating in a social justice living-learning community at a university in the Southeast?

### Sub questions:

- a. In terms of transformative learning, how are students challenging their own long-held beliefs about social justice concepts?
- b. How are students making new meaning of these differences as they communicate and engage with their peers and faculty?
- c. How are students making meaning of social justice in terms of inequality and disenfranchisement of minoritized groups?
- d. How are students resisting learning and how does working through resistance foster learning?

## Question topics (pre-coding)

Background information of student (BIS)

Social justice definitions (SJD)

Complexity of social justice (CSJ)

Discussion as learning (DL)

Resistance to learning (RL)

Learning activities (LA)

Social interactions (SI)

Critical moments (CM)

Learning from diverse perspectives (LDP)

Interaction with privilege (IP)

Interaction with oppression (IO)

1. Could you share what you have learned in the program so far (CSJ, 1)
2. Which activities most engaged you? (LA, CM,1)
  - a. Why do you think those were the most engaging for you?
3. When the class participated in \_\_\_\_\_ class activity, how did that make you feel? (LA, CM, 1)
4. How about the \_\_\_\_\_ activity? (LA, CM, 1)
5. The course has examined prejudice, discrimination, oppression, power, and privilege. Which topic or topics do you think are the most important to understanding inequality? Why did you pick this/these? (CSJ, SJD, 1, b, d)
6. Have you changed the way you think about \_\_\_\_\_ (the topic/s they chose)? (CSJ, SJD, CM,1, b, d)
  - a. If yes, talk about these changes
7. During the class on \_\_\_\_\_, did you disagree with any of the discussions? If so, please explain. (RL, CSJ, CM, 1, c, e, f)
8. Did anything in class make you upset? Could you share what upset you? (RL, CSJ, 1, c, e, f)
9. How about the other students? Did you notice any arguments or tensions during \_\_\_\_\_? What was that like for you? (RL, CSJ, 1, c, e, f)
10. What kind of environment do you most enjoy being in?
  - a. Talk about how that environment relates with your learning (1)
11. How would you describe your experiences in this program to incoming students? (1)
12. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about related to learning about social justice?
13. Additional follow up questions as needed.

## Concluding Remarks

- Thank them for their participation
- Ask if they would like to see a copy of the results (explain there will be an opportunity to review the transcription of their interview to check for errors)
- Record any observations, feelings, thoughts and/or reactions about the interview

## Participant Observation Protocol

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym and ID Numbers of Participants

Pseudonym

ID Number

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Observation time: estimated \_\_\_\_\_ actual \_\_\_\_\_

Observation Notes:

- 1) Pay particular attention to the communication (verbal and non-verbal) between individuals.
- 2) How do the students communicate?
- 3) What language are they using to describe learning?
- 4) What activities are they engaged in (journaling, answering questions, reviewing texts, critically examining, etc.)?
- 5) How are students responding?
- 6) Demarcate researcher reflections from observations

Observations	Reflections	Themes

**APPENDIX C**

**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Demographic Questionnaire**

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_ ID \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

1. Gender  
\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_ Female

2. Race/Ethnicity  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Age  
\_\_\_\_\_ years

3. Classification  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Where were you born (City, State, and Country)?  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Birth order (your order if you have siblings)  
\_\_\_\_ First  
\_\_\_\_ Second  
\_\_\_\_ Third  
\_\_\_\_ Fourth  
\_\_\_\_ Fifth  
\_\_\_\_ Sixth > \_\_\_\_\_

6. Have any of your parents or guardians gone to college?  
\_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX D**

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FOR**

**HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH**

From: Human Subjects [REDACTED]  
Sent: Friday, September 06, 2013 11:09 AM  
To: Bukanc, Rachel  
Cc: Guthrie, Kathy  
Subject: Use of Human Subjects in Research - Approval Memorandum

The Florida State University  
Office of the Vice President For Research Human Subjects Committee Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742  
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

**APPROVAL MEMORANDUM**

Date: 9/6/2013

To: Rachel Bukanc

Address: [REDACTED]  
Dept.: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research  
Understanding Social Justice through a Living-Learning Program

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and one member of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be Expedited per per 45 CFR § 46.110(7) and has been approved by an expedited review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals, which may be required.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by 9/5/2014 you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol

change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is FWA00000168/IRB number IRB00000446.

Cc: Kathy Guthrie, Advisor  
HSC No. 2013.11096

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Dr. Rachel Bukanc is the oldest daughter of Michael and Stella Bukanc. She was born and raised in Essex Junction, Vermont, and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Bradford College in Human Studies. Rachel went on to earn a Master of Arts degree in Anthropology and Women's Studies from Brandeis University. Given her interest in exploring different cultures, Rachel studied abroad in Nigeria, taught English as a Second Language in Taiwan, and led two separate groups of Beyond Border students to Germany.

Rachel began her student affairs professional experience as a Coordinator of Graduate Student Services and later as a Residence Life Quad Director at Brandeis University. She then served as the Assistant Director of University Conduct at the University of North Florida before serving more recently as the Assistant Dean/Director for the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities at the Florida State University. Rachel's research interests focus on social justice and diversity.