

**COMPARTMENTALIZED CULTURES, INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS: EXPLORING
FIRST-YEAR STUDENT TRANSITION THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AT
A MIDDLE ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2017

This study explores how first-year students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture in higher education during the transition from high school to college. Examining institutional culture during the first year remains relevant because nearly 25% of all students who depart higher education do so within their first year (Nalbone et al., 2015). When disaggregated, there are problematic differences among these departures based on students' gender, race, and first-generation status (Pell, 2015). Institutional culture, therefore, serves as a timely tool to account for variation in first-year students' transitional experiences.

This study employs a cultural constructivist methodology that is informed by a constructivist theoretical perspective. This methodology accounts for the multiple realities of various stakeholders. Sixty-two students—50 in their first year and 12 in their second year—at a middle Atlantic university comprised a stratified purposeful sample for this study. Data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews and analyzed following interpretative thematic analysis.

Several key findings of this study expose the complexity of co-construction that is integral to interpreting individual experiences within the institutional culture that I studied. First, learning institutional culture transpires for students as an ongoing, multifaceted process throughout the first year. Immersion, trial and error, and observation serve as tactics students rely upon to learn how to perform cultural norms. Second, friendships that develop during the first year appear as interconnected constellations that remain homogenous based on gender and political dispositions. These friendships aid students in interpreting the institutional culture. Third, institutional rituals produce in students feelings of belonging through shared emotions. Ceremonies that celebrate individual identities suggest through symbolic actions a strong sense of mattering that deepens institutional connection. Finally, minoritized students encounter differential interactions with the institutional culture. Friendships, often developed through cultural student organizations, facilitate transition and deflect discrimination experienced by minoritized students. Students with intersecting minoritized identities may rely on hopeful self-reliance to overcome challenges in the face of transitional isolation. Understanding these processes provides the opportunity for researchers and practitioners to unravel the complexities of campus cultures that impinge upon student success. Implications are drawn for theory and future research.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education are sites where institutional culture is pervasive yet decipherable. Physical manifestations of an institution's culture appear through a number of ways. The architectural designs of campus buildings, residence hall layouts, statues, student groups, student programs, stories, plaques, rituals, legends, and ceremonies are just a few examples of manifestations of institutional culture that reflect deeply rooted values, ideals, beliefs, and assumptions that are espoused and embraced by members of the community (Birnbaum, 1988). Because of the enormity of what culture encompasses, it is not surprising that various researchers and theorists have defined culture differently in order to sophisticate its comprehension, while adding to its complexity (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

Although, there are multiple definitions and conceptualizations of institutional culture, this dissertation envisions institutional culture as an evolving context-bound set of affective and behavioristic patterns that shape, mold, or persuade individuals in higher education through symbolic structures and tacit assumptions aimed at manipulating feelings, eliciting affects, inciting actions, and inculcating expectations in new members. Conceptualizing culture in this way blends salient characteristics of the definitions explained later, while imbuing feeling and affect into its revitalized construct. The addition of affect allows the ways in which members experience, perceive, and make sense of cultural situations in higher education institutions to be positioned centrally.

As students transition to higher education, they are potentially exposed to previously unconsidered or new values, assumptions, and beliefs (Tinto, 1975). This theoretically casts transition in the first-year as a site through which institutional culture may be explored. Institutional culture, consequently, serves as a timely tool to understand the ever-changing nature of higher education, to examine its current contexts, and to illuminate students' experiences. Returning to and renewing cultural perspectives of higher education may provide an opportunity to present new understandings of these experiences, allowing for implications that foster broader student success.

1.1 PURPOSE AND RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY

Higher education's evolving atmosphere is spurred by pressures and demands created by new student populations, college access, degree attainment, and social mobility (Perna & Thomas, 2008). As a result, higher education garners criticism about its societal role (Aronowitz, 2000; Arum & Roska, 2011; Bok, 2006; Burke, 2012; Cox, 2009). From the pressure created by these forces, institutional efforts aimed at student retention, persistence, and graduation resurface as perennial outcomes that demarcate institutional effectiveness. Retention and persistence are two of the seven measures used to determine academic quality rankings in *U.S. News and World Report* (Bishop & White, 2007) and are frequently utilized to quantify accountability.

Since 1996 college degree completion has not improved. For the past 20 years, approximately 58 percent of first-time, first-year students earned a college degree within six years according to the most recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data. Nearly one-quarter of all students who depart higher education do so after their first year (Nalbone,

Kovach, Fish, McCoy, Jones, & Wright, 2015). Students departing higher education do not receive the benefits of a college degree and forfeit the time and financial investments placed into their education (Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013). When disaggregated, there are problematic differences in college degree attainment among students based on their gender, race, and first-generation status (Pell Institute, 2015). Current research identifies these student populations as not only emergent, but also critical in folding into the higher education fabric in order to improve college degree attainment for wider populations of students (Perna & Thomas, 2008). As a result, first-year student transitions to higher education serve as a site for exploring disparities in educational attainment. Retention in the first year has garnered particular attention from institution administrators, researchers, and policymakers because it subsequently links to persistence toward degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). The first year of college is critical for not only transitioning to college, but also for deciding to remain or depart from the institution, a postulation embedded in current research and practice (Sax & Weintraub, 2014). Exploring first-year student transition provides an opportunity to understand the experiences, perceptions, and meaning making activities of first-year students in their adjustment to college.

Degree attainment has not increased substantially in the past 20 years, in spite of burgeoning research on college students and college outcomes. Prominent research related to student outcomes includes student involvement (Astin, 1984), student engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005), and student integration (Tinto, 1975) theories. These theories have been repeatedly tested and remain foundational to much current research on college students. However, involvement, engagement, and integration are potentially stagnant because degree completion remains steady, in spite of their theoretical ubiquity (Melguizo, 2011; Porter, 2006;

Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Due to the primacy of these theories, critics argue that little is being done to advance new ways of thinking about undergraduate experiences in order to improve the status quo (Perna & Thomas, 2008; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

The purpose of this research study is to explore first-year student transition through the lens of institutional culture in order to offer new conceptual knowledge about undergraduate student experiences with institutional culture. This study intends to shift from the positivistic and post-positivistic paradigms that dominate higher education and student affairs research and practice (Guido, Chavez, & Lincoln, 2010; Manning, 2000; Mertens, 2010) by using cultural constructivism informed by a constructivist theoretical perspective to explore first-year student transition. This epistemological approach allows us to interpret the complex and socially constructed natures of human environments (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, 2005; Hatch, 2002; Manning, 2000; Mertens, 2010; Schwandt, 1998). This new knowledge has the potential to revitalize frameworks to displace the status quo, to rejuvenate institutional culture's role in understanding and critiquing higher education, to underscore institutional culture's role in college student transition, and to improve practices that widen student success.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Institutional culture provides an analytic device through which sophistication and complexity may add to understanding the experiences of undergraduate students. Much higher education research focuses on precollege characteristics and outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 1999, 2005); therefore, institutional culture allows the perspectives, narratives, and representations of the students within the environment to be captured and analyzed. Intentionally including and

representing the narratives of students based on their gender, race, and first-generation status allows for the continued understanding of the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, a need in current higher education research (Fischer, 2007; Perna & Thomas, 2008; Stuber, 2011).

The research questions designed for this study center on understanding how institutional culture influences first-year students' transition to higher education. The main research question relates to this goal: How do first-year students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture during their transition to higher education?

Three specific research questions provide nuanced utility to unpacking the overall research question by examining pertinent areas that previous literature suggests as relevant to college student transition and outcomes, especially as it relates to experiences and perceptions of institutional culture:

- (a) How do students learn to enact institutional culture during their transition to higher education?
- (b) How do campus friendships influence perceptions of institutional culture?
- (c) How do students ascribe affective meaning to institutional rituals, performances, and situations?

1.3 INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

1.3.1 Conceptual underpinnings

Institutions of higher education are noticeably complex environments that reflect societal norms as well as specific institutional values and beliefs (Birnbaum, 1988; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). As a result, interpretative cultural frameworks, emanating from anthropology and cultural studies, have been broadly applied to higher education to make sense of institutions. Culture is an elusive concept that is variously defined in myriad fields of study. In fact, the myriad meanings of culture remain so paramount that various researchers and theorists have devoted volumes to uncovering its complexities (Bloch, 1998; Boivin, 2008; Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1976; Hall & du Gay, 1996; Van Gennep, 1909/1969; Williams 1983a). Williams (1983b), a distinguished cultural critic, asserts that culture is among the three most complicated words in the English language (p. 87). In 1952, Kroeber and Kluckhohn noted over 160 different definitions of culture, a number that has presumably increased over time (cited in Kuh & Whitt, 1988). For Geertz (1973), a leading interpretive anthropologist, the way in which meaning is constructed and expressed in social groups remains a defining attribute of culture:

[Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.
(p. 89)

In this sense, culture not only refers to cultivating social interactions among members, but it also introduces a complex system of symbols through which value, meaning, and emotion are stored. These symbols are continuously accessed to provide comprehension of life activities and to make

sense of the world; in other words, these symbols provide a conceptual map for analytic interpretation of life activities (Hall, 2003). Situating separation, transition, and incorporation as key markers for processing through liminality, Van Gennep (1909/1969), a seminal structural anthropologist, proposes a mode of analysis of structural, material, cultural rituals to cultivate their richer symbolic meanings. In this way, rites of passage play an integral role in the way that culture is rationalized, perceived, and interpreted.

As culture's usage as a term burgeoned over time, its complexity thrived. Culture came to interweave materiality with symbolic meaning. According to Williams (1983b), a dichotomy between material and symbolic natures of culture limits interpretative utility. There is much to be gleaned from examining culture as a holistic concept instead of fragmenting it into either material or abstract interpretations. Exploring the primacy of these frameworks together enriches its complexity, while sophisticating meaning-making activities. In this way, language (or symbol) and action couple in interactive and mutually shaping ways.

In a broader sense, culture is a perceived abstraction that is variously employed to understand the ways in which values are transmitted and social constructions are perpetuated among groups of people (Geertz, 1973; Kohls, 2001; Kuh & Hall, 1993; Schein, 2010; Van Gennep, 1909/1969). However, culture veils these underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values through complex forces (Alfred, 2006; Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Love, 1997). Its invisible nature does not, however, diminish its presence; culture remains a powerful and dominant force that individuals enact and interact with daily. In this way, culture is never complete; it is never an end product. Instead, culture becomes a marker of progress and a promise toward unraveling experiences; culture is discovery (Kuh et al., 1991). Because of its complexity, researchers and theorists employ metaphor to communicate, represent, and illustrate

culture's intricate conceptuality (Manning, 2000). The metaphors contained within these conceptualizations of culture are generally unique and require decoding.

Culture illuminates the way that values and beliefs are transmitted to new members. It provides a frame to make meaning of activities and it serves as a powerful, tacit force guiding daily life (Boivin, 2008; Geertz, 1973; Van Gennep 1909/1969). It permeates the ways in which the social world is perceived, constructed, and enacted. It binds relationships by enforcing rules, standards, and norms that extend into a number of arenas. Examining culture provides utility in understanding the way in which organizational systems—like higher education—function. In this sense, human behavior and emotion cannot be understood without culture; culture mediates human behavior and emotion (Manning, 2000).

1.3.2 Overview of institutional culture in higher education

Institutional culture, interchangeably termed organizational culture, retains characteristics similar to the anthropological senses of culture that make it useful in interpreting higher education. Culture broadly relates to nearly every field of study (Schein, 2010), including higher education (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). The far-reaching extension of culture's relevance to various fields hints at its utility in the study of higher education. The interpretative frameworks of Geertz (1973) and Van Gennep (1909/1969) contribute to the development of institutional culture in higher education. Conceptually, institutional culture possesses inherent richness, depth, and complexity that render it a useful frame for interpreting higher education. Imagined as a culture, higher education includes widespread activities and interactions that are variously perceived, experienced, and made sense of by numerous students, faculty, and staff who regularly and

irregularly enter and exit the institutional setting (Birnbaum, 1988; Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh & Hall, 1993; Magolda, 2003).

In this regard, higher education institutions are cultures that enact and produce behavior of social actors. Theorists continually grapple with culture in higher education and understanding the pertinent aspects of these conceptualizations contributes to the ways in which institutional culture is defined for this dissertation. Birnbaum (1988) refers to institutional culture as “glue” that binds together members of an organization through values and ideals (p. 72). Meanwhile, Peterson and Spenser (1991) view institutional culture as patterned behavior, reflected in decision-making processes through shared values and symbols (cited in Awbrey, 2005, p. 5). In a sense, the symbols, values, and beliefs that undergird institutional culture aid individuals in rationalizing an institution’s behavior and direction (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Ott, 1989). Institutional culture within this research study encompasses varying definitions. Values, beliefs, symbols, systems, patterns, and individuals recur throughout the literature and are necessary to account for when reconstituting the definition of institutional culture described earlier in this chapter (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006).

1.4 METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

This research study utilizes a cultural constructivist methodology informed by a constructivist theoretical perspective. Rooted in constructivism and interpretative anthropology, cultural constructivism provides a methodological approach that appreciates the exploratory nature of a research design that accounts for the multiple realities of various stakeholders. Qualitative one-on-one interviews following a semi-structured interview protocol served as the data collection

technique. The semi-structured nature of the interview protocol included open-ended questions that allowed participants to recollect, reconstruct, and analyze that which was salient to their transitional experiences.

To obtain experiential variation, the sample was stratified by gender, race, and first-generation status. This sampling strategy aligns with cultural constructivism's incorporation of diverse perspectives and with the field's need to better understand the experiences of these students. Furthermore, this methodology allows a researcher to decipher higher education institutions as complex and context-bound landscapes. Sixty-two students from Middle Atlantic University (MAU) finishing either their first or second year comprised the sample for this research study. MAU enrolls approximately 17,500 undergraduate students, nearly 4,000 of whom are in their first year (Carnegie Classification, 2017).

Data analysis within cultural constructivism requires abstract interpretations. Within this research study, thematic analysis of data was employed to allow for abstract interpretations to develop and to emerge from the data. Interpretative thematic analysis connects to cultural constructivist methodology and a constructivist theoretical perspective that represents not only the multiple realities and nuanced transitional experiences of diverse participants, but also the underlying assumptions that direct institutional culture.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE

This research study contributes to the literature in higher education by exploring first-year students' experiences and institutional culture during the first-year transition to higher education. Incorporating perspectives of students from diverse backgrounds provides experiential variation.

This variation draws attention to the voices of students based on their gender, race, and first-generation status. Providing new conceptual knowledge that targets multiple student voices and experiences is a direction for current higher education research, especially given lower percentages of degree attainment among students based on their gender, race, or first-generation status.

This study utilized cultural constructivism in a way that has only been theoretically discussed and infrequently employed (exception Christie & Dinham, 1991) in order explore first-year students' experiences within an institutional culture. Related research primarily focuses on the precollege characteristics or general relationships to outcomes (Birnbaum, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 1999, 2005; Pike, Smart, & Ethington, 2011; Terrion & Aceti, 2012; Vinson et al., 2006), instead of transitional processes. This study fills a conceptual gap in the ways in which institutional culture is considered by directly focusing on processes and experiences. A renewed cultural constructivist perspective on first-year student transition advances our conceptual understanding of institutional culture and reconsiders student success as previously defined in the literature. This research study also has several recommendations for practice that may promote greater student success and persistence toward degree completion.

Reflexively, this research study has personal significance for my past and future professional roles. Working in the Offices of Student Life and Residence Life for seven years led me to focus my attention on student transition, student engagement, and student success during a student's first year. Professionally, I had frequent interactions with first-year students and was afforded the opportunity to learn about their successes and challenges in adjusting to college life. During the 2013-2014 academic year, some of these interactions were mediated through a pilot version of the MAP-Works (recently renamed) retention program, which intended

to predict students at risk for attrition through survey instruments and individualized developmental conversations with students (Skyfactor, 2016). From these interactions throughout my career, I anecdotally linked those successes and challenges to positive and negative encounters students had with institutional culture and to the ways in which they developed subcultures within peer friendship groups and student communities. I collaborated on teams in Residence Life to develop and experiment with strategies that were aimed at easing students' transition and that were founded on extant literature. For example, I crafted an initiative that increased the frequency of residence hall programs during the first six weeks of the term in an effort to facilitate students' transition. This initiative is still the current programming model of Residence Life at the University of Pittsburgh. This initiative incorporated facets of student engagement and student integration theories (Kuh et al., 2005; Tinto, 1975), which may have limited utility in upending the status quo and supporting students from traditionally underserved backgrounds (Perna & Thomas, 2008; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Additionally, when investigating these theories in a previous exploratory research study with first-year students conducted through a qualitative research methods course, it became apparent that the processes that overlaid individual experiences with institutional culture suggested that students experienced the institution holistically. This diverged from popular conceptualizations of higher education, which categorized experiences into either academic or social spheres (Birnbaum, 2013; Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Christie & Dinham, 1991; Ryan & Glenn, 2006). That exploratory study, this current study, and the infusion of institutional culture with student engagement and transition are significant to my overarching research trajectory related to this inquiry.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines several strands of literature to form conceptual understandings of the ways in which students experience higher education. Because of the dearth of literature on first-year student experiences with institutional culture during transitional periods, I explored, synthesized, and converged multiple strands of literature in order to conceptualize, broaden, and deepen the foundation of this research topic. This literature review forms initial understandings of the ways in which first-year students transition to higher education. First, this chapter examines institutional culture in higher education in ways that renew this term. Next, exploring student involvement, student engagement, and student integration allows for examination of the ways in which these theories have been utilized not only to understand student experiences, but also to link these experiences to outcomes. Highlighting and exposing the differences related to these theories provides utility in considering their functionality to explain student experiences and in interrogating their contemporary application to first-year student transition. Additionally, reviewing models that build upon, map onto, and expand involvement, engagement, and integration refines and adds nuance to these overarching theories. Further, examining student transition as well as the characteristics that affect students' transition constructs a point of departure necessary for this study. Finally, the prevalence of campus residence halls at colleges and universities, their association with multiple college student outcomes, and their presence at Middle Atlantic University warrants consideration in this chapter. Unifying these strands of

literature provides the foundation for this research topic, which explores first-year student transition through institutional culture.

2.1 INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Institutional culture, which focuses on culture at the organizational level, retains elusive complexity that renders it decipherable through targeted interrogation, appropriate conceptual knowledge, and interpretative tools. Institutional culture is a pervasive force that infiltrates multiple levels of an organization. It impels and guides behavior through the rigid enforcement of norms, values, ideals, and beliefs (Kuh et al., 2005). Furthermore, institutional culture is experienced and perceived differently by those interacting with it (Goldberger, 2009). Consequently, institutional culture is never singular. Instead, it becomes the confluence of internal subcultural texts and external macro-cultural forces that culminate in a way that presses upon individuals (Kuh et al., 1991; Schein, 2010). In spite of its complexity, elusiveness, and multiple meanings, institutional culture serves as a useful framework for grappling with meaning-making activities, affective perceptions, and behavior (Kuh et al., 2005). Therefore, institutional culture serves as an appropriate framework to analyze higher education and the activities associated with first-year student transition (Christie & Dinham, 1991).

Institutional culture has been defined in a number of ways. However, researchers and theorists most often refer to the definitions and models proposed by Smircich (1983), Tierney (1988), Kuh and Whitt (1988), Parker (2000), Valimaa and Ylijoku (2008), and Schein (2010). The definitions of institutional culture proposed by these authors allow for an investigation of overlapping themes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of Definitions of Institutional Culture

Author(s)	Definition
Smircich, 1983, p. 344	“Culture is usually defined as social or normative glue that holds an organization together. It expresses the values or social ideals and beliefs that organizational members come to share...manifested by symbolic devices such as myths, rituals, stories, legends, and specialized language.”
Tierney, 1988, p. 4	“Organizational culture, then, is the study of particular webs of significance within an organizational setting.”
Kuh & Whitt, 1988, pp. 12-13	“[C]ulture in higher education is defined as the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups.”
Parker, 2000, p. 83	“Organizational culture is a process which is locally produced by people...but it can also be usefully talked about as a thing with particular effects on people...it is both a verb and a noun.”
Valimaa & Ylijoki, 2008, p. 12	“Organizational culture acts as sets of taken-for-granted values, attitudes, and ways of behaving, which are articulated through and reinforced by recurrent practices among a group of people in given context.”
Schein, 2010, p. 18	“The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and is therefore transmitted to new members as the correct way to interpret, perceive, think, and feel.”

Even though these theorists approach institutional culture differently, certain characteristics repeat. The recurring concepts of institutional culture include: (a) shared values, beliefs, or assumptions; (b) groups of people in an organizational context; (c) evolving patterns

of behavior; (d) transmission of norms to new members; and (e) complexity through interacting layers and forces. Uncovering these recurring features allows for a synthesized definition of the term to be offered.

Capturing significant elements of these definitions, institutional culture, for this dissertation, is defined as an evolving context-bound set of behavioral patterns that shape, mold, or persuade individuals in higher education through symbolic structures and tacit assumptions aimed at manipulating feelings, eliciting affects, inciting actions, and inculcating expectations in new members. Within this definition, emotions and feelings assume significance because these affects are powerful forces that greatly contribute to the cultural construction that students, faculty, and staff members experience (Boehman, 2007; Jo, 2008; Lawler, 2001; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Including the emotive vectors produced by institutional cultural phenomena recognizes the complicated human factor inescapably enmeshed with culture (Hardt, 2009; Hochschild, 1983). To summarize, a reconstituted definition of institutional culture not only contains patterns of behavior as previous definitions suggest, but also the feelings, emotions, and affects these behaviors evoke. This refined definition explicitly incorporates visible (material) and invisible (abstract) cultural domains.

2.2 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT, ENGAGEMENT, AND INTEGRATION

Student involvement, student engagement, and student integration have been widely tested and heavily employed in student affairs practice to account for student experiences that generate educational outcomes (Baldwin & Koh, 2012; Hu, 2010; Keup, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Peck, 2011; Pike et al., 2011; Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014).

As such, involvement, engagement, and integration remain foundational to much higher education and student affairs research and practice (Melguizo, 2011; Porter, 2006; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The outcomes of these theories often relate to student retention, student persistence, and student sense of belonging, which are frequently utilized to represent or gauge student transition (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009; Woosley & Miller, 2009). According to Google Scholar (2016), Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement, Kuh’s (2009) theory of student engagement, and Tinto’s (1975) theory of student integration have been collectively cited over 14,000 times. Thus, these three theories have remained accessible, prominent, and frequently utilized since their introductions. This frequent utilization also demands critique because repeatedly testing and expanding these theories has not resulted in significant improvements in retention or degree attainment.

Conceptually, student involvement, student engagement, and student integration are distinctive and separate. These terms represent discrete conceptualizations aimed at accounting for student experiences in higher education. However, these terms are often used interchangeably and sometimes employed in contradictory or confusing ways (e.g. Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011). The entanglement of these terms was established by Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009), who thoroughly researched the interrelationships of these three constructs through qualitative expert interviews. They found that involvement, engagement, and integration are differentially applied, resulting in confusion about their strengths and limitations in illuminating complex student experiences. Consequently, unearthing the way students’ experiences relate to desired institutional outcomes remains a focus in higher education.

Therefore, student involvement, engagement, and integration must be further investigated to extract the intricacies of these terms and discern their utility in contemporary accounts of

college student transitions and experiences. Through this investigation, student experiences may be more adequately accounted for through challenging these frameworks in a way that generates new conceptual frameworks that holistically target the rich complexity of undergraduate student experiences. The following sections examine student involvement, student engagement, and student integration theories in order to capture their strengths, recognize their limitations, and propel their reconfigured utility in an effort to account for undergraduate student experience.

2.2.1 Student involvement

As a theoretical concept, student involvement was popularized by Astin (1984, 1993b) to link student behavior to educational outcomes. According to Astin (1984), student involvement explains the type of mental exertion that students exercise outside themselves:

Student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience...a highly-involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. (p. 518)

Astin's (1984) notions of student involvement are drawn from Freud's idea of cathexis, the energy that is invested into objects and people outside oneself (p. 518). Vigilance, time on task, and effort are discrete concepts that may relate broadly to involvement, but their narrow definitions inhibit their singular utility in examining college student behavior. Student involvement incorporates aspects of vigilance, time on task, and effort. Inclusion of these concepts allows student involvement to be employed broadly. Furthermore, student involvement theory is behaviorally driven. Within this model, the behavior that a student enacts is more

important than how a student feels; the student's actions maintain prevalence in involvement theory (Astin, 1984). With this in mind, student involvement occurs along a continuum; students participate in activities with varying degrees of psychological investment at different points in their collegiate careers (Astin, 1993b). Thus, student involvement in different activities achieves varying outcomes that are based on a student's precollege characteristics and interactions with the campus environment.

In evaluating student involvement, Astin (1984) operates within the confines of an inputs-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model (see Figure 1). Students matriculate with predetermined characteristics, attributes, capabilities, ideologies, and prejudices referred to as inputs. As they immerse in the college environment, interact with peers and faculty, and encounter institutional programs and policies, students are influenced. Accordingly, the outcome indicates a change in learning or development based on the environmental variables. This suggests that development occurs under varying conditions.

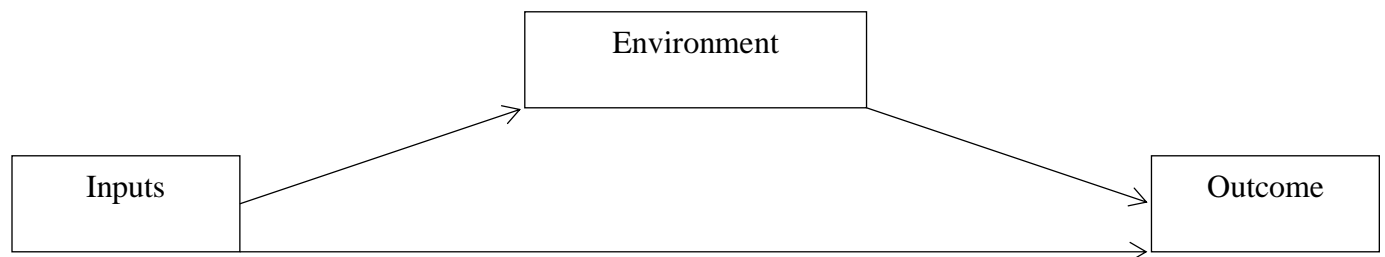


Figure 1. Astin's (1993b) I-E-O Model

Particular consideration must be given to the four domains of outcomes that can be measured by Astin's (1984) I-E-O model. These domains exist within a matrix and demonstrate possible utilizations of involvement theory in assessment, research, and practice (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). The main divides within this matrix are outcomes and data collection methods. Outcomes are either cognitive and relate to knowledge and skills, or affective and relate to attitudes and perceptions. Data collection inputs are behavioral and defined as something that a

student performs or does, or psychological and defined as something that a student perceives or feels. The four potential domains of outcomes are cognitive-psychological, cognitive-behavioral, affective-psychological, and affective-behavioral (see Table 2).

Table 2. Abridged Version of Astin's (1993a) Taxonomy of Student Outcomes

Type of Data	Type of Outcome	
	<i>Cognitive</i>	<i>Affective</i>
<i>Psychological</i>	Academic achievement Critical thinking ability Subject-knowledge	Values, attitudes, or beliefs Self-concept Satisfaction with college
<i>Behavioral</i>	Degree attainment Vocational achievement Awards	Leadership Citizenship Interpersonal relationships

As noted previously, student involvement theory privileges cognitive-behavioral and affective-behavioral outcomes because it rests on the assumption that the main determinant of involvement is what a student does; involvement theory is not concerned with how a student feels (Astin, 1984, 1993b). This guiding assumption has had significant influence on student affairs and higher education practice and research. Studies and programs are more comfortably aligned with behaviorally based outcomes (Astin, 1993a; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). As a result, involvement in productive learning activities consistently relates to a host of positive outcomes within these domains, such as educational attainment, retention, increased studying, graduate school enrollment, faculty relationships outside the classroom, and richer peer relationships (Astin, 1993b; Dugan, 2013; Junco et al., 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 1999, 2005).

The most underutilized domain of outcomes within this taxonomy is affective-psychological. As Astin (1993a) notices, practitioners and educators are less likely to measure affective outcomes, overall, because their value-laden and individually perceived natures appear

limiting and non-generalizable. This perspective emanates from the persistent influence of positivist and post-positivist paradigms on higher education (Mertens, 2010). Yet, ignoring affective outcomes impoverishes and simplifies the totality of the undergraduate student experience. In fact, affective outcomes play a significant role in more fully apprehending student experiences (Bean, 2005; Reason, 2009; Vianden & Barlow, 2014). A student's college satisfaction, for example, has considerable relationships with numerous outcomes in other domains including retention, persistence, and academic achievement. In fact, student satisfaction is asserted as the most significant affective outcome (Astin, 1993a, 1993b). Yet, moving beyond satisfaction to more fully incorporate other affective components related to students' senses of self, perceptions of efficacy, confidence levels, values, attitudes, and beliefs remains a vital task for the continued utility of student involvement theory in accounting for increasingly diverse student experiences.

2.2.2 Student engagement

Student engagement theory extends and amends Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement alongside Pace's (1979, 1982) theory of quality of student effort. Astin (1984) and Pace (1979, 1982) were foundational to Kuh's construction of student engagement. Broadly, aspects of quality of student effort and student involvement resemble student engagement. Engagement considers how students invest in institutional activities (Pace, 1979) in order to achieve desired outcomes (Astin, 1984). According to Pace (1979, 1982), learning and development require time and effort from the student. Within his model, Pace (1982) concludes from a nationally representative survey of approximately 12,000 undergraduate students from 40 institutions that students who expend much time on an activity with low psychological effort achieve less than

students who exert more effort in an activity for fewer hours. Such a finding suggests that a student's quality of effort is more important than time on task, a tenet that is represented in student engagement.

Similarly, Kuh's (2009) definition of student engagement refers to the effort that a student places into an activity. Thus, student engagement becomes an evolution of these concepts with an important difference: "Student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009, p. 683). Through this definition, Kuh's (2009) student engagement theory clearly incorporates aspects of Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and Pace's (1979, 1982) theory of quality of student effort. Insisting upon institutional conditions that encourage student engagement provides a distinguishing addition and the most crucial component of Kuh's (2009) theory.

Within the student engagement framework, the onus rests with the institution's actions and behaviors to champion student engagement through high frequency and value-added learning experiences (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Thus, the reciprocal partnership formed between the student and the institution grounds student engagement (Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Strage et al., 2002). The absence of institutional accountability recurs as criticism of Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement (Kuh, 2009; Porter, 2006). In short, student involvement theory assumes student responsibility for involvement and does not adequately represent the institution in the model. According to the principles of student involvement theory, the student is the unit of analysis and usually represented in aggregate data (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Kuh et al. (2005), meanwhile, utilize the institution through the mediation of student outcomes as the driving unit of analysis within student engagement. In this way, student engagement is about

institutions creating educationally purposeful conditions, identified by linking institutional characteristics and positive student outcomes, mainly defined as high levels of educational engagement and high graduation rates. Institutions producing these outcomes exhibit characteristics conducive to effective educational practices (Kuh et al., 2005). Overall, these types of institutions allocate resources to learning opportunities for students that add value to the undergraduate learning experience. It is, therefore, argued that these characteristics positively promote student engagement.

Student engagement, then, emanates from six practical principles whereby institutions (a) live their mission statement, (b) embrace their educational philosophy, (c) center efforts on student learning, (d) enact changes for improvement, (e) share responsibility for student success among faculty and staff, and (f) produce measures for educational quality (Kuh et al., 2005). Engagement theory emphasizes institutional improvement, reflection, and good practice (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The measurements and outcomes in student engagement theory contrast with the four domains of student involvement theory. In this way, the institution provides differential learning opportunities that create educationally purposeful conditions with which a diverse student population can elect to engage. Theoretically, students engaging with these curricular and cocurricular experiences are more likely to attain educational goals, to achieve scholastically, and to develop personally (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 1999, 2005). These linkages assist in accounting for student experiences. While there are claims to positive individual outcomes for students and increased attention to institutional responsibility, student engagement theory has the potential to obscure affective individualized experiences through vague or generalized forms of universality intermediated by contextually situated institutions. This permits the exclusion of critical affective factors, such as perceived institutional prestige,

pre-institutional commitment, affective loyalty, and attachment, which may be at work in within this framework (Bean, 2005; Blimling, 2015; Keup, 2002; Vianden & Barlow, 2014).

2.2.3 Criticisms of student involvement and student engagement

Student involvement and student engagement are difficult to completely uncouple and distinguish within the broader literature because these constructs maintain a significant overlap in key concepts and ideas. This overlap results in differential application and confusion between these terms. For instance, some studies may intend to measure student engagement, yet define Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement (e.g. Junco et al., 2011). Fueling this complication, Astin admitted in a 2009 interview that involvement and engagement might be utilized interchangeably, suggesting no conceptual variations. During a similar interview, Kuh advocated for delineation between the two terms because of foundational differences. It is no wonder, based on the paradoxical explanations offered by these two seminal theorists, that researchers also blur these frameworks together, mismatching definitions and models to support their needs. Because this results in differential application in research studies, distinguishing these terms and evaluating their theoretical utility becomes intricate, requiring deeper examination and unraveling.

In further critiquing the relationships that have been suggested by subsequent research studies related to student involvement and student engagement, it is important to note that many of these studies focus on time on task instead of quality of effort or institutional characteristics (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Measuring engagement in this manner focuses on only one of the three components that Kuh (2009) posits within student engagement theory—time on task. In other words, current research largely ignores quality of effort and an institution's activities.

Furthermore, one may argue that the focus on time on task does not account fully for Astin's (1984) dichotomy of physical and psychological effort. As a result, measuring solely time on task to test for various learning outcomes does not adequately fulfill the foundational factors important to student involvement and student engagement theories. With these limitations in mind, studies generally suggest links between activities or behaviors and student outcomes through the mediating device of involvement or engagement.

2.2.4 Student integration

Developed as a way to explain and curb attrition, student integration theory transfers Durkheim's (1961) theory on suicide to higher education, while incorporating the linearity of leading structural anthropologist Van Gennep's (1909/1969) rites of passage. Integration, with its roots in behavioral psychology and cultural anthropology, emerges as an enticing way to rationalize student departure from higher education. With the concept of student departure, Tinto (1975) was among the first theorists to offer a framework that accounted for various components of the student experience, most notably student integration. For Tinto (1975, 1994) institutional integration consists of academic integration and social integration through linear rites of passages. Rites of passage consist of three stages—separation from past connections and identities, transition through liminality, and incorporation into the new hegemonic structure. This mirrors Van Gennep's (1909/1969) rites of passage of *divestiture* (separation), *liminalité* (transition), and *investiture* (incorporation).

Academic socialization and integration deal with higher education's social standards and systematic norms: "With respect to the academic system of college...an individual's integration can be measured in terms of both his grade performance and his intellectual development during

the college years” (Tinto, 1975, p. 104). While grades represent the specific standards in this model, intellectual development hinges on student identification with and acceptance of institutional norms and values within integration theory.

Social integration, meanwhile, stresses the importance of positive social interactions with students, faculty, and staff that result in friendship, support, or feelings of collectivity: “social integration...involves notions of both levels of integration and degrees of congruency between the individual and his social environment” (Tinto, 1975, p. 107). In order for students to be successful within higher education, they must be equally integrated into both of these arenas. In this way, integration theory explains voluntary departures from college. For example, if a student encounters personal values conflicting with the institution, a student may choose to seek an education where his or her values more closely align with those of the institution. Likewise, if a student does not interact with peers or faculty in meaningful and productive ways, the student may not feel a part of the collective social culture and withdraw from college.

Foundationally, these notions parallel Durkheim’s (1961) theory of suicide. For Durkheim (1961), individuals who are malintegrated into societal structures and networks are more likely to commit suicide. Analogous to academic and social integration, Durkheim (1961) explains the necessity of moral integration—sharing societal values—and collective integration—connecting with others in substantial ways. Because Tinto (1975) regards suicide as a voluntary withdrawal from society, he extends Durkheim’s (1961) theory to explain student attrition, a voluntary withdrawal from higher education (Melguizo, 2011; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). In this way, integration in the academic and social realms consists of multiple interactions occurring over time, creating patterns and perceptions in individuals that affect their commitment to the educational system. Students who enjoy a high level of integration are more

likely to engender positive institutional commitment and persist until graduation (Tinto, 1975, 1994). Thus, the perception that students hold about their level of integration is vital. In short, the perceptive reality that students interpret about their socially constructed and negotiated environment produces their feelings of institutional integration. Unlike student involvement theory, how a student feels is highly relevant in integration theory. Consequently, departure is a multidimensional outcome that results from insufficient or unsuccessful academic and social interactions between the individual and the institution, making student integration distinct from student involvement and student engagement (see Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of Definitions of Involvement, Engagement, and Integration

Theory	Definition
Student Involvement	“Student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience.” (Astin, 1984, p. 518)
Student Engagement	“Student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities.” (Kuh, 2009, p. 683)
Student Integration	
Academic Integration	“With respect to the academic system of college...an individual’s integration can be measured in terms of both his grade performance and his intellectual development during the college years.” (Tinto, 1975, p. 104)
Social Integration	“Social integration... involves notions of both levels of integration and degrees of congruency between the individual and his social environment.” (Tinto, 1975, p. 107)

2.2.5 Criticisms of student integration

In spite of its widespread usage in accounting for student experience, student integration theory has been the focus of significant criticism (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Melguizo, 2011; Tierney, 1992; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). By synthesizing and analyzing ten multi-institutional research studies, Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) find no empirical support for Tinto's (1975, 1994) theory. At best, they describe an indirect relationship between attrition and social integration. Indirect findings are, similarly, reported in other research studies that examine the effect of positive socialization among students, faculty, and staff (Birnbaum, 2013; Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Christie & Dinham, 1991; Vinson et al., 2010). Moreover, Ryan and Glenn (2006) report that students enrolled in a first-year seminar on learning strategies were more likely to return the following year when compared to students enrolled in a first-year seminar on academic integration. This finding contradicts one of the main tenets of integration theory, questioning its application to higher education.

Most important, Tinto's (1975) theory does not adequately account for racial, cultural, or background characteristics. In Tierney's (1992) critique of Tinto's (1975) theory, he draws dramatic and appropriate attention to the integration's severe limitations: "Tinto has misinterpreted the anthropological notions of ritual, and in doing so he has created a theoretical construct with practical implications that hold potentially harmful consequences for racial and ethnic minorities" (p. 603). Presumably, integration requires the student to shed previous values in order to conform to the institution's hegemonic values. Without this erasure of previously held values and heritage, a student cannot be fully integrated into the institutional setting (Tierney, 1992; Melguizo, 2011). Tierney (1992) argues that ethnic minority students may experience friction in being successful because their commitment to the institution may be

limited based on their original cultural heritage. In this way, the separation phase that requires disconnection from past attitudes and relationships may never occur for minority students because their racial and ethnic backgrounds distinguish them as different within predominantly white institutions of higher education. Furthermore, the language that Tinto (1975) selects represents hegemonic discourses and power structures that are disconnected from racial and ethnic minority students. Certain Native American cultures and languages, for example, do not have linguistic tools to represent conceptions of higher education dropout or departure (Tierney, 1992). This pushes against Tinto's foundational assumption that dropout and departure are universal experiences.

In this sense, Tinto (1975, 1994) overtly privileges one culture over another by arguing for cultural suicide in exchange for success in the dominant cultural system (Tierney, 1992; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Thus, student integration theory purports a one-sided relationship of students adapting to the institution; it neglects the manner in which students simultaneously shape institutions (Kuh & Love, 2000). In critiquing the overarching premise of this theory, conceptualizations of integration flatten and simplify the competing affective complexities that surround and inescapably press upon student departure decisions.

While these criticisms remain highly relevant and are seemingly ignored by practitioners and researchers, integration appears to be an outdated concept that needs to be either readjusted for modern usage or even wholly discarded. In a recent interview, Tinto agrees that it is necessary to expel the term, integration, from the higher education vocabulary, claiming that it no longer fits with the complex system of contemporary higher education. His rationale for this recommendation is that he intentionally employed integration at a time when racial integration agendas were relevant and necessary to higher education. In this way, integration represented

the antithesis of segregation (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). However, the theory of integration still shapes much research and practice in higher education and student affairs, meaning that it is difficult to ignore. As a result, it is impossible to wholly divorce the theory from current programs and policies or curtail its existence. Nevertheless, critiquing integration theory requires a conscientious exploitation of its severe limitations and its differentiating attributes from engagement and involvement.

2.2.6 Models relevant to involvement, engagement, and integration

Although distinctions among student involvement, student engagement, and student integration have been represented in this chapter, other models that build upon these theories are necessary to review in order to better understand first-year student transition as well as the relevance of institutional culture. These subsequent models are viewed as related or helper models because of their proximity to the foundational theories of involvement, engagement, and integration (Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton et al., 1997). Specifically, these models build upon, develop from, or incorporate one or more of the theories authored by Astin (1984), Kuh (2009), or Tinto (1975, 1994). For the purposes of this dissertation overview, facets of these related or helper models are tangentially highlighted in order to illustrate the existence of new layers of complexity that they offer to the original theories. This controls these contributions in a way that allows for more prominent and in-depth focusing on the complexity that surrounds student involvement, student engagement, and student integration. This section provides an overview of the Reason (2009) model of student learning and persistence, Milem and Berger (1997) model of student persistence, Habley (1981) model of student retention, Perna and Thomas (2008) model for student success, and Weidman (2006) model of socialization of students in higher education.

2.2.6.1 Model of student learning and persistence

This model comprehensively accounts for variables, influences, and factors that relate to student learning and persistence. Previous research on student learning and persistence usually accounts for few variables and factors at a time (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students' precollege characteristics, social experiences, demographic background, and academic preparation relate to early interactions within the institutional context of a college or university. Interactions between students' precollege characteristics and the institutional context lead to engagement in the peer environment through classroom experiences, outside the classroom experiences, and curricular experiences. Interactions among these inputs and environmental contexts converge through the outcome of student persistence (Reason, 2009). This model imitates and complicates Astin's (1993b) I-E-O model and introduces the institutional context as relevant to student learning and persistence.

2.2.6.2 Model of student persistence

This conceptual model incorporates behavioral aspects of student involvement and attitudinal aspects of student integration. Student entry characteristics, institutional commitment, academic and social behaviors, and institutional perceptions correlate to student persistence (Berger & Milem, 1999). Before matriculating, students' diverse background characteristics predict initial levels of institutional commitment. As students immerse in the institution during the fall term, their involvement or noninvolvement with faculty and peers cyclically reinforces their perceptions of institutional and peer integration. These perceived levels of support, then, either enhance or diminish involvement for the following term, instilling revised feelings of institutional commitment that, ultimately, predict persistence (Milem & Berger, 1997). In short, positive experiences within the institution enhance students' perceptions, increase positive

academic and social behaviors, heighten institutional commitment, and result in a higher likelihood of persistence.

2.2.6.3 Model of student retention

According to this model, retention occurs along a continuum for five academically remediable reasons for attrition that may be solved through interventions that are artful, purposeful, effective, early, intensive, and continuous. In other words, identifying retention concerns early in a student's academic transition and delivering continuous interventions through an effective institutional agent mitigates attrition. The five reasons for attrition include (a) institutional match or mismatch; (b) academic relevance or irrelevance; (c) academic boredom or stimulation; (d) low or high concern for students from faculty, staff, and peers; and (e) the degree to which students' "efforts and abilities are fairly rewarded" (Habley et al., 2012, p. 31). In essence, these factors account for students' experiences in an academic environment that requires coursework that is challenging, engaging, and stimulating, that matches students' skills, and that aligns with students' interests and goals. Identifying students at risk for departure early in their college transition may allow institutions to deliver ongoing interventions for student-institution mismatch, academic irrelevance or boredom, low institutional concern, or low rewards for student efforts and abilities that, ultimately, increase institutional retention (Habley, 1981 cited in Habley et al., 2012).

2.2.6.4 Model of student success.

Student success is a longitudinal process of transition that is defined by (a) college readiness through educational aspirations and prior academic preparation; (b) college enrollment; (c) college achievement through academic performance, retention, and graduation; and (d)

postcollege attainment through employment, graduate study, and income (Perna & Thomas, 2008). Success is either achieved or not achieved through students' behaviors that align with their personal attitudes. Students' attitudes and behaviors are influenced to varying degrees by increasing macro-level, external forces such as family contexts, school contexts, and social, economic, and policy contexts (Perna & Thomas, 2008). Student success, therefore, becomes a longitudinal process during which students experience multiple discrete transitions through defined stages of their collegiate experience that result in outcomes related to the overall academic pipeline.

2.2.6.5 Model of socialization of students in higher education

Higher education socialization outcomes relate to changes in values, beliefs, and knowledge in students through interactive sequences and processes among inputs, environments, and outcomes. These processes, however, transpire neither linearly nor singularly. In other words, higher education environments iteratively influence students and students reciprocally shape these environments. Although situated centrally in this model, higher education is not an encapsulated environment; students' personal and professional communities consisting of family, friends, employers, practitioners, and associations contribute to their socialization experiences in higher education (Weidman, 2006). Therefore, even before arriving on campus, student backgrounds influenced by these communities inculcate expectations and predispositions for the collegiate experience. Once on campus, student socialization occurs through formal processes mediated by normative contexts such as academic departments, majors, peers, or student groups and by informal structures positioned through interaction, integration, and learning. These coalescing socialization sequences instill within students knowledge, skills, dispositions, identity, and academic commitment (Weidman, 2006).

2.2.6.6 Summary

These models represent more nuanced and complex ways of considering principles related to involvement, engagement, and integration by enriching the ways that we think about student inputs, higher education environments, and outcomes. In particular, student perceptions, learning, persistence, retention, institutional commitment, success, and socialization can serve as markers for student transition and contribute to better understanding students' overall experiences in higher education. Although somewhat limiting, most of these models categorize students' experiences as either academic or social, still largely dissociating these spheres. Moreover, almost all of these models do not directly focus on first-year student transition or institutional culture. However, Reason (2009) and Weidman (2006) subtly recognize the importance of institutional cultures by pointing to institutional contexts and academic subcultures—concepts related to institutional culture. Overall, exploring these models and reviewing their salient features conceptually widens involvement, engagement, and integration for this research study.

2.3 COLLEGE TRANSITION

The transition from high school to college is a complex confluence of psychosocial adjustment factors and external, ecological, institutional, and cultural forces. Current research on college student transition draws heavily from the field of psychology, forgoing cultural or anthropological perspectives. The first year of college, in particular, has been demarcated as a critical juncture for adjustment and transition (Sax & Weintraub, 2014). The first few weeks of college (Vinson, Nixon, Walsh, Walker, Mitchell, & Zaitseva, 2010), and more specifically the

first three weeks of college (Woosley & Miller, 2009), the first six weeks of college (Kuh et al., 1991; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Pattengale, 2010; Tinto, 2000), and the first semester of college (Bishop & White, 2007; Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, & Bryant, 2014) have been suggested to be key periods in which students experience and navigate transition. In spite of the inconclusiveness regarding which timeframe within the first year of college is most critical, researchers and theorists widely agree that the first year in its entirety is crucial for students to successfully navigate (Goenner, Harris, & Pauls, 2013; Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012; Kuh et al., 2005; Palmer et al., 2009).

The first year of college remains prominent because it is when students typically decide whether to remain at or depart from an institution (Nalbone et al., 2015). The likelihood of persisting until graduation increases significantly for students who return for their second year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Retention and persistence maintain prevalence within higher education research, incidentally averting the focus from transitional processes, in part because retention and persistence are two of the seven metrics that *U.S. News and World Report* considers for rankings of institutional quality (Bishop & White, 2007). Sense of belonging, sense of loyalty, sense of place, involvement, engagement, integration, institutional commitment, satisfaction, wellbeing, learning, and student development frequently intermingle in the literature and serve as other outcomes through which first-year student experiences are also examined (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013; Fischer, 2007; Goenner et al., 2013; Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Mayhew, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2012; Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2014; Palmer et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2012; Vianden & Barlow, 2014; Woosley & Miller, 2009). This focus, however, leaves the inherently emotional *processes*

associated with these outcomes, such as transition, largely unexamined (Fischer, 2007; Kane, 2011; Locks et al., 2008; Palmer et al., 2009; Renn & Arnold, 2003).

In general, transitioning to college pertains to an aspect of emerging adulthood—a period positioned between the “dependency of childhood and adolescence” and “the enduring responsibilities of adulthood” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). Within college, first-year students acclimate to self-management, new freedom, independence from daily parental supervision, new ideas, and new peers from diverse backgrounds (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012; Sullivan, 2014). These new freedoms to which students acclimate imply a residential bias. Approximately 70 percent of first-year students attending four-year institutions of higher education live on campus (College Board, 2015). While this transition is often welcomed by many students, there are frequent obstacles in transitioning to college life. Unhappiness, loneliness, isolation, disequilibrium, and alienation are challenges associated with transition that students encounter during this time (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Experiencing and failing to cope healthily with such challenges may produce stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, and personal or emotional distress (Hicks & Heastie, 2008) and may result in attrition (Nalbone et al., 2015). Transitioning to college may also produce learning shock or culture shock as students confront unfamiliar, incongruent, discordant, or frightening episodes (Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012; Risquez, Moore, & Morley, 2007). Discontinuity associated with the liminality of transition—a concept originated by Van Gennep (1909/1969) and propagated by Tinto (1975) in higher education—may exacerbate these stresses (Scanlon et al., 2007) by producing “an ‘in-between-ness’—a betwixt space—which, in turn, creates a sense of placelessness” (Palmer et al., 2009, p. 38). Processing through these betwixt spaces by successfully navigating turning point experiences serves as a mechanism for students to reclaim continuity.

According to Palmer, O’Kane, and Owens (2009), “turning point experiences simultaneously enrich and impoverish, liberate and constrain” (p. 50). Transitional turning points, imbued with inherent paradox, require the renegotiation of former and current identities and relationships. For example, students confront and cope with negativity, redefine previous roles and relationships with friends and family, and forge new connections to peers and faculty. Constructing a clear identity affixed and proximate to these new and redefined social supports buttresses and bolsters transitional agility and facility (Azmitia et al., 2013; Bishop & White, 2007; Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012; Scanlon et al., 2007). Social media, such as Facebook, aids this process by allowing students to preserve their former presentations of self and virtually represent selective and strategic aspects of their re-moored identities through an online medium (Stephen-Abetz & Holman, 2012). Struggling with anonymity during the first lecture, receiving their first feedback on a course assignment, and experiencing their first doubts in their abilities to successfully handle the independence of college life represent other common turning points students manage, grapple with, and incorporate into their identity (Palmer et al., 2009). As such, these transitional processes and turning point experiences proceed neither smoothly nor linearly.

A positive climate mediated through supportive friends, inclusive faculty and staff, and understanding family eases transition, especially during turning points (Smith & Zhang, 2008). Positive transition, thus, becomes a cooperative activity in which students are validated through encouragement, care, and reassurance in their abilities to succeed (Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Terenzini et al., 1994). Effective outside the classroom relationships with faculty and staff members, enacted through living-learning programs, educational programs, faculty mentor programs, undergraduate research, or service learning, further promote successful transition (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2013; Mara & Mara, 2010; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011; Smith &

Zhang, 2008) as well as increased satisfaction, academic achievement, personal development, retention, and persistence (e.g., Ellett & Schmidt; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; O’Keefe, 2013). Orientation programs and welcome week activities also facilitate transition, but often assume student homogeneity in one-size-fits-all programming and restrict transition to occurring in less than a week (Palmer et al., 2009). This may diminish its programmatic effectiveness by instructing students in adapting to the institution, instead of transitioning through their first year (Gill, Lombardo, & Short, 2013; Krause, 2006 as cited in Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012).

The social engagement that students have with peers on campus, however, most greatly affects their collegiate experience (e.g., Astin, 1993b). Positive peer relationships are essential to a successful transition to higher education (Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Palmer et al., 2009; Renn & Arnold, 2003) because these relationships help alleviate common stresses associated with transition (Mattanah et al., 2010), promote inclusive association and identification with localized enclaves, niches, or reference groups (Azmitia et al., 2013; Blimling, 2015; Gellin, 2003), and transmit institutional knowledge (Scanlon et al., 2007). High quality friendships with other students promote wellbeing and psychosocial adjustment during transitional periods (Al-Qaisy, 2010; Sax & Weintraub, 2014). Even having just one substantial connection to a peer within the institution reduces a student’s risk for departure because of the sense of belonging it provides (O’Keefe, 2013). Even a first-year student attending the same institution as a high school friend must renegotiate that relationship through the new campus context in which they are situated. Peers, then, may be envisioned as cultural conduits that communicate direct and indirect messages about institutional norms (Weidman, 2006). These peer relationships and their affective byproducts contribute to perceptions of institutional culture, especially during initial transitions (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Hummon, 1994; Johnson et al., 2007). Transitioning to

higher education, therefore, materializes as a heterogeneous and iterative process, engrained with complexly interwoven relational patterns that are effectuated by intrapersonal adjustment factors and external, ecological, institutional, and cultural forces.

2.3.1 Emergent populations

Transitions to college are not experienced uniformly by all students (Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1994). Background characteristics related to gender, race, and first-generation status contribute to students' experiences (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013). However, these background characteristics are rarely explored in relation to students' lived experiences during their initial transition to higher education (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Mattanah et al., 2010). Instead, background characteristics are usually correlated to outcomes associated with transition as mediated through a range of variables. While further research is needed to understand the variation contained within the lived experiences of students based on their gender, race, and first-generation status (Palmer et al., 2009), current research demonstrates differential educational experiences for students based upon these background characteristics.

2.3.1.1 Gender

The construct of gender correlates to a host of educational attainment outcomes that continually demonstrate that women outpace men in high school graduation, college entry, academic achievement, and college degree attainment (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2013; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013; Woosley & Miller, 2009). Women have earned more than 50 percent of bachelor's degrees since 1981 (ACE, 2016), and indicators of student success among women hold in spite of socioeconomic status (Buchmann, 2009). Recognizing the achievement gap between men and

women remains relevant to exploring variation in college student transitions. College men experience unique challenges in their transition to higher education; they are more likely to depart higher education (Kahn, Brett, & Holmes, 2011), to earn lower grades (Harris, 2010; Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Kahn et al., 2011), to violate university judicial standards (Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005; Harris, 2010), to disinvest from campus activities and organizations (Harris, 2010), to experience depression (Harris, 2010; Oliffe, Galdas, Han, & Kelly, 2013; Oliffe et al., 2010), to lack coping skills (Harper et al., 2005; Harris, 2010; Oliffe et al. 2010, 2013), and to more frequently consume alcohol (Harris, 2010; Peralta, 2007). These behaviors are sometimes explained through hegemonic masculinity, a fluid, yet dominant, gendered performance of masculinity marked by dominance, control, toughness, subjugation of women, and marginalization of gay men (Connell, 2005). Consequently, transitioning to college may be invisibly taxing for men (Conley et al., 2014) because performances of masculinity disparage expression of vulnerable and intimate emotions, impeding the development of satisfying friendships and peer connections (Kane, 2011; Kimmel, 2008). Attempting to explore these disparities among college men is exacerbated by the difficulty that exists in recruiting college men for research studies (Stuber, 2011). Women, meanwhile, experience greater social fulfillment during college (Helland, Stallings, & Braxton, 2002), but encounter more difficulty in navigating the emotional and psychosocial adjustment to college (Conley et al., 2014). Parental involvement, high school counselors, and first-year seminars, in particular, assist women more than men through this transition (Smith & Zhang, 2008). Differences between women and men in the attainment of educational outcomes, in adjusting to campus life, and in campus experiences suggest a need to consider gender in exploring potential variation in undergraduate student transitions (Buchmann, 2009; Kane, 2011).

2.3.1.2 Race

Race remains a fundamental background characteristic that is inherently intertwined with how Black and Latinx students experience and make sense of their transition to higher education (Fischer, 2007; Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013). Overall, Black and Latinx students complete high school at lower rates, enroll in college at lower rates, and depart higher education at higher rates when compared to white students (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2013; Bowen, Kuzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013; Pitre & Pitre, 2009). This inequity in educational attainment occurs in spite of increasing postsecondary enrollments from these student populations (Altbach, 2011). Black and Latinx students are also more likely to come from families with low socioeconomic status, to be first-generation college students, and to receive lower levels of parental guidance during transitions to higher education (Inkelas et al., 2007; Smith & Zhang, 2008; Zhang & Smith, 2009). Specific to Latinx students, lower societal educational expectations as well as family responsibilities produce friction with the hegemonic structures of higher education (Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013). These known risk factors for attrition compound (Scanlon et al., 2013) and adjusting to college life during the first year, therefore, becomes a significant hurdle for many Black and Latinx students, who further experience negative campus racial climates characterized by racism, discrimination, marginalization, and microaggressions (Locks et al., 2008; Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013). Parental support, balancing family responsibilities, and receiving support from peer networks mitigates attrition, facilitates belonging, encourages academic self-efficacy, and eases transition for these populations (Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013; Zhang & Smith, 2009). However, exploring the lived experiences of Black and Latino/a students through the processes associated

with first-year student transition provides a way to enrich knowledge of the campus experiences of these populations.

2.3.1.3 First-generation status

Nearly one-third of all college students are the first in their immediate family to pursue postsecondary education (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). Entry characteristics typical for first-generation college students that may influence their transition to higher education include lower socioeconomic status, underrepresented racial background, lower standardized test scores, lower educational aspirations, lower grades, and lower levels of parental financial support (Martinez et al., 2009). These risk factors combine in a way that places this student population at a higher likelihood for attrition (Fischer, 2007), especially after the first year of college (Ishitani, 2006). Financing higher education recurs as a common reason for departure for these students, who usually work on a part-time or full-time basis to afford higher education (Martinez et al., 2009; Ishitani, 2006). In addition to financial concerns, first-generation college students experience a disjunction from their familial script by attending postsecondary education (Fischer, 2007; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1994). While overall support from family and friends positively influences persistence for first-generation students (Fischer, 2007), families of first-generation college students are less likely to assist with the particulars of navigating the academic landscape (Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011). This disjunction intensifies the stress associated with adjusting to college life for first-generation students (Orbe, 2008) and creates additional challenges to their overall psychosocial adjustment and campus engagement (Inkelas et al., 2007; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). First-generation status, therefore, serves as a relevant background characteristic to explore potential variation in students' experiences with transition.

2.4 STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN RESIDENCE HALLS

Residential living has embedded itself as a cultural marker of higher education in the United States. Traditional college campuses across the country frequently feature residence halls—university owned facilities where students reside while they enroll in courses and work toward degrees. Residence halls have evolved into state-of-the-art facilities that employ a number of staff who promote holistic student development and work to connect students to institutional resources (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). Living in a residence hall has been associated with many positive student outcomes, making it the “single most consistent within-college determinant of impact” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 611). Previous research does not directly address first-year student transition through residence hall living. Instead, extant literature focuses on factors and outcomes related to a student’s residential experience. Drawing from this literature, I thematized key areas transferable to understanding first-year student transitions. Exploring literature related to residence halls is relevant to this study because 95 percent of first-year students at MAU live in a campus residence hall. Furthermore, new student orientation and transition programs at MAU primarily target first-year residence hall students. This section explores common themes connected to students’ residence hall experiences that resurface in the literature and that may emerge in a study of first-year student transition.

2.4.1 Community development

Residence halls generally promote community development experiences that engender assimilation into the broader campus. Specifically, residence halls link students to campus resources, programs, and services that support the mission of the institution. Exposure to these

resources and involvement opportunities are inherently engrained in the residence hall experience (Levine, 1994). College students spend close to 150 hours per week outside the classroom, with 100 of those hours in their living environment (Brandon, Hirt, & Cameron, 2008; Levine, 1994). The more time students spend in the residence hall, the more likely they are to engage in the campus and residence hall communities by participating in student activities and by taking advantage of institutional resources (Arboleda, Wang, Shelley, & Whalen, 2003; Christie & Dinham, 1991). Residence halls commonly promote involvement through invited speakers from student groups, club meeting advertisements, conversations with residence hall staff members, or tutoring sessions in common study areas (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Schuh, 1999; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). From this perspective, the ways that students utilize these resources and orient to the broader campus community may affect individual feelings of belonging, institutional commitment, and attachment (Blimling, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994). In this way, residence halls move beyond places that merely satisfy students' basic needs for shelter and become spaces that assist in the transition to higher education (Johnson et al., 2007).

Overall, community development efforts intend to instill within students a greater sense of belonging—a concept commonly associated with transition in the first year of college. To this end, many residence hall communities aspire to foster regular interaction among members, invite collaboration, provide enclaves that determine membership, promote diversity, allow for freedom of expression, impose just standards for acceptable behavior, celebrate civility, respect, and care for others, generate celebrative atmospheres, and produce a spirit of openness (ACUHO-I, 2013; Blimling & Whitt, 1999; Bonfiglio et al., 2006; Brazzell & Reisser, 1999; Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Gellin, 2003; Sandeen & Barr, 2006). While executed and

communicated differently by various institutions, these aspirational perspectives of community may simultaneously influence students during transition and reflect fundamental values, beliefs, and assumptions of the institutional culture.

2.4.2 Student development

Student learning and development are difficult to measure in residence halls because it is difficult to isolate the residence hall as the sole variable that spurs outcomes. However, residence hall programs designed to support student learning are plentiful (Blimling, 2015; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Stimpson, 1994; Strange & Banning, 2001) and the outcomes indirectly influenced by living in a residence are worth examining. Student learning in residence halls occurs through formal programmatic mechanisms and intrinsic self-reflective processes associated with on-campus living. Living in a residence hall has been linked broadly to increased interpersonal communication, intrapersonal reflection, self-awareness, emotional expression, and sociocultural knowledge (Blimling, 2015). Through educational residence hall programs, roommate relationships, living-learning programs, as well as the personal development that occurs through living on campus, students continually develop psychosocial awareness, cultural awareness, social skills, life skills, and sensitivity to campus and global issues (Blimling, 2015; Stimpson, 1994).

As outcomes, student satisfaction, retention, and persistence relate to residence hall living in ways that concertedly reinforce and perpetuate each other. Simply stated, students who are more satisfied with their collegiate experience are more likely to be retained; students who return to college the following year are more likely to persist until graduation (Lopez Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Tinto, 1975). Students living in residence

halls are more likely to be satisfied with their collegiate experience, to be retained, and to graduate (Blimling, 2015; Gellin, 2003; Kuh et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Pascarella et al., 1994; Shudde, 2011). Research continues to suggest that residence hall students graduate at higher rates than students commuting or living off campus (Astin, 1993b; Blimling, 2015; Shudde, 2011). Yet, these higher completion rates may be actually linked to socioeconomic status rather than residence hall living (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016).

However, residence hall living has not been linked to higher levels of academic achievement or to greater classroom learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Moreover, residential living also relates to increased privilege (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Lopez Turley & Wodtke, 2010) and more frequent alcohol consumption (Stahlbrandt, Johnsson, & Berglund, 2012). The emergence and prevalence of these outcomes become crucial for uncovering the way in which students experience college during transitional periods.

2.4.3 Roommate relationships

Roommate relationships are one of the first ways that residence hall students connect to their residence hall and to their floor community. These relationships are particularly powerful during transitional periods (Blimling, 2015; Pascarella et al., 1994). Roommate arrangements in residence halls are unique because they are often not self-selected, require negotiation and compromise, and provide frequent contact (Erb, Renshaw, Short, & Pallard, 2014). Peer relationship quality, then, predicts feelings of institutional belonging, assimilation, and psychosocial development (Arnett, 2000; Astin, 1984; Erb et al., 2014; Khozei, Ramayah, Hassan, & Surienty, 2012). Even nonverbal communication between roommates relates to the ways that students perceive the overall community (Erlandson, 2012). High quality roommate

relationships relate to integration, sense of belonging, academic achievement, and satisfaction. Roommate relationships may serve as learning laboratories where students encounter challenge, support, and cultural differences (Brazzell & Reisser, 1999). Therefore, roommate relationships are potential sites of exploration when studying first-year student transition.

2.4.4 Living-learning programs

Living-learning programs are intended to be high intensity, interactive communities that create meaningful conditions that promote academic, social, and transitional growth among students (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Inkelas et al., 2007; Inkelas & Soldner, 2011; Pascarella et al., 1994). Sometimes, living-learning programs ease students' transitions from high school to college (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Living-learning programs for first-year students increase interpersonal and academic connections and reduce some of the challenges associated with transition. Students in these programs have the opportunity to connect with peers through shared interests; they frequently join similar cocurricular activities, enroll in common courses, and participate in the same experiential learning opportunities (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The high frequency and intensity of this exposure allows for the organic development of conversations related to intellectual topics and social issues. In this way, living-learning programs align with peer group ideologies because they provide identification, affiliation, and acceptance (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). In all, living-learning programs promote group formation through enclaves that allow students to establish connections to the institution, which may aid in the transition to college.

2.4.5 Alcohol

Alcohol consumption affects the way that students experience community assimilation.

Nationally, 60 percent of college students consume alcohol and 47 percent of students claim that they experienced a negative consequence from alcohol misuse (Novik & Boekeloo, 2013).

Similarly, students living in residence halls are more frequent users of alcohol when compared to off-campus peers (Cross, Zimmerman, & O'Grady, 2009; Novik & Boekeloo, 2013; Stahlbrandt et al., 2012). Among the most frequent users of alcohol in residence halls are first-year students.

Of residence hall students who reported using alcohol during their first-year of college, Novik and Boekeloo (2013) report that over 70 percent of respondents incurred at least one negative consequence from drinking. Meanwhile, students residing in suites, mixed gender halls, and fraternity and sorority houses are likely to consume alcohol more frequently (Cross et al., 2009).

The combination of peer pressure, independence, and craving a sense of belonging may influence a student's decision to use alcohol during their first year. Even students who do not drink alcohol may interact with the effects of their peers who drink (Everett & Loftus, 2011).

With residence hall students being at a higher likelihood of drinking, students' interactions with and perceptions of alcohol consumption cannot be excluded when considering first-year student transition.

2.5 SUMMARY AND KNOWLEDGE GAP

Institutional culture, student involvement, student engagement, and student integration are distinct concepts within higher education research. They have often been used to account for

student experiences within institutional settings, but diminish the complexity associated with variations in student experiences based on gender, race, and first-generation status. This literature review broadly explores concepts that assist in understanding current conceptualizations of undergraduate student transitional experiences as well as current research needs for the field. Understanding the theoretical limitations within these constructs broadens the scope of this research study by increasing the complexity associated with how we think about undergraduate student experiences.

Previous research on transition has not yet thoroughly considered the processes students encounter during transitional periods (Fischer, 2007; Kane, 2011; Locks et al., 2008; Palmer et al., 2009; Renn & Arnold, 2003). While much is known about outcomes relationships to common variables, such as retention or persistence, less is known about the explication that undergirds these relationships. First-year student transition provides a point of entry to consider these processes and to add sophistication to understanding student transition through nuanced interpretation of students' diverse experiences. This research study intends to fill these gaps in the literature by utilizing institutional culture to investigate first-year student transition, by understanding the perceptive and affective processes that influence that transition to college, by expanding our knowledge of the variation of student experiences based on background characteristics, and by re-engaging cultural perspectives of higher education.

3.0 METHODS

This research study explores the ways in which first-year students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture during their transition to higher education. This study employs cultural constructivist methodology informed by a constructivist theoretical perspective to excavate, unearth, and illuminate invisible, tacit cultural assumptions and beliefs that function as complex processes that students encounter, navigate, and experience (Guido et al., 2010; Kuh, 2000; Schein, 2010; Whitt, 1993) as they learn to perform and enact peer norms within the institutional culture.

Cultural constructivist methodology is rooted in interpretative anthropology and constructivism (Manning, 1993, 2000). Its methodological strength allows for the application of abstract interpretative meanings to participants' experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Manning, 2000; Schwandt, 1998). Ascribing meaning to cultural experiences aids in better understanding the manner in which students transition to higher education during their first year. This research is unique because it weds institutional culture to first-year student engagement and transition. First-year student engagement and transition have typically been examined through precollege characteristics and outcomes-based models (Astin, 1984; Keup, 2002; Kuh et al., 1991; Hu, 2010; Milem & Berger, 1997; Tinto, 1975), forfeiting the cultural exploration of the transitional process that students navigate (exception Christie & Dinham, 1991). According to Christie and Dinham (1991), exploring first-year student transition through a cultural lens provides new

understanding of the localized processes that students experience. In short, cultural constructivist methodology allows the transition process to be investigated in a manner that uncovers nuanced experiences and to centrally position students' learning and meaning-making.

3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research study is guided by the following research question: How do first-year students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture during their initial transition to higher education?

This research study is more directly shaped by secondary research questions, which support the guiding research question:

- (a) How do students learn to enact institutional culture during their transition to higher education?
- (b) How do campus friendships influence perceptions of institutional culture?
- (c) How do students ascribe affective meaning to institutional rituals, performances, and situations?

3.2 CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIVIST METHODOLOGY

Cultural constructivism is rooted in both constructivism and interpretative anthropology (Manning, 2000). These theories overlap in significant ways that shape the overarching methodology. These guides frame research as explorations that are differentially applied,

enacted, perceived, processed, and interpreted. However, the enactment of most cultural research inquiries is firmly situated in constructivism and guided by key principles and tenets that are formational to the theoretical perspective.

Cultural constructivism, as a methodology, is especially useful in apprehending the meanings of human contextual environments and experiences, such as first-year student transition. The assumptions that undergird cultural constructivism differ from the positivistic and post-positivistic discourses that pervade higher education research (Manning, 2000; Mertens, 2010). While positivism and post-positivism identify objective realities, uniformity, generalizability, and causes and effects, constructivism highlights the intricate and evolving natures of human environments (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, 2005; Hatch, 2002; Manning, 2000; Mertens, 2010; Schwandt, 1998). In this way, human environments are imagined as complex and context-bound arenas that require abstract interpretations (Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1976).

Human environments are mediated by social interactions, emotions, and behaviors (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, 2005; Mertens, 2010; Schwandt, 1998) that are invisibly guided by culture (Birnbaum, 1988; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006; Geertz, 1973; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 2010). In essence, constructivism “acknowledges the complexity, contradiction, and paradox inherent to social living” (Manning, 2000, p. 137). Constructivism adds levels of increasing complexity instead of simplifying or essentializing phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Hatch, 2002; Whitt, 1993). Such an assumption corresponds to deciphering higher education institutions as cultures, which are fundamentally complicated, variously enacted, and differentially experienced (Birnbaum, 1988; Kuh & Hall, 1993; Love, Jacobs, Boschini, Hardy, & Kuh, 1993; Love, 1997). These tenets strengthen the rationale for the utilization of cultural

constructivist methodology in studying first-year students' experiences of institutional culture during their college transition.

3.2.1 Ontology

Ontological principles of cultural constructivism suggest that culture becomes apparent through language and action (Geertz, 1973; Manning, 2000; Whitt, 1993), producing realities that are multiple and socially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Hatch, 2002). Imagining realities in this manner acknowledges that perceptions of the same institutional culture will be experienced and interpreted differently by different individuals based on their unique backgrounds, lived experiences, affects, biases, beliefs, values, assumptions, cognitive abilities, political predispositions, and family and community relationships (Bloch, 1998).

In examining higher education, the wide range of ephemeral and constantly fluctuating students, faculty, and staff leads to the divergence of innumerable perceptive constructions of unique situational experiences in the institution. Culture remains an invisible guiding force that impels action, manipulates feelings, elicits emotion, and persuades behavior; it is omnipresent, immutable, complex, and paradoxical (Manning, 2013). Thus, its conceptual fluidity facilitates to multiple constructed realities, a concept that emanates from relativist ontology (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, 2005; Hatch, 2002; Magolda, 2000, 2003; Manning, 2000; Mertens, 2010). Thus, constructivism's ontology related to multiple realities directly translates to uncovering multiple meanings associated with the activities of higher education, strengthening its position as a relevant interpretive frame for first year students' initial transitions to higher education.

3.2.2 Epistemology and researcher role

Knowledge within cultural constructivism is socially constructed. As a result, the relationship between the researcher and the participants assumes significance within this theoretical perspective; the link between the researcher and the participants is inextricable and vital (Hatch, 2002). This relationship remains critical because constructivism's epistemological framework situates reality as multiple, socially constructed, and locally apprehendable (Guba & Lincoln, 1998).

The researcher becomes an inherently consequential in the process of examining institutional culture (Magolda, 2003; Manning, 2000; Mertens, 2010; Schein, 2010). The researcher's mere presence serves as an intervention that influences participant behavior (Mertens, 2010). Institutional cultures, which distinguish insiders from outsiders, will be influenced in even the most mundane settings by the addition of someone new, even someone invited only to observe (Schein, 2010).

Additionally, the researcher is reciprocally influenced by participants, further complicating the researcher's role (Hatch, 2002; Manning, 2000). Consequently, the researcher and participants must jointly construct knowledge and make meaning of experiences. This co-construction of knowledge is still mediated through the subjective filter of the researcher's interpretation, which is governed by biases, prejudices, lived experiences, language, and sociohistoric context (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Magolda, 2003; Hatch, 2002). Therefore, "findings are a creation of the inquiry process rather than a reality that exists in the researcher's absence" (Manning, 2000, p. 140). Recognizing the researcher as a necessary intervention is essential to cultural constructivism and to recognizing the ways in which knowledge is co-constructed

between the researcher and the participants. As I explain later, reciprocity and reflexivity are ways of further situating the researcher's role within this process.

3.3 SITE

Participants for this research study attended Middle Atlantic University (MAU), a “R1: Doctoral University–Highest Research Activity,” according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2017). MAU is located in an urban setting, has fulltime undergraduate enrollment of approximately 17,500, and enrolls nearly 4,000 first-year students annually. Approximately 3,700 of these first-year students reside in campus residence halls during their first year. First-year student retention for this institution has remained near 92 percent since 2010.

MAU is also known for a robust new student orientation week, which highlights unique characteristics and attributes of its institutional culture. Its orientation programming has been featured in a research journal article as well as during professional organization presentations. Programs and services geared at assisting students with their first-year transition primarily target first-year residence hall students. Late night social events, residence hall meetings, move-in activities, floor groups on social media websites, and pre-arrival welcome phone calls from resident assistants indicate that residence hall students are a primary audience for orientation and transition programs at MAU. These efforts also expose students to involvement opportunities on campus, like student clubs, community service, faith-based organizations, internships, research, cultural events, and work-study (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Stimpson, 1994).

This research study reports the transitional interactions with institutional culture at a single institution. While themes have been saturated, their transferability to other settings must be done carefully and responsibly (Mertens, 2010). Aspects of the conceptual knowledge ascertained through my analysis and findings may also translate to broader institutional settings.

3.4 PARTICIPANTS

The sample for this research study included 62 students at Middle Atlantic University (MAU). Of these students, 50 were in their first year and 12 were in their second year. Students finishing their first year and students who had completed their second year were included in the sample to obtain the variation in students' reconstructions of their experiences. Combining data from these populations intended to provide a richer understanding of how students interpret institutional culture during their transition to higher education.

A little more than half of the students participating in this study were white ($n = 35$) and a little less than half identified as Black ($n = 13$), Latinx ($n = 2$), Asian ($n = 10$), or biracial ($n = 2$). Most students were women ($n = 37$) compared to men ($n = 24$) or genderqueer ($n = 1$). Almost all of students in this study were not the first members of their family to attend higher education ($n = 55$), and only seven students were the first in their families to go to college (See Table 4). The stratified purposeful sampling strategy created space for multiple diverse voices, representing an oversampling of students of color (See Appendix D for a fuller table of participants and Table 5 for MAU's racial demographics). Furthermore, a stratified purposeful sample accounted for variation in college student experiences, which current literature points to as significant and which the current research in the field is interested (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-

Wagner, 2013; Harper, 2012; Kuh, 2009; Padgett, Goodman, Johnson, Saichaie, Umbach, & Pascarella, 2010; Reason, 2009; Sax & Weintraub, 2014; Tierney, 1992).

Table 4. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	24	39.4%
Female	37	60.4%
Genderqueer	1	0.2%
Race		
Asian	10	16%
Biracial	2	3%
Black	13	21%
Latinx	2	3%
White	35	56%
College Year		
1	50	81%
2	12	19%
Status		
First-Generation	7	11%
Not First-Generation	55	89%

Students for this research study were recruited by student affairs professionals at MAU who acted as gatekeepers for the researcher. Recruitment emails were sent by student affairs staff working in first year experience, minority student services, minority student services for engineering, or TRIO services. These units were appropriate partners because the populations with which they work aligned with the participants needed to generate a stratified purposeful sample for this study. Gatekeepers emailed invitations to students who met two predetermined criteria: (a) status as a current or previous first-year student at the institution and (b) 18 years of age or older (See Appendix A for recruitment email script). Students replying to these email invitations and completing an interview were included in the study sample.

Chain or snowball sampling was, then, peripherally utilized to further secure variation in the sample (Stuber, 2011; Whitt, 1993) based on gender, race, and first-generation status.

Specifically, snowball sampling was employed to increase the number of male students, students of color, and first-generation students in the sample. These populations were more difficult to recruit at MAU. However, this secondary sampling strategy only resulted in the recruitment of one Black female student, who was referred by a friend who participated in the research study.

Table 5. Demographic Comparison of MAU and Sample

Race	% at MAU	% in sample
Asian	9%	16%
Biracial	3.5%	3%
Black	5%	21%
Latinx	3%	3%
White	77%	56%
Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, or American Indian	0.2%	0%
Unknown	1%	0%

3.5 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUE

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews served as the data collection technique for this study. These interviews provided flexibility for participants to discover, construct, and re-present that which is important to them (Hatch, 2002). This also allowed me to consider the emergence of previously unperceived patterns and themes (Whitt, 1993) and aligned with a constructivist theoretical perspective (Charmaz, 2014; Hatch, 2002). While Seidman (2006) focuses mainly on phenomenological interviewing, I followed his goal of qualitative interviewing by developing through each interview “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9).

Interviews were conducted with students who responded to an email sent by a student affairs professional serving as a gatekeeper. These interviews were conducted between March and July 2016 in a café near campus or over the phone. Phone interviews were necessary because some students were not on campus during the summer recess. While initially wary of phone interviews, I found that these interviews often yield unexpected rich information, especially pertaining to racialized campus experiences. The materiality of my own corporality experienced by a research participant can either encourage or inhibit openness to discussion of sensitive subjects, such as racism (Marn & Wolgemuth, 2016). Unless the participant searched for images of me online, my appearance could only be inferred or imagined by the participant through a phone conversation, limiting restrictions my physical presence may have imposed.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes with informed consent being obtained through both written and verbal statements approved by the University of Pittsburgh Human Research Protection Office. These statements were provided to participants before the research interview. The semi-structured interview protocol consistent of open-ended questions and potential probes. Interview questions prompted students to consider their feelings, their belonging, and their connection to MAU. These interview questions likewise centered on themes developed from the literature including cultural experiences, campus friendships, engagement experiences, and transitional challenges. The semi-structured nature of these interviews provided flexibility in directing discussions toward productive routes that participants found salient. Follow-up questions and probes generated richer data and helped contextualize participants' descriptions. Appendix B includes the HRPO approved interview protocol, which aligns with the research questions associated with this study.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Cultural constructivism relies heavily on abstract interpretations of data (as opposed to descriptive interpretations of data) to construct deep meaning of participants' experiences (Manning, 2000; Schein, 2010). To this end, data within this methodology may be analyzed using a number of techniques; cultural constructivism does not rely on a singular data analysis technique. For this research study, interpretative thematic analysis served as the data analysis technique for representing participants' voices and experiences. The general path of data analysis for this research study moved from (a) immersion in the data and generating initial impressions of data through member checking to (b) creating initial open codes, (c) descriptive codes, and (d) analytic memos ultimately represented as findings through interpretative themes (Bazeley, 2013; Hatch, 2002; Saldana, 2009).

Thematic data analysis began with an immersion into the data that occurred through reflexive memo writing and with delving into individual interview transcripts. As interviews were conducted, I recorded aspects of participants' answers to ask follow-up questions, observations about intonation and body language, and my own feelings. A few days after the interview concluded, I typed and revised these handwritten notes by adding further personal reflection to practice reflexivity and situate myself within the research (Hatch, 2002). This process allowed to me sense my personal feelings and subjectivities as I experienced them at certain points during the interview, which allowed to me to be regulate these dispositions before I initially read the transcripts. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and all interviews initially were read to record initial impressions. My role in interacting with and responding to the transcribed interview text in this fashion intended for "the interview to breathe and speak for itself" (Seidman, 2006, p. 117). These impressions and interviews were emailed to participants

to check for clarity of concepts and representation (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Only four students, emailed corrections to their interviews or my impressions, which were included during the coding phase.

As immersion continued, I re-read interview transcripts and developed open and descriptive codes. These codes were organized in NVivo software, which allowed me to identify and compare sections of the text coded identically. This allowed me to work among codes and interviews to find linkages and develop interpretative themes. Themes were mined for complexity through analytic memo writing that focused on abstract interpretation of participants' experiences. Specifically, memos were written to illuminate invisible and tacit assumptions related to culture (Whitt, 1993). Memos provided me with the opportunity to speculate freely and to theorize from the data. Reflexivity in analytic memos added richness, complexity, and sophistication to the overall construction of themes (Bazeley, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1998, 2005). Analyzing data thematically provides a high level of rigor that is supported in constructivism (Bazeley, 2013; Hatch, 2002; Mertens, 2010).

3.6.1 A note on language

Throughout the dissertation, I intentionally use the term "more advanced students" to describe students who are in their second, third, fourth, fifth, or sixth year as an undergraduate. The term more advanced is intended to indicate students who are further along their academic journey in terms of credit units acquired as opposed to more advanced in their thinking or their intellectual capacity. In instances where participants described "upperclassmen," the *in vivo* term remains in participants' quotes in order to more fully represent their perceptions and depictions of their collegiate experience.

3.7 REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity within constructivism is heady, problematic, and contentious (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The complexity of reflexivity in qualitative research emanates from the multiple and invisible ways the self is constructed, discovered, revised, and rediscovered through field work, interviews, observations, and interpretative writing (Altheide & Johnson, 2011). This means that reflexivity in this theoretical perspective relates to the conscious discovery of the subject, of the research problem, and of the researcher. According to Goodall (2000), reflexivity is “the process of personally and academically reflecting on lived experiences in ways that reveal deep connections between the writer and his or her subject” (cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 11). The process of engaging reflexively requires the researcher to remain attuned to the ways in which he or she influences an environment, to recognize his or her biases, and to regulate his or her emotions to a situation (Hatch, 2002). Thus, reflexivity provides integrity that is key to qualitative research.

To state my position related to this research study, I became interested in the success of first-year students from my previous professional role within Residence Life at the University of Pittsburgh. For six years, I worked directly with first-year residence hall students, developing and delivering programs and services aimed at easing their transition to college and bolstering their overall success. During my first year within this position, I quickly learned that students within my residence hall were multifaceted and diverse with unique perspectives, experiences, and desires. I also learned that first-year students were more open to learning about and attending institutional programs during their initial transition to college. As a result, programs and services within my residential community could not be delivered uniformly. Instead, these efforts had to be designed and implemented in ways that would target a range of students.

This focus on delivering programs and services led me to conduct pilot interviews as a part of my qualitative methodology coursework. These pilot interviews uncovered the ways that first-year students formed relationships with their floor communities, a key component of how these students experienced transition. During one of those pilot interviews, a student described to me the importance of finding and successfully attending an off-campus party as part of his college transition. He described it as a rite of passage into the institution, reminding me of Van Gennep's (1909/1969) anthropological writings about rites of passage. This particular interview struck me and provided a glimpse at the ways in which students create, perform, enact, and experience institutional culture wholly. In other words, students did not differentiate their collegiate experience between the academic and social spheres, as Tinto (1975) suggests. Other interviews completed in this course reflected this presumption. This exploratory finding diverged from previous expositions of institutional culture that I read, which delineated experiences as either academic or social. Instead, this pilot interview made me realize that students do not experience an institution in disjointed fragments.

While these experiences became salient for me in coming to this line of inquiry, the undercurrent which thrust me to this end centers on first-year student success. As mentioned previously, I spent six years working with first-year residence hall students and advocating for their success in a multitude of ways. Over the years, I directly had responsibility for nearly 3,000 different first-year students and 105 paraprofessional staff members. This direct connection to first-year student experiences in a professional role cultivated within me a desire to ensure and create conditions for their success by providing them with a positive residential experience that they could not achieve elsewhere. While I am not currently employed by Residence Life, my desire to create conditions for first-year student success in future student

affairs work remains. Therefore, I acknowledge the significance of these experiences in leading me to this inquiry, to formulating foundational ways that I will inevitably interact with research participants during interviews, and to constructing my impressions of data.

With the statement of my positionality that led me to this inquiry established, there are three main ways to practice reflexivity in this theoretical perspective: (a) recognizing my influence on participants as an intervention that will change and shape their perception of the environment, (b) controlling biases in a minimally intrusive manner, and (c) inciting personal affect in ways that are conducive and helpful to the participant (Magolda, 2003; Manning, 2000; Schein, 2010; Whitt, 1993). Recognizing the salient experiences that were foundational to my research on first-year student transitions to institutional culture, understanding ways to practice reflexivity within this theoretical perspective, and remaining mindful of the inevitable self-discovery processes that will transpire within this research provide the high level of scrutiny that is required in constructivist research (Charmaz, 2014). This research study and my research interest in institutional culture developed from these pilot interviews and from my professional experiences.

3.8 RECIPROCITY

Reciprocity in this study will be achieved in two ways that align with constructivism. Reciprocity in research studies that rely on interviews remains problematic and potentially unequal because the research benefits the researcher's agenda more than the individual participants (Seidman, 2006). Therefore, reciprocity must be carefully planned to honor participants' voluntary presentation of their experiences.

First, this research study will deepen institutional knowledge about the ways in which students experience initial transitions to higher education. Information gleaned from students during this research study will be made accessible to the student affairs units that provided access to research participants. Through these findings and results, practical implications—such as newly constructed programs and revitalized services—may be developed by departmental units in order to assist students during their transition and to support their academic journey toward degree completion (Guido et al., 2010).

Second, reciprocity in this study offers an opportunity for reflection for participants. Interviews may be sites where students are pressed to consider aspects of their transition that they had not previously considered. This may allow students to learn more about themselves and the ways they have handled their transition. This type of critical reflection and external processing targets students' self-awareness and may link to future decisions concerning degree completion (Astin, 1993b; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Such reflection and processing will be heightened as students co-construct meanings ascribed to the transitional experience. Through sharing new institutional knowledge and increasing participant reflection, reciprocity for this research study will be achieved in a manner consistent with the underpinnings of constructivism.

3.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS AND TRANSFERABILITY

Issues of trustworthiness related to constructivism are contextually repositioned and situationally contested (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2011). This paper addresses trustworthiness through the process of interpretive rigor, which embraces the connection between researcher and

participants. Thus, trustworthiness links tightly to the major epistemological tenets of constructivism.

Interpretive rigor reflects participants' experiences and preserves the recognition of multiple socially constructed realities (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In this regard, interpretive rigor provides space for the co-construction of research findings. This is done by sharing analytic memos and preliminary themes with research participants for commentary and further interpretation (Bazeley, 2013). This commentary is meant to provide participants additional opportunity to reflect the findings and to add feelings, emotions, and influential moments of personal crisis/catharsis that may be absent from initial interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). These co-created constructions produce social experiences from which transferability may be applied to research findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2011). Therefore, the researcher creates re-presentations of participants' experiences and the participants' input on these re-presentations increases trustworthiness.

While the goal of constructivism is not to achieve tenuous objectivity that allows for generalizations (Mertens, 2010), it is to approach the inquiry with honesty, with biases acknowledged and largely controlled, and with the spirit of honoring participants' experiences through the co-construction of knowledge in a dialogic fashion (Magolda, 2000, 2003). This allows for transferability through which readers may exercise individual judgments regarding the applicability of the research findings to their own unique situations (Mertens, 2010).

3.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Constructivism requires the researcher to be mindful and aware that his or her presence is an unavoidable intervention. As a result, the researcher must be acutely attuned to the ways in which he or she is influencing participants and their interactions with the institutional culture. To this end, the researcher must ensure that his or her presence serves the participants and institution in a helpful manner (Magolda, 2003; Schein, 2010). To achieve this, the researcher must utilize newly learned knowledge during the interview process to make future projections about potential impact of his or her presence in order to curb possibly adverse experiences for participants.

Part of this ethical consideration will be achieved through confidentiality. All records pertaining to subjects' involvement in this research study will be kept confidential through a unique code that will be assigned to participants' information. Participants' names will be separated from this coded information during storage. Maintaining a unique code is important because I expect that student experience will differ based on the constructivist tenet of multiple perceived realities (Guido et al., 2010; Magolda, 2003). Participants may be invited to complete a future follow-up interview in order to ascertain additional details from the initial interview. All transcribed data will be stored on a password protected external hard drive of the researcher. Finally, the interview questions related to this research study are non-sensitive.

3.11 HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION OFFICE

This research study is an exempt research study with the Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) because it provides either no risk or benign risk to participants. Informed consent will

be obtained through a verbal statement read to participants at the start of each interview; signed consent forms are not required for exempt HRPO studies. Appendix B contains a sample informed consent script that will be read at the beginning of each interview.

4.0 IMMERSION AND OBSERVATION: LEARNING AND ENACTING INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

Entering higher education marks a critical juncture of transition for first-year students. This transition requires navigation throughout the entire first year, thus marking first-year transition as an ongoing process. Based on my analysis of student interviews, students learn and enact the institutional culture while situated within compartmentalized peer networks during their transition to higher education. For this dissertation, I define institutional culture as an evolving context-bound set of behavioristic patterns that shape, mold, or persuade individuals in higher education through symbolic structures and tacit assumptions aimed at manipulating feelings, eliciting affects, inciting actions, and inculcating expectations in new members. These forces work in concert to instill in new members ways of being and behaving at a higher education institution. As a result, understanding the ways in which students learn institutional culture contributes to our overall understanding of how they perform the norms associated with culture. This, then, enriches our conceptual knowledge of how students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture during their transition to higher education.

Institutional culture is introduced through new environments, ideas, academic expectations, institutional values, situations, and norms for peer behavior (Kuh & Hall, 1993; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). These aspects of institutional culture are transmitted and communicated through multiple direct and indirect forces (Schein, 2010). While these students receive messages

about higher education from numerous sources like family, summer jobs, the media, or popular culture, the intricacies of the institutional culture are primarily transmitted through immersive experiences and peer observations, which emerged as themes in this study. Students remain open to learning the norms and values within this new culture because they expect college to serve as transitional space that bridges childhood and adult responsibilities. Navigating this transitional space and learning expectations, norms, and assumptions contributed to students' experiences in and perceptions of the MAU culture.

4.1 THE BUBBLE OF TRIAL ADULTHOOD

When students in study began college, they described transitioning to a new phase of their lives. This phase signaled independence symbolized through situations like daily separation from parents or living in a residence hall, delineating college as a signifier of transition. Such a notion remained even more prominent for first-year students whose viewpoint, informed by their recent transition, centralized their independence (Arnett, 2000). As such, first-year students opened themselves to learning how to align their behaviors with institutional expectations to gain social acceptance and academic success (Tinto, 1975, 1994). Especially for students living on campus, their shifting social networks positioned students' campus connections as their primary interactive bases. Together, these forces influenced how students embraced peer norms within the institutional culture.

One factor that promoted this openness was the prevailing view of college as distinctive or separate. Students regarded MAU as separate from the bustling urban environment that surrounded it. While there was a clear outside world that regularly interacted with the campus,

time-intensive academics and student organizations defined much of first-year student life at MAU. The intensity of these activities, combined with living on campus for many first-year students, impelled a handful of students in the study to describe MAU as a bubble that was shielded from not only the local urban environment, but also the broader society. Molly, a white female in her second year, outlined the activities that occurred at MAU that distinguished it from other environments:

It feels like college is just this bubble where you do your schoolwork, you do your social activities, and you do your clubs and organizations and then you can interact with the outside world. It's like first you interact with your college and then you interact with everyone else...College is supposed to be preparing you for life in the rest of the world, but sometimes it feels like you're just isolated from the rest of the world.

MAU served as the primary interactive base for Molly, and social networks beyond MAU were secondary. Collegiate life represented a paradox for many students who were engulfed by academics, friends, and campus activities and did not find themselves interacting much with broader communities. In this way, the institutional culture experienced by first-year students at MAU allowed for sheltered interactions with these other communities and networks. Tessa, a Black female in her second year, concluded, "MAU is a bubble...the campus very easily sucks up your everyday life...not realizing anything is happening outside of the campus...I would not even know that news was happening...it's very easy to get sucked [into the bubble]." This pervasive and encompassing nature of institutional culture perpetuated for students an inside-outside dichotomy that proved to be a distinguishing aspect of the first year. While interactions with broader sociopolitical networks remained limited, students subsumed regular contact with family and passive or loose communication with high school friends through social media into

their compartmentalized constellation of support. This bubble imagery suggests the encompassing nature of the campus culture, which not only directs behavior, but also demarcates insiders and outsiders. This dichotomy reinforced students' desires to gain acceptance by learning the peer norms associated with the culture.

Ultimately, this dichotomy presented the world inside MAU as a changing, transitional space. This transitional space was regarded by students as sheltered or protected from "real" responsibilities. For Chloe, a white female in her first year, college bridged two distinct periods of her life: "At MAU...You live in this little world where you have a lot of independence and free time, but no responsibilities to go with it...college...connects your childhood to adulthood." The perceived lack of responsibilities, increased independence, and ability to make decisions about how to spend free time all contributed to the distinctness that separated first-year students' role at MAU from their roles in other communities. This perception positioned college as a transitive space of emerging adulthood that bridges childhood and adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Sophie, a white female in her first year, meanwhile recognized college acting as a transitional space by highlighting the new responsibilities she assumed by attending MAU:

College is trial adulthood. It's like you are kind of an adult, but you are not. It's you figuring things out. I'm responsible for myself. I feed myself. I get my laundry...I go to class...I get up when my alarm goes off...Going to MAU is really radical, like different.

While Chloe mentioned that these types of responsibilities were not a salient part of defining her independence, Sophie's attention to performing tasks associated with independent living defined her independence. For Sophie, these responsibilities, which were previously coordinated by her parents, felt real. Overall, individual responsibilities guided by academic, cocurricular, and social demands and absent from direct parental oversight highlighted the ways in which life inside

MAU generally functioned for students. These responsibilities highlighted students' independence, an independence that was not perceived when they returned home during break periods due to parental oversight. In searching for ways to describe her experience at MAU, Becca, a white female in her first year, considered MAU as an ongoing transitional space:

College life—it's just weird that you can just go to college and live in a whole new place in this like pretend college bubble world and get a different kind of education [outside the classroom]...everything is constantly changing and new things are happening. That's exciting...[but] I don't think I've gotten used to being here yet.

After a year, Becca still was finding her place, learning, and adjusting to new situations, expectations, and norms. While many of these changes were exciting for her, MAU served as an ongoing transitional space with processes extending beyond an academic year. These daily adjustments recognize the changing nature of various aspects of the transitional process. Institutional culture and peer norms that students learned shape the complex and ongoing first-year transition process to which students are attuned. Students focus on the idiosyncrasies of this adjustment process that occurs within this place and space because of their desire to connect with peers and the time-intensity associated with aspects of college life.

Views of MAU as pretend or a bubble should be tempered and regarded with the relative privilege that they imply. For almost all students in this study, MAU represented a transitional space that allowed for the healthy experimentation of new ideas, friendships, and identities. All but a handful of the students in this study spoke positively about institutional values, sporting events, campus buildings, and campus ceremonies. Sensing this positivity was heightened by an enthusiasm that was apparent in many students' voices as they spoke about their lives at MAU. This further demonstrates these first-year students' willingness not only to be open to, but also to

claim and contribute to institutional culture. Yet, this transitional space at MAU is also one that most students of color and first-generation college students did not view as a pretend or protected bubble. Their experiences with oppression, coupled with pressures to perform well academically for scholarships made life at MAU not a “pretend college bubble world.” For example, losing a scholarship for poor academic performance meant no longer being able to afford to attend MAU for this subset of students. These students treated MAU as an extension of the “real world,” a world in which the potential decisions could have negative consequences and in which the sociopolitical contexts pervaded the campus culture through microaggressions.

4.2 LEARNING THROUGH IMMERSION

Max: How did you learn about the way of life at MAU?

Oscar: By living it. [Laughs].

Learning institutional culture primarily occurred through daily immersion for participants in this study. Immersion provided regular and ongoing exposure to campus activities, rich with cultural meanings. Interactions in the classroom, social situations in the residence hall, student organization meetings, and campus ceremonies were just a few of the activities that contributed the immersive nature of higher education. The vastness of what MAU life encompassed created explanatory difficulty for many participants, who troubled over explaining how they learned about life at MAU. Clara, a biracial female in her first year, exemplified the way most of these students perceived learning the campus culture “[Learning] just kind of happened through experience.” This recurrent trend aligns with individuals becoming rooted within an institutional culture in ways that hinder their ability to explain or operationalize its inner workings (Christie

& Dinham, 1991; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 2010). In a few cases, participants explained that the interview pressed them to consider that which they took for granted on campus and encouraged their thinking about new ideas. In part, this exposes how institutional culture served as a force that operated through unquestioned assumptions during the first year of college.

Other students enrich Clara's notion of learning institutional culture through ongoing exposure. These students described learning institutional culture as an immersive process that proceeded neither linearly or smoothly. Immersion was generally recognized as ongoing daily interaction with campus activities and campus peers. Leigh, a Black female in her first year, described this process as rhythmic: "I think for me, the biggest thing is trying to get the rhythm of everything." Learning the rhythm of MAU illustrated the way in which institutional culture was sensed and perceived to be nonlinear, yet generally predictable. Becca, meanwhile, compared learning institutional culture to learning a language:

It's kind of like whenever people are learning a language, they'll just go to the country and immerse themselves in that country. Doing college is like that. You just kind of have to do it. I don't think there is necessarily anything that people can say that will prepare you for [college life]...until you walk around...you're never really going to know.

Learning through activity prepared Becca for how to appreciate the expectations of MAU and enact behavioral norms that met these expectations. Walking around to learn the institutional culture runs more deeply than merely mastering the location of campus buildings. Instead, the metaphor that Becca employs refers to the broader experiences that students collect throughout their transition. Samuel extrapolates by explaining the way he learned social aspects of MAU culture: "I learned the social part just by practicing, going to parties." While going to parties provided students with different social benefits, for Samuel they also served as an activity

through which he practiced enacting the peer social norms that he learned. In essence, immersion provided a point of departure from high school-defined routines by offering ongoing experiences within the new institutional culture. Moreover, these experiences offered opportunities through practice, reinforcement, and affirmation, to enact culture.

These regular interactions contributed to how students perceived MAU's institutional culture, while transmitting to students messages about norms for behaviors and values. Becca further stated, "The aspects of community and diversity—you can't help but be a part of once you come to MAU. Like you just kind of immerse yourself in that way." Becca's exposure to MAU's values implicitly framed many of her experiences on campus. For Becca, these values were reinforced by regular interactions in her residence hall, student organizations, and classes. MAU's values related to community and diversity were so prevalent that all students listed community and about half explained diversity as MAU values during their interviews. The consistent nature of these values encased and guided students' experiences as they transitioned from high school to college. Through continued exposure, these values remained foundational to how students' lives either proceeded or aspired to proceed at MAU. Institutional values that were explicitly communicated, consequently, contributed to the immersive processes through which students in this study learned institutional culture.

These values, then, relate to the assumptions that students carry with them as they experience myriad facets of campus life and potentially soften individual areas of transitional hardship, incongruence, or challenge. Vicky, a white female in her first year, employed immersion as a tactic that enabled her to learn the specifics about the institutional culture, while de-emphasizing her discomfort with leaving home:

Immersing myself would basically be the best way for me to [learn about MAU's way of life]. It kept my mind off the big transition of leaving home and realizing MAU is my home now...I immediately started with clubs...I remember going to a bunch of random things...anything...remotely interesting...it's a good time to explore all of your options and find out what other people are doing on campus.

Time-intensive cocurricular activities provided Vicky with little time to think about the significant changes to her life, while also allowing her to interact with peers and develop her interests. Immersion served two purposes: (a) easing fears associated with transitioning to higher education and renegotiating relationships with family and (b) engaging in a high number of campus activities through which institutional culture is purveyed. This created a situation where institutional culture was learned, connection to new peers thrived, individual sense of belonging swelled, and fears associated with experiencing this new way of life were mitigated. In this way, immersion, ultimately, works as a mechanism and tactic that allows students to reframe their normality, while re-figuring and mooring to new constellations of support.

4.2.1 Rebounding from failure

Within Learning through Immersion, a subtheme appeared—Rebounding from Failure. Failure proved to be a phenomenon that each student in the study experienced to varying degrees. All students in the study described overcoming failures in completing their first year of college. Students experienced, learned, and rebounded from personal failures caused by misalignment between cultural expectations and their behaviors in that culture. Direct or indirect correction signaled to students this incongruence and produced negative emotions. Experiencing,

perceiving, making sense of, and adjusting through these corrective mechanisms dispelled negative emotions for a wide range of abrasive cultural situations.

Failure during this transitional period was unpredictable, but expected as a part of the learning process. Transitioning to a new environment, new schedule, new academic demands, and new friends left students anticipating situations or moments that would produce disjuncture. Julian, a white male in his first year, curbed this disjuncture by envisioning failure as a technique to build a database of information for expected future behaviors:

College is trial and error—you just got to try stuff until you figure out what works for you...it's not a routine cause I don't do the same thing every day. I think it's just like building a database you know. Taking in all this information so I just know what will work for me.

For Julian, trial and error allowed him to fit within the culture while adapting personal strategies that were beneficial to his individual success. He viewed this information as a database that allowed him to broadly replicate patterns of behaviors that worked in the culture and avoid practices that resulted in incongruence. Trial and error requires not only an openness toward failing and making mistakes, but also rebounding from those failures. Rahmi, a Black female in her first year, explained, “College is a lot of trial and error...[like] failing bus system navigating, failing the first couple of exams. Otherwise, you won't know what you're doing wrong.” As such, failure served as a corrective mechanism through which students learned to change to succeed within the institutional culture. In this way, students perceived college failure as an opportunity to learn about their place within the institution and tactically employ trial and error to affirm that placement.

Trial and error with common stresses, such as going to the wrong building or not doing well on an exam, were usually presented as relatively benign. Chloe, a white female in her first year, summarized this point: “Some things you have to experience. You know failing a class, getting rejected from a job. You can’t really get hurt right now.” For Chloe, the bubble that encapsulated the college experience also softened failures that occurred within this space. These types of activities not only provided opportunities for failure, but also future opportunities for correction, thus diminishing the impact of reverberating negativity. Students rebounded from these failures by adjusting their behavior or attitudes to affirm their place in the culture.

A series of adjustments may need to be made throughout the trial and error process. As Kiyoshi, an Asian male in his first year, pointed out, “There isn’t any specific arithmetic, any specific thing that you do [in this process].” Trial and error did not offer a linear path to success and served as an effective learning tool. Learning culture may not be the same as solving a mathematical equation, but it may provide the beats in a rhythm that allow students to anticipate the next measure or hear that they are off-key. In his interview, Oscar continued this line of thinking, “It almost seems counterintuitive to first experience failure and then learning from it...failing just sticks more.” The trial and error process of learning culture produced a reaction that presented a lasting memory that was stored and retrieved from the cultural database that students were constantly building and refining. Part of the effectiveness of relying on trial and error as a method for learning intricacies of the culture may relate to overcoming negative emotions associated with failures and noting times when the database was out of sync.

Other failures occurring during the trial and error process contained deeper negative emotions that students more laboriously worked to overcome. Without a specific algorithm for

experiencing academic challenges early on, Jonas expressed dissatisfaction with his grade in one of his classes:

I withdrew from one economics class because I was struggling...it was disheartening...I had never done bad on anything before...That felt pretty shitty...because...I didn't think that I would ever have to withdraw from a class. It was kind of a drag.

In this instance, Jonas concluded that increasing attention to this class and attending faculty office hours would detract from his commitment to his other classes. After seeking the faculty member's guidance, Jonas learned how to better sequence the course by enrolling in a lower-level economics course that would prepare him to retake this course in the future. Although help-seeking behaviors helped Jonas make sense of and reframe this failure, he still had not envisioned struggling and needing to withdraw from a course because of the expectations generated from his high school experiences. Even after receiving guidance from the faculty member, Jonas still dealt with overcoming the negative emotion by internally detailing a plan to avoid academic course withdrawal in the future that would involve gaining faculty help or tutoring earlier.

Processing these negative emotions and overcoming friction encountered within the culture left students who experienced these failures with empowering views of their perseverance. Gina, a white female in her first year, experienced friction with the culture as she struggled academically and finding engaging campus activities: "I'm proud of how hard I worked my first year. I'm proud of my attitude...I'm proud, you know, getting back up again after I was kind of knocked down over and over again." This perseverance allowed Gina to utilize the trial and error process to build her database and to reframe negative emotions into an empowering script of personal perseverance.

4.2.2 Highlighting variation: Backgrounds contributing to trial and error experiences

The trial and error process assumed that students enter college with cultural tools that enabled them to decipher the institutional culture and respond to it in productive ways that encourage their success. However, students' individual backgrounds and prior experiences contributed to the cultural tools they possessed upon entering college and the level of congruence these tools had with the institutional culture. Molly quickly learned that the behaviors she observed while visiting her brother's college campus did not align with MAU:

MAU has its own idiosyncrasies that make it what it is. You don't really learn them until you put yourself out there and live in it and make mistakes and get yelled at for doing it the wrong way. I learned first that you do not wear any of your clothes from your brother's college because you will get made fun of for it and probably yelled at [laughs].

While it was acceptable to wear other institutions' apparel on her brother's campus, MAU peer culture restricted such behavior and policed it through lighthearted, yet impactful teasing. This teasing interrupted Molly's previous assumption and impelled her to alter her behavior by no longer wearing non-MAU collegiate apparel. Meanwhile, Becca's experience of observing her older sister's collegiate experience set an unrealized expectation for her first year of college:

I think watching my sister a lot was what I thought was going to happen. She had a random roommate and it was great. So, I thought I'm going to have a random roommate and it's going to be great. Then, it's not [great] and then it was like disillusionment...[it] messed me up for a bit...I was unprepared for that.

The collegiate experiences of older siblings at other institutions revealed assumptions that younger siblings projected about their own experience. However, variation among these experiences combined with the uniqueness of institutional cultures renders such transference

tenuous. As a result, students with older siblings may impose expectations that misalign with the institutional culture. This required a realignment of expectations to repair the disjointed cultural perspectives which subsequently emanate.

High school preparation also played a role in the cultural tools that student bring to deciphering their collegiate experience. Hayden, a biracial genderqueer in her first year, felt culture shock around her academic courses:

I think that's been the hardest part about MAU...where most of my shock comes from—from classes...I never knew what to ask professors...I felt like in class I understood the materials...the exam would roll around and I would be somewhere around the class average.

Hayden's previous academic experiences in high school provided her with a cultural script that did not neatly align with MAU's academic expectations. Plotting interactions with professors left Hayden at times puzzled with how to communicate her difficulty with certain aspects of course material. Through a trial and error process through which Hayden concluded the professor to be unresponsive to her needs, she eventually hired a tutor outside MAU and followed a more familiar script generated from her high school experience.

Overcoming obstacles by learning the institutional culture to successfully navigate these paths through trial and error had the potential to be satisfying. Molly described her sense of connection after learning the nuances of the institutional culture after reconciling expectations: "I think [the idiosyncrasies] are important because it helps—like once you figure it out, then you feel like you belong. Those little things show you're an MAU student." While laborious and requiring careful decoding of implicit behavioral norms, successfully deciphering cultural norms resulted in sense of belonging. These experiences on how to enact the institutional culture

through daily performance produced for students in the study a sense of connection or belonging that delineated insiders and outsiders, knowers and novices. Students entered college with a range of backgrounds and experiences that contributed to the cultural tools they had available to decipher, navigate, and work within the institutional culture. This variation suggests that experiencing trial and error processes with cultural tools that provide alternate expectations that may produce cultural friction. As a result, students reframe their expectations to navigate the general cultural path that the institution and its actor follows.

4.3 MIRRORING PEERS' BEHAVIORS

Another crucial way that students learned about institutional culture was through the messages they received from peers and the behaviors they observed on campus. Observing and internalizing these messages created a situation where students mirrored peers' behaviors in order to align with peer cultural norms. Mirroring behavior both contrasts and complements immersion, requiring increased situational awareness and astuteness. This technique for learning culture expressed a desire to fit in and perform the culture "correctly." Doing so eased transitional anxieties. In a sense, this method of cultural transmission compressed trial and error processes. This is not to say that students who mirrored behavior avoided experimentations with trial and error. Instead, immersion, trial and error, and mirroring observed behaviors work together in instilling norms for institutional culture.

Through observations, others' behavior signaled the ways students should enact and perform institutional culture. This particular method of learning culture provided an added layer of safety and support that was absent from trial and error experiences. In essence, this allowed

students to observe their peers' behaviors before replicating it themselves. This technique may be especially meaningful during the initial transition from high school to college when anxieties about fitting in and succeeding run high. The experiences of more advanced students were privileged as first-year students navigated their transition and searched clues on how to handle college life. These experiences imbued privilege because more advanced students were perceived to possess institutional knowledge learned through their experiences. Their knowledge was unique because it came through their daily immersion, interactions with faculty, building constellations of support, learning from other students' mistakes, and engaging in their own trial and error processes. Establishing a relationship with a more advanced student, typically a resident assistant, retained potency because it exposed first-year students to implicit and explicit messages about norms for peer behavior. Jonas recollected an early conversation he had with his resident assistant about bridging the academic and social spheres of campus:

One of the first things my RA said is, "Don't major shame anybody because if anyone was major shaming or talking shit about your major, just come tell me and I'll like straighten them out cause it's bullshit...Nobody cares about your test scores in high school, and don't brag about them like keep that separate." Both nice things to hear...but it is just a good thing to know that that's understood as being kind of like not a good thing to do.

Jonas's resident assistant provided direct messages about norms for peer behavior at MAU. These messages enforced a standard where all academic pursuits were equal and high school academic successes were meant to be ignored. This message promoted a certain sense of academic equality among students at MAU and directed Jonas and his floormates with rules for

engaging with peers on academic topics. Heather, a white female in her first year, looked to others, especially students in their second or third years for clues of how to master college life:

At the very beginning, [I was] just kind of watching and seeing how other people worked and not necessarily just jumping in and doing it...[I] could kind of watch and see [how they did it]...asking RAs, asking any of [my] friends that were upperclassmen like how can I [do something], what can I do...everyone kind of learned [college life] the same way, and they can teach now [because] they had the opportunities and experiences, and they can now they can show us how they did it.

Instead of immediately immersing herself in the culture and performing, Heather relied on her relationships with more advanced students and observations to determine how others were successful in college life. Within this perspective, students with experience at MAU possessed knowledge that was decidedly valuable because they had succeeded in completing their first years at MAU. Consequently, Heather implicitly concluded that these students' experiences were worthy of replicating and could result in similar outcomes. Heather followed up this sentiment by saying, "[Observing] is a comfort thing. I think it makes everyone feel comfortable knowing that someone else did it too." Therefore, observation before performing provided a sense of security that bolstered confidence and curbed anxiety. It, likewise, infused within first-year students a sense of possibility for success through similar behaviors.

Observing others' behaviors was especially prominent during the initial transition from high school to college when students experienced anxieties related to belonging and making friends. These anxieties led students who mirrored behaviors to observe even mundane routines before attempting them on their own:

I learned the way of life at MAU by just following others' lead...I mean if I walked into a class...I would look around and evaluate my surroundings and see what other people were doing. Did they take out their notebook right away? Do they just sit there and stare? Do they have stuff on their desk? It just makes me at ease [to do what they're doing]...make sure I'm not like too far off. Bella (Asian female in her second year)

Observation was, therefore, used as a tool by Bella to replicate the groups' behavior. Bella explained that she employed these observational techniques heavily during her initial college transition. As she progressed throughout the rest of her first year and into her second year, she gained confidence and stopped looking to others' behaviors for validation. This technique initially aided Bella in reducing the uncertainty about college life that she experienced in her early transition to MAU.

Observing others' behaviors with the desire to fit in assumed that peer norms could be performed correctly and that operating outside this norm may have invited unwarranted negative attention. Molly described a behavioral instance of the embarrassment incurred by making a normative gaffe: "Wearing your ID tag on a lanyard—like no one does that...you see [a first-year student] doing it, and you're like—Aww man! That kid doesn't know what he's doing." In this way, Molly noted the ways in which seemingly small details about displaying a student ID might provoke unwelcomed and even unknown negative attention, which cast first-year students as novices. Elle, a white female student in her second year, noted another behavior that distinguished first-year students:

A lot of freshmen will...walk up and down the streets looking for a place that appears to have a party...that's definitely a very first semester freshman activity...I don't think I ever did that. I only went to parties I was invited to...but [looking for a party] definitely a

freshman faux pas...having a connection to the party is very important because then you know where you're actually going...they don't know where to go...it's kind of a joke for the older people to laugh at.

While stressing that she had never breached etiquette by engaging in this behavior, Elle explained that first-year students looking for parties only highlighted their status as novices and magnified their still-forming social connections. This contrasted with the experiences of more advanced students, some of whom asserted social superiority over first-year students because of their established social networks. Attending a party implicitly represented the breadth of one's social network and conferred status within the culture. Not having a direct invitation to a party left many first-year students wandering streets densely populated with other college students. More advanced students directly or indirectly policed this behavior. Taking cues from other students, most notably more advanced students, provided structure for whom first-year students attempted to emulate.

Overt messages were one way that students privileged more advanced students' messages, and observing their behaviors served as another way through which first-year students considered how their more advanced counterparts behaved. Chloe, for instance, surveyed more advanced students through observation to discern their behaviors and outcomes:

I like...seeing upperclassmen, seeing how their lives are going, seeing this person went to class everyday didn't go out at all and now is going off to one of the best med schools in the nation...Internalizing that as okay this is what I want for my life...trying to emulate people who are what you want.

Observation of more advanced students' behaviors led to internalization and either emulation or avoidance. Chloe emulated the behavior of her peers who achieved outcomes that aligned with

her goals. While privileged for their experience within the institutional culture, more advanced students served as role models of behavior for first-year students. Even more advanced students that first-year students did not have direct relationships with influenced the ways in which they behaved. Therefore, more advanced students play pivotal roles in the cultural transmission process for first-year students because they are looked to for cues on how peer norms should be enacted.

4.3.1 Highlighting variation: Modeling culture through mentors for students of color with a scholarship

First-year students of color with an MAU scholarship comprised a unique subset of nine participants in this sample. While these students also utilized immersion and trial and error, they learned about how to behave as a scholarship student through mentoring relationships, accounting for a variation in their experiences. These assigned mentoring partnerships paired students with more advanced students of color through a program that I refer to as Connections (CXN). CXN was supervised by an MAU staff member, and peer mentors provided direction and information about navigating the scholarship aspects of MAU culture. CXN participants summarized that their scholarships were vital to their continued attendance at MAU and noted that the primary goal of CXN was to ensure scholarship maintenance. Clara, a biracial female in her first year, explained CXN:

Connections is for minority students that are on a scholarship...We are all trying to keep our scholarship...we had upperclassmen mentors who wanted to help us keep our scholarship and to keep an eye on us...make sure we knew all of the resources [and] we acted in ways to enable us to be successful.

This program transmitted institutional knowledge to CXN participants that would promote behaviors to engender academic success; mentors communicated and demonstrated knowledge about these pathways to institutional success. These pathways included exposure to academic resources, but stress undergirded many of the interactions, experiences, and ways of being for CXN participants.

Peer mentors exposed CXN participants to new information about how to navigate the academic landscape at MAU. Providing information about leveraging institutional resources, like tutoring during times of academic distress, pointed CXN students to existing campus resources:

I just told my mentor all my problems. I was like I hate my classes, like I'm worried about this and I'm worried about that. She kind of calmed down and sent me away with a bunch of resources...she said, "You said you hate chemistry. Don't forget there is help in the [residence hall] Sunday, Tuesday, and Wednesday..." She gave me advice on how to approach the problems [I had at MAU]...[saying] "Here is how you are going to be successful if you want to choose that pathway." Clara (biracial female in her first year)

I have two classes I'm struggling in...my mentor told me to go to the [tutoring center] and go to the professor's office hours that would really get me connected...Me being more personal with [the professor], let [the professor] know that...I was just...trying my best in [the] class. Mimi (Black female in her first year)

Clara's mentor provided her with directions on how to handle academic demands, presenting institutional resources as the pathway for a successful academic experience. Mimi's mentor, meanwhile, coached her with more specific strategies on conducting a cordial, personal,

productive, and culturally-appropriate dialogue with a professor. Within the MAU culture, struggling academically implied a behavioral response from the student to engage in help-seeking behavior. However, personal backgrounds may have cast receiving tutoring or assistance from a faculty member as stigmatizing. Differential power relationships between tutors or faculty and students may further complicate the uneasiness that pursuing these resources generates. Mimi, for instance, eventually spoke to her professor as a result of her mentor's encouragement. Nevertheless, she maintained that her personal and family background valued self-reliance and she still "had a very hard time asking for help."

Within CXN mentoring relationships, the stressful demands associated with students' scholarship were continually present, even though unspoken. For many CXN participants, their scholarship served as the determining factor of being able to attend MAU. As a result, being a scholarship student meant enduring a stress that was not sensed by their non-CXN peers. Mimi explained her feelings about the stress her scholarship produced, which were reflected by all but one CXN student:

[Being on scholarship] adds a lot of stress really cause it's just I have to maintain a certain GPA, and a lot of my friends I made when I came here [through CXN], we didn't realize the GPA scale was different than high school...I was like—oh my gosh! If I don't do well and I lose my scholarship, I'm not going to be able to be here anymore, I'm not going to be able to see my friends anymore. Even now, it's even stressful [talking about it] because I don't want to lose the money...I could just have it taken away.

Mimi's comment exemplified the implications that scholarships produced for CXN students. Through CXN, scholarships intertwine with classroom performance, grades, friends, identity, and sense of belonging. Inherent in Mimi's commentary was the implied differential power

relationship between her and faculty or administrators, who oversee the scholarship award. As Mimi noted, the implications of losing a scholarship for CXN students were consequential and under a constant perceived threat of revocation. Being on scholarship, therefore, produced a salient identity as well as a responsibility for CXN students that uniquely situated them within the institutional culture. Individual combined with institutional expectations produced stressful conditions that consequently undergirded CXN participants' campus experiences.

These stressful experiences were fueled by perceptions of diminished expectations for students of color and a consequent desire to prove oneself. Kali, a Black female in her first year, explained the stress induced by these lower expectations for scholarship students: "The scholarship produces stress...because people expect us to flunk out. So that's double stress because you have to prove them wrong." Tessa, a Black female in her second year, recounted that she also experienced these stresses: "I just want to prove [to the people who expect me to fail] that I belong here; I feel the pressure." Anticipated failure from white students contributed to a racial climate influenced by the institutional culture. This resulting stress backgrounded the CXN mentoring relationship as well as relationships forged with other CXN participants. Through these relationships, CXN participants modeled their behavior after their peer mentors, who they looked to for guidance on how to handle this stress and claim empowerment. Clara's mentor did more than merely point her to resources by sharing his personal struggles with the stress of fitting into the academic mold demanded by the institutional culture. Clara related her mentor's experiences to her own and mirrored his behavior to strive to be similarly successful, summarizing "[we] went through the same experience." In her interview, Kali explained how she mirrored positive academic behaviors she observed in her CXN mentor and peers: "During finals week, every Black [CXN] person will be studying. You will not catch a Black [CXN] person at

a party...they all know they cannot bring a failure home.” Final exam periods carried additional significance for CXN scholarship students who handled the institutional and familial consequences of underperforming. Ongoing stress as influenced the cultural assumptions that undergirded much of the way of being for a CXN scholarship student.

The stresses and consequences of performing below institutional academic standards remained implicit among CXN students. According to Clara, mentors succeeded in sensing their students’ stress: “It’s just nice...without having to explicitly say...I’m on scholarship...[CXN mentors] already knew that’s why you’re so stressed out about class...it could be really important for you keeping your scholarship...[they] know your pain.” Associating maintaining a scholarship with pain indicated that the pressures to perform and succeed academically were reinforced by CXN mentors and other CXN participants. Even something seemingly innocuous or well-intentioned like a bulletin board silently contributed to this stress, as Clara later pointed out: “There was a time management bulletin board [in my residence hall] coming in. It was just like, ‘you never have as much time as you think...focus.’” These background markers of peer culture served as reminders about the responsibilities that being on a scholarship entailed. Combined with regular academic check-ins with CXN mentors, the persistent pressure to perform well academically induced ongoing stress for many CXN scholarship students. While this stress was implicit, CXN participants looked to their mentors and mirrored their behavior to maintain their scholarships, their confidence, and their familial pride.

4.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, I explored the ways in which institutional culture is learned, enacted, and performed at MAU. A series of themes emerged that represent the tools and mechanisms that first-year students relied upon to decipher the culture. Deciphering the culture allowed students in this study to enact behavioral norms that contributed to their confidence associated with connecting and belonging to MAU. Viewing MAU as a bubble partitioned from broader society similarly served as a point of departure from students' previous normality. This departure enabled students to approach their collegiate transition with a sense of openness. Possessing this attitude encouraged many students to figure out college life through immersion that was predicated on trial and error. This process permitted failure and opportunities for re-calibrating behavior until it aligned with peer norms within the institutional culture. Mirroring others' behaviors after observation functioned as a strategy for students to gain performative safety, especially during their early transition to MAU. Privileging and remaining sensitive to the experiences of more advanced students was key to this strategy. Together, these mechanisms served as transmitters of peer norms to new students situated within the institutional culture.

5.0 CONSTELLATIONS, CORES, AND COMPARTMENTALIZATION: FRIENDSHIPS IN INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

College student friendships remain as rich, dense, multifaceted, and as differently constructed as today's diverse student body (McCabe, 2016). In this chapter, I explore campus friendships as constellations that allow students to compartmentalize a diffuse network of peers and categorize them for specific activities. In the same way that constellations are anchored by their brightest star, so too are students' networks anchored by a core friendship group. In essence, these constellations serve as referential points that inculcate belonging and act as filters of institutional culture. Through these friendship groups, the meaning undergirding students' campus experiences is cooperatively constructed.

Initially, students meet other students in their residence hall, classes, club meetings, intramural sporting events, and off-campus parties. Homogeneity, proximity, and time intensity spur these friendships. Sharing meals, studying, watching television or movies, playing sports, going to parties, drinking alcohol, attending campus programs, tailgating at MAU football games, and attending museum exhibits were just a few of the activities students I interviewed engaged in with peers. These activities influenced friendship development and reinforced their similar interests. These networks regardless of their composition serve as mediating filters of institutional culture, demarcating their prominence during the transition to college life.

This chapter explores the ways in which peer campus friendships for first-year students act as filters of institutional culture. Such an exploration is crucial because it more generally relates to understanding the ways in which first-year students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture during their first year. In this chapter, I consider the ways in which friendships are structured to facilitate interpretations of institutional culture during the first-year transition. First, I examine the role of friendship groups in easing transition by buffering negativity through positive support from friends with similar a gender, race, or political disposition. Then, I grapple with the ways in which shared experiences within an institutional culture create common bonds among students as they co-construct these situations. I conclude this chapter with an illustration of students with intersecting minoritized identities who have ended their first year without significant friendships and the implications this poses for these students.

5.1 INTERCONNECTED CONSTELLATIONS OF CAMPUS SUPPORT

5.1.1 Core friends within a diffuse constellation

In their overarching form, students' campus friendships were constellations that indicated group membership, while reproducing local and global cultural scripts. These constellations were anchored by a core friendship group that served as a primary referential and support point. The various points that comprised these constellations represented compartmentalized friendships or friend groups (McCabe, 2016). Social connections contributed to shaping the overall MAU institutional culture as well as a student's perceptions of it. Moreover, friendships facilitated

silent interpretations and enacted behaviors within this culture. Shawn, a white male in his second year, mused with this image by saying, “Those types of...moments [with friends at MAU]—and it’s nothing concrete—it’s all different bits of a [bigger] picture that is being formed.” As a result, the community and friendships, formed as students transition to MAU, were not reflective of a singular MAU culture. MAU culture was, therefore, the combination of overlapping interactions among multiple constellations. Together, these various constellations formed a broader image of diffuse peer networks and served as one way students perceived institutional culture.

The friendships into which students entered during their first year represented compartmentalized networks that produced individualized communities. Various friendships coalesced in ways that formed a student’s community or constellation of support. Although these groups interacted and commingled, each constellation of friendships was regarded by students as distinct and individualized, as Darius, a Black male in his first year, explained:

I’m not sure if I feel connected to like the deans and all that stuff just because I haven’t really done anything big. But I think that I have my own community within MAU, so that I can have my own little web of friends from various places, like from classes and clubs...some know each other; some don’t. I think that like I have my own MAU community, but I don’t think anyone has the overall MAU community...because not everyone can know everyone in this school...so, I just think that everyone has their own MAU community...they all have a single string to each person [in the web]...you can always make your way to every person through your connections.

While distinguishing between the institution and students, Darius’s description of smaller MAU communities aligned with the ideas related to multiple iterations of institutional culture and its

differential experiences and interpretations existing simultaneously (Manning, 2000; Whitt, 1993). The interpretations of these cultural experiences were largely based on students' constellation of campus support. These campus friendships may have been more nebulous because of intermittent interaction and commingling. In this vein, Darius continued:

I feel like everybody's worlds interact. Everybody's worlds interact at some point and you might find things in common with others just based on what you've built up around yourself...that draws you closer to other people...they may challenge some of the things that you may think...in a good way...it inspires both of you to grow.

Throughout the course of a first-year student's transition, these constellations cascaded and overlapped, producing an overall image. This confluence promoted healthy tension and challenged ideas, thoughts, and norms in ways that inspired individual learning and growth.

In this way, these social networks served as ways for students to gain and reciprocate support. Similar to Darius's experience, Helena, a white female in her second year, recognized in her interview that the role of these friendships overshadowed the institutional culture perceived to be operated by campus faculty and administrators:

The little communities are definitely I'd say more important [than administrators' community] because they are like the sincere friends that I have made and they're the other people that I kind of look to for support or I will be able to support them if they need help.

Helena recognized the importance of her campus friendships and defined these relationships through a reciprocal personal investment that she perceived to be meaningful. Leigh, a Black female in her first year, further explained the structure of her core friend group, "I have my main

group of friends. It's small—six of us...They're my best friends, like go-to friends." Leigh's comment highlighted support as a defining feature of core friendships.

While these friendships provided a positive outlet for students, they paradoxically promoted this positivity through exclusion, which students especially feel in the absence of their own defined constellation of support:

One of the biggest adjustments for me—I thought coming to college that nobody had friends and everybody would be friends. It actually was pretty similar in high school...people formed their own groups in college and I didn't realize that would be a thing...I thought I would initially connect a lot with the girls on my floor and we would become close friends...I thought it would be a lot easier than it was. Vicky (white female in her first year)

Vicky's unmet expectations for other students to be in a similar situation to her required her to readjust her expectations and change her strategies for making friends. This initial shakiness in finding a friendship group where feelings, emotions, and interests were reciprocated required additional concerted efforts. Vicky, however, overcame this loneliness by relying on her parents and employing new strategies to develop friendships:

I remember calling my mom once and telling her I was lonely. I had to eat a lot of meals alone [at first], which can be weird... I just had to realize that if you don't get somebody's phone number you're probably never going to see them again. So, every time I would meet somebody, I would ask them for their phone number or I would find them on Facebook...so that I knew who they were if I passed by them on the street...or something like that. Through that communication, I finally started to really find a group of girls and guys that I got along with.

Through parental support, new social strategies, and social media, Vicky eventually developed a core group of friends that provided her with crucial support. This core group embedded within Vicky a sense of belonging that incorporated her within MAU.

While MAU's institutional culture was perceived to be owned and operated by faculty and administration, individual friendship constellations worked together to form the image of this culture as well as perceptions of it. Core friends served as supportive anchors within the constellation, and students interacted with other peers outside this core group in defined and compartmentalized ways.

5.1.2 Compartmentalization through defined activities

Most students in this study spoke about a core friend group, which typically existed on their residence hall floor—an environment where proximity and time intensity were omnipresent. In addition to these core friends, students generally distinguished other friends through specialized roles or defined purposes for distinct activities. Aaron, a white male in his first year, was one of many students in the study who talked about the ways he found himself compartmentalizing his friendship group by prescribed activities:

There are different things that I do or don't do with friends from different places. For example, if we are going to the gym or going for a run, I'll probably ask a friend from club cross country. If I was studying, I would call somebody from some of my classes to have a study group.

Within this overview of his friends, Aaron described specialized and defined roles for individuals within his social network. Vic, an Asian male in first year, assigned friends into particular roles in order to maximize their social benefits: "You can easily identify the people you need to be

with when you come across them and which category they fall into.” Actively placing friends into categories based on specifically defined purposes as well as the potential social benefits they may provide served as ways that students not only compartmentalized, but also managed their diffuse constellation of peers.

One area where students more heavily compartmentalized friendships concerned the relationships they made with classmates. “Class friends” were individuals that students met in a classroom setting with the intention of forming a transactional and cooperative partnership to maximize academic success. Class friends may share lecture notes together, study together, practice course material together, answer each other’s questions about homework, partner together for group projects, or unpack the complexities of classroom dynamics. During the first year, turnover can be high among class friends because of the number of students at MAU and the flux of general education classes. Becca, a white female in her first year, described the utility of class friends in providing guidance outside the classroom:

What’s most important is studying and getting connected with people...if I didn’t make friends in my chemistry class I wouldn’t have people to study with. Then if I had a question, I would kind of be floundering...[it’s] kind of like a LinkedIn profile...who your connections are and [how you] utilize them.

The transactional nature of sharing information and leveraging class friends for academic success defined this classification of connections. Aaron, meanwhile, was not able to envision maintaining social ties with friends from class, “I wouldn’t text my class friends and ask to hang out.” Bella, an Asian female in her second year, viewed an expiration date of many of her classroom friendships, “I would call them ‘class friends,’ but I don’t see myself being friends with them outside of this class.” For students within their first-year, these classroom friendships

served a defined academic purpose that did not allow them to imagine social ties beyond classroom-related activities.

Part of this compartmentalization stemmed from students' desire to separate the academic and social aspects of their lives. Kayla, a white female in her first year, mentioned the ways in which she alleviated stress by separating friends based on social or academic activities:

I think it is really nice sometimes to have my academic friends separate from my social life, so that I actually can enjoy myself when I am hanging out with friends. It's not always me worrying about my exams or stuff like that.

Like Kayla, students in this study frequently described their lives at MAU in academic and social terms, noting direct and indirect messages they received from staff members, academic advisors, resident assistants, or more advanced students about how to navigate their collegiate lives. Indeed, Tinto's (1975, 1994) notions of academic and social integration are still largely at play as operating separately and reinforced to students in the study through orientation programming and institutional actors. Students, thus, rarely allowed their academic and social lives to overlap and relied on compartmentalization as a means to mitigate academic stress.

Part of the stress Kayla experiences stems from the competitive experiences in the classroom. Maddy, a white female in her first year, talked about the competitive culture she felt in her MAU classes, "Classes were very competitive. There were lots of people failing tests; there were lots of people getting As on tests...I was like 'Oh okay. This is way more competitive now.'" As Maddy mentioned, success and failure were the two most common ways that students talked about classroom competition and the stress it produced. This competition also strained the depth of relationships that students made within the classroom:

I don't really like the classroom competition. I don't like the sort of people that it breeds. A lot of people in my class, especially in the ones that were making As, a lot of them are not good people. They will cheat on tests...they will put other people down because of their lower grades...we are being taught in an environment that basically tells us make sure that someone else fails so that you succeed. Chloe (white female in her first year)

This perception of classroom competition was heightened for students in pre-professional majors. Therefore, students frequently spoke about controlling, limiting, and defining their interactions with students they met inside the classroom. However, befriending a few of what participants regarded as their competitors occurred for the purposes of establishing a collegial and cooperative relationship designed to promote students' individual success. While students would rely on a friend or two from class to study or to answer a homework question, they rarely sought out engagement with these individuals in a social sense. Compartmentalization of friendships, especially classroom friendships, therefore, helped students cope with the competitive stresses that they experienced in the classroom. As students in this study become more firmly situated within their fields of study, it is possible that social friendships may emerge in these future classroom spaces.

5.1.3 Highlighting variation: Deflecting discrimination through core friends for students of color

While their constellations of support were still compartmentalized, students of color at MAU tapped into specialized core friendship groups that connected them specifically to other students of color. These friendships were commonly made through cultural student organizations. These core groups served as the primary bases for students of color as they negotiated the pressure of

representing their race to a predominantly white undergraduate population and deflected discrimination, racism, oppression, prejudices, and microaggressions. The supportive activities occurring within these core friend groups produced additional depth that white students in the study did not describe. Students of color found strength and solidarity by deeply investing in each other through empowering encouragement, connecting over shared cultural practices, language, and traditions, and collectively resisting limiting cultural scripts that marginalized their race and abilities.

Students of color sometimes approached new campus friendships with white students with hesitation. Kiyoshi, an Asian male in his first year, exercised caution when meeting new friends and determining their membership in his network:

You can slowly feel how people feel about different races. You can tell when people are open to like many races and some people who don't think that should be a thing...it's picking up on the nuances of the situation, seeing how they respect you, seeing how [they] treat you. Then, you can determine how they feel about you based on their actions. Potentially developing friendships with peers with prejudicial or racist stances required students of color to exercise caution that was absent from white students' experiences. The institutional culture of MAU was not free from racism, prejudices, and microaggressions. Carolyn, a Black female in her second year, for instance, implicitly knew that she would not include individuals with oppressive sentiments in her friendship network. Oscar, an Asian male in his first year, meanwhile, troubled over ending an early friendship with a peer who levied racist sentiments against him:

A friend of mine...we used to be really good friends...in a group of people she often likes to make fun of me and broaden the cultural gap that has divided me and other

people for so long...it just didn't seem like a healthy friendship...I kind of feel bad I broke off my friendship with her...something that is associated with Asian people is being involved in the technical field...I bought an iPod Nano to use to go on runs...she chose instead to point it out [in front of friends], "Oh Oscar! Is that an iPod? Oh my God! What Asian still uses iPods?"...she would make comments like that a lot.

Ending this friendship proved to be healthy for Oscar, but he soon found himself engaging in defensive behaviors with other students through a coping technique he relied on since middle school:

I'm someone who possibly self discriminates, and I make a lot of self-deprecating jokes about my own culture. I use it almost as a defense mechanism...I would make jokes if someone would say I'm switching to an iPhone, I would say something along the lines...I think my dad made that one...or I've been an expert at making iPhone since age three...I've found in my experience if I make those jokes first, then other people are much less likely to make those jokes...putting me in a less vulnerable position.

Oscar employed his humor as a shield against potential racist remarks or aggressions, bringing a sense of guardedness into many of his friendships and group interactions. Students of color negotiated, traversed, and formed friendships while enduring and deflecting hostility from some peers. Limiting vulnerability by connecting to similarly situated peers helped deflect this discrimination.

These networks also allowed students to be at ease with one another and experience facility in sharing tacit assumptions about their cultural backgrounds. Carolyn, a Black female in her second year, explained the ways in which having others that understood her familial background grounded her core friendships:

Some of my Black friends are African and I talk with them about like my home life more. Because like living with like first-generation African parents is a very distinct experience and like not a lot of people will understand what I am saying when I talk about it. [My African friends] will always understand and they will know exactly what I am saying...So it's, I guess I like relate more to like my African friends when it comes to talking about my heritage and my parents and stuff.

Although there were a number of students at MAU, all students of color comprised less than 20 percent of the entire student population. This resulted in fewer opportunities for first-year students of color to connect with other first-year students of color and share cultural interests and backgrounds. Samuel, a Latino male in his first year, for example, noted the importance of his friendship with another Latinx student that allowed him to communicate in Spanish and watch Spanish language television shows. Rahmi, a Black female in her first year, found particular satisfaction in a Pakistani student organization that allowed her to effortlessly share her heritage and make new friends. Students of color described the centrality of these core groups as situated within their constellation of friendships in ways that were nearly gravitational. The strength, support, and power that these friendships provided cast other friendships as almost cursory:

For me, it brings a sense of connectedness and family because I know they're a minority...we know that we have each other's backs no matter what the circumstance...that's really been helpful and like really nice especially when it comes to transitioning. I feel like it's someone to talk to if I needed anything, and they would be willing to help me no matter what. Leigh (Black female in her first year)

Leigh's comment exemplified the empowerment and support students of color drew from and invested into their friendships with other students of color. Mimi, a Black female in her first year, made reciprocal investments through deep friendships with other students of color:

I was able to meet other African Americans who also have scholarships, who also have to work hard for their identity, who are also first-generation, who are also first-generation African...We have kind of like a community within ourselves and like know we have to be great not just for ourselves but from where we came from...[we] think about what we represent as a whole and that has pushed me to go harder, do better.

Mimi's core friendships possessed a certain depth through shared cultural assumptions that enabled her to navigate community and familial pressures. Students of color maintained high expectations to succeed, defied messages of failure that they received on and off campus, and motivated each other through empowering encouragement that resulted in solidarity.

Most students of color in this study described their experience with microaggressions, racism, or discrimination. This group of students in the study described resisting and warring against these limiting cultural scripts their entire lives. The empowering solidarity that emanated as a response to these oppressive incidents manifested itself in students of color taking collective action to deflect discrimination. Such empowerment and motivation was particularly crucial as students of color relied on their core friends as they overcame, defied, and reframed racism. Rachel, a Black female in her first year, described the action she and her friends took after entering a party where the confederate flag was displayed and music with [racial epithets] was being played: "We went into the group chat...we [wrote in the chat] we were at this party and people are just saying [racial epithets] like really hard...[and we decided] just [to] leave." Instead of coordinating verbally, Rachel and her friends utilized their smart phone group chat

feature to text message each other about the situation as it was happening. Rachel and her friends had to gauge their immediate safety, think quickly on how to respond in a way that confirmed their safety while defying the racist incident, and collectively reconstruct the experience to ascribe affective meaning and learning from it. Through their conversations afterward, they reframed the experience and situated its placement in the institutional culture. Their action of departing the party early was intended to signal to other students at the party the unacceptable nature of the flag and the racial epithets:

We left [and] we were still talking about it. Like that was pretty not fun and kind of uncalled for. So, we had to realize that you know that's what happening...we were just like yeah sadly this stuff happens, but you know we have to learn how to deal with it and just I don't know...after we left...hopefully they took it as maybe this was wrong.

This system of reciprocal support and resistance was further highlighted when discrimination was blatantly presented in ways that presented incongruence between the institution's cultural values and its actions. During the year, a political student organization funded by the student government contracted a controversial conservative speaker, known for his inflammatory rhetoric toward minoritized populations, for a campus program in the student union. This speaker's campus visit sparked protest among the student body and particularly activated students of color. When discussing discordant experiences encountered during the first year, several Black students in the study described the ways in which this speaker's visit highlighted cultural incongruence:

I remember a lot of my friends coming from [that speaker], feeling like they have never experiences such hatred and discrimination...[that speaker] is full of hate, sincere hatred and a lot of the people [attending the event] were almost just as bad. I remember my

friends couldn't tell me what happened. I had friends so upset, like I've never seen her so upset...she was shaking...she was crying...like what people at MAU invited these speakers to come? Nadifa (Black female in her first year)

It was a contradiction...you can't say we're advocating for more diversity at this school and...bring someone like this controversial speaker into your campus to speak in the student union, which is to me one of the symbols of diversity...it was almost like a slap in the face to all those [cultural] organizations. Darius (Black male in his first year)

Nadifa and Darius and their core friends protested the event, attended debriefing sessions to broadly strategize ways to overcome and reframe this incident, and relied on each other to make sense of this cultural incongruence. Fueled by this event, Darius and his friends later protested similar speakers and political candidates on or near campus. Through these experiences, we can infer that institutional culture, perceived and explicit values, and symbolic interpretation matter, especially when confronted with divisive campus speakers harboring repressive messages. Students of color drew attention to the paradoxical contradictions that transpired when controversial and conservative campus speakers with phobic messages about minoritized populations ran contrary to institutional values. Students of color further invested power into and drew power from each other as they cognitively processed and ascribed affective meaning to these instances of oppression and cultural incongruence in ways that might have been limited with white students.

The experiences and cultures that students of color shared with each other eased communication and facilitated understanding. Carolyn, for example, noticed differences when seeking support about a racist encounter she had at an off-campus party with her friends who were white:

I don't really experience a lot of racism in the daytime. But when it's nighttime and I'm around a bunch of drunk white guys, that's when they will come at me and say something racist...this dude was following me around [at a] party and he was like "Hey [traditional African name], hey [traditional African name]." I was like that's not my name and he said every Black is named [traditional African name]...that was his thing the entire night, he just followed me around calling me [traditional African name]...Of course I wanted to get made about it and tell him to shut up or do something...he wanted me to get angry...So, my response was not to do that. Eventually, he got kicked out...I mean [my white friends at the party] were all like, "You shouldn't let that bother you. Why did you let that happen? Would you like to see him kicked out?" They don't really understand, I mean because...they are white...they don't understand like why I don't just like go out and like slap the kid in the face...That's what he wants. I can't do that. So like they definitely understand that's not something I would ever do, and they think [racism is] wrong, but they don't understand the way I respond to it.

While concluding that her white friends were well-intentioned and sympathetic, Carolyn frequently found herself explaining and educating her friends on the racism she encountered. She did not need to educate her friends who were students of color. In her interview, Nadifa, a Black female in her first year, understood that her friendships with students of color provided her with insight and depth that she was not able to achieve elsewhere: "I just don't know who I'd be friends with if I did not meet [other students of color]...I am pretty sure I'd be a token friend...in some white group of people." Nadifa revealed a fear of being tokenized in a way that would have limited her ability to connect with others. The tokenization that Nadifa described could atomize the robust backgrounds and life experiences related to students' cultural existence.

Elevating their shared culture, heritage, and language through empowering interactions that resisted marginalization fortified cultural cores as an anchor for students of color. Students of colors, like white students, compartmentalized friendships in diffuse constellations. The variation in the experiences of students of color emanated from the depth of connection and empowerment they drew from these core groups. Friendships with other students of color served as powerful mechanisms for deflecting discrimination and reframing cultural scripts that minimized their race and abilities.

5.1.4 Homogenizing friendship constellations through selection

In spite of their usually compartmentalized nature, campus friendships were homogenous for college students. While friendship groups were mixed between men and women, homogeneity enforced through gendered scripts guided these relationships through presumed heteronormativity. Thus, friendship groups within an institutional culture were guided by broader cultural narratives. Although gender and heteronormativity played a major role in friendship formation, students in this study rarely recognized these factors as homogenous and remained unaware of unspoken assumptions of gender and heteronormativity that shaped friendship decisions. Instead, students viewed friendships as the results of their independent decisions. Although these decisions were guided by institutional forces, personal factors, and situational circumstances, students selected friends that reflected similar attitudes related to their educational objectives, to the usage of drugs or alcohol, and to their political dispositions.

Through the process of selecting friends with similar attitudes and interests, students found themselves learning and discovering new information about themselves:

I think the big thing was like finding people here like that you fit in with most... There are 36 of us on the floor if you see how like in the beginning of the year since no one knows anyone we all like unified... and then as we figure out personalities, the floor gets broken up into like little cliques of like two or three different groups of people who hang out a lot... and the people you hang out with kind of tells you a lot about yourself. You tend to be with people who are more similar to you... You pick attributes of them and then you recognize that their attributes also like can be found within you. Kiyoshi (Asian male in his first year)

This positioned these friendship constellations as not only diffuse and varied based on activities, but also homogenized through similar attitudes, backgrounds, dispositions, or interests. Thus, the process of establishing friendships remained multifaceted and complex.

5.1.4.1 Reflecting attitudes regarding academics and alcohol

Similar educational objectives served as the first way that students homogenized their friendship groups through the process of selection. In this way, friendships could be considered in almost economic terms, noting the role friends play in advancing or impeding one's educational plans:

Coming to MAU and realizing: Oh! High school isn't how it's going to be now. I have to start over and find a friend group and be comfortable with my environment, decide how what I do now is going to affect me sophomore, junior, senior year. Becca (white female in her first year)

Bella, an Asian female in her second year, noted that the similar educational goals were crucial to a lasting friendship: "I found that having friends that also had the same intentions really helped... to have like someone there who knew exactly what you were going through." Selecting

friends with similar academic goals and educational priorities were one way that students recognized people gravitating toward one another on campus.

Attitudes toward alcohol and drugs also played a determining role in selecting friendships. Aubrey, a white female in her second year, talked about her avoidance of parties and drinking as defining the friends she made: “I’m not a party person. I’m like a super people person really, but, so, I have like a couple of friends...like literally [what we do] is 80 percent food. Sometimes, we’ll hangout...My life sounds so sad [laughs].” Aubrey went on to explain that she and her friends participated in activities, like going to museums, watching movies in the residence hall, or going out to eat, that did not involve alcohol. Julian, a white male in his first year, mentioned the role that his attitudes toward drugs played in him establishing what he described as genuine, yet homogenous connections with other men on his floor: “We smoke a lot of weed...Really it is what happens whenever we get together. Sports, music and weed.” Defying institutional rules and laws against drugs and alcohol produced a bond between Julian and his core friends while following a traditional hegemonic script for masculinity that includes openness toward drugs or alcohol:

I don’t know when like I realized like I was really close with like the guys that I’m friends with but it just sort of like happened naturally without me really noticing it...Cause there are friends that you like and you enjoy hanging out with and then there are friends like you actually care about what they are doing, how they are emotionally...I think that’s what’s going on here.

Through this script, Julian noted that the attitudes he shared with his friends about marijuana allowed friendships to shape without him noticing. In addition to noticing similarities in attitudes regarding drugs and alcohol between him and his core friends, Julian described feelings of

camaraderie he experienced with this group. Considerations regarding one's educational objectives as well as one's attitudes toward alcohol, drugs, or parties served as a way that students relied on selection to homogenize their friendship groups. Because these friendships were almost always formed in the residence hall, they were frequently skewed toward the same sex because almost all first-year student residence hall floors at MAU were arranged by sex.

5.1.4.2 Reflecting politically congruent attitudes

Political congruence among friendship groups surfaced as a critical way that students homogenized their friendship networks through selection. Students' insular revealing of political attitudes and dispositions may have been prominent because these first-year students matriculated at the beginning of the 2016 Presidential Election campaign. As Kali, a Black female in her first year, described, "With our freshman class being the class that gets to see the Election, I can say for sure that our freshman class had an experience that was probably unlike any other freshman class because emotions were high." The unique situation of this class combined with political rallies on or near campus invited the political context to permeate the campus culture.

Within this encroaching political context, students transitioned from high school to college, sought to establish their independence, renegotiated parental relationships, forged new friendships, adjusted to different academic expectations, navigated a new physical environment, and deciphered a new institutional culture. With the enormity of this task, it is not surprising that many students established friendships with individuals who reflected their core political beliefs in order to preserve a sense of continuity of beliefs while so much else was in flux:

I guess we all have like a lot of similar interests...we like the same—it sounds like stupid—but we all like the same like movies and music and we like have the same like

political viewpoints...we're all like pretty liberal in our viewpoints and stuff, but we also [are from] an area where a lot of people are very conservative. Mia (white female in her first year)

Regardless of political affiliation, sharing similar political beliefs and discussing politics were a way that students connected with their core friends. Discussing politics regularly was important for many students in this study because of the Presidential Election.

However, when confronted with different political ideologies, students sometimes retreated by concealing their attitudes. Luke, a biracial male in his first year, expressed frustration about his need to conceal his political beliefs on what he described as a progressive campus:

I tried not to let politics affect me too much, but I felt like my opinions didn't matter and that I couldn't have an honest conversation with people [about politics]. If I gave them my real opinions, they would yell at me...[I] can't really present [myself] as an honest individual without facing some sort of backlashes.

While Luke was unable to find and select friends who mirrored his conservative beliefs, he ultimately befriended students with liberal political dispositions. As a result, Luke avoided talking about politics to preemptively curtail his beliefs being challenged and labeled as "male privilege," a label other students and a staff member affixed to him during a leadership workshop on campus during his first year. In essence, either insularly revealing political attitudes to individuals with similar dispositions or strategically concealing attitudes occurred in order to maintain friendships and to leave political beliefs intact.

5.2 FILTERING EXPERIENCES WITHIN THE INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

5.2.1 Buffering negativity and uncertainty through positive support

Renegotiating social networks and establishing a base of new friends facilitate transition to an institution (Scanlon et al., 2007). The expectation of needing to meet new friends and develop new social networks appeared in each interview. Core friends served as anchors within students' varied constellations of friendships, acting as mediators of transition and filters of institutional culture. Reducing friction encountered with institutional culture served as a key way that friendships filtered institutional culture by providing positive support. This support allowed students to reframe negative experiences in ways that maintained belonging.

Transitioning to higher education was a cooperative activity that required the formation of new campus friendships. Logan, a white male in his first year, summarized the ways in which friendships functioned as constellations that support transition:

You can't really reach your full potential [without] a support unit [that is] going to help you through that. Like obviously in high school for almost everyone it's been families because that's where you wake up every morning and that's where you go to school. But, obviously in college you don't have that. You need to find another support group. You need to find another group of people who are going to help you through the process and stuff.

As Logan hinted at, friendships necessitate and mediate transitional experiences for students during their first year. Transitioning to higher education required students to refigure their previous relationships and form new ones. Establishing campus peer connections early on eased

transitional concerns and aided in adjusting to college life. Kiyoshi's building of friendships accelerated his transition to MAU and inculcated within him a sense of belonging:

The more you get friends and how people acknowledge you more...you just feel like "Yes—I belong here!" because I am being successful [in meeting new people] to some degree. My friends have accepted me and they see me in like I belong here because they also have a sense of belonging. The belongingness is almost handed off person by person.

Achieving belonging is reinforced through establishing campus friendships, which fortified students' feelings of peer acceptance.

Interactions with friends provided helpful support but also worked in co-constructive ways to process, understand, make meaning of, buffer, and filter transitional processes within the institutional culture. Julian generally mentioned the ways friendships provided him with an outlet to combat negative experiences, friction with the institutional culture, or failure:

I can come home [to the residence hall floor] after a bad day and like go out with friends, have a good time, forget about it, and like talk about it. They're like, "Whatever" and I don't know—it just makes things overall easier.

Chloe more pointedly described a jarring experience she had with a coach during a meet that left her with negative emotions that needed to be reconciled:

I remember after one meet we again did not do well at all. We didn't score as many points as we wanted to and a few of the people just gave up during their races and our head coach really, really went off on us and said that we were scared...I...kept asking myself, "How did I fail like this? What did I do wrong? Why are you so bad?" After talking to my friends...I was kind of reassured that...what [the coach] was saying didn't

apply to me or wasn't justified...I didn't feel any disconnect, and the upset that I felt was temporary because of the subsequent conversations I had with my friends.

Chloe's friends helped her reframe this negative incident in a way that softened any emotional disconnect she felt with the institution. Sophie, a white female in first year, relied on her core group of friends to process uncertainty she had with a final examination. Through their discussions, Sophie and her friends discussed experience, challenging each other along the way reframing Sophie's off-putting experience. This allowed Sophie to ascribe meaning to this institutional situation by adding her friends' perspectives to her own.

In these students' cases, as with many other students in this study, core friend groups became anchors that provided an emotional outlet that allowed students to reframe friction with facets of the institutional culture. This aspect of friendships presented itself through reassurance that did not allow sense of belonging or connection to others at the institution to be permanently interrupted.

5.2.2 Sharing common experiences

In addition to relying on friends for support and reassurance, students in the study also relied on friends to make sense of and co-construct particularities of campus life through shared experiences that resulted in a common bond. Co-constructive support was not always achieved through explicit dialogue. Instead, it was shaped by the implicit sharing of institutional experiences that fortified bonds and connectivity. Solidarity through the sameness of these experiences deepened social connection as the institutional culture was learned and performed. Positive moments—experienced with peers—within the institutional culture enriched these connections.

Not just experiencing similar aspects of the institutional culture, but the same aspects of the institutional culture reinforced bonds with close friends. Kate, a white female in her first year, stated, “I feel connection with other people like a friendship...we are all going through the same thing.” In his interview, Logan seemed to add to Kate’s idea by discussing the way that sharing common experiences promoted learning about the institutional culture. Kiyoshi envisioned these shared experiences as adventures that allowed him to become involved with institutional activities while simultaneously furnishing him with social support:

[My friend and I], we both like doing, going through adventures [together], [we’re] always doing that and we seem to get closer...we would even sleep over in the [basketball arena] so we could get good seats and stuff...we are going to end up being roommates next year.

These implicit activities contributed to positive emotions related to belonging while silently communicating norms of the institutional and peer transitional cultures. Exposure to facets of campus cultures like sporting traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and peer norms transpired through these processes. Friends provided a key component to navigating campus life, to learning about institutional experiences, and to ascribing meaning to various aspects of the institutional and peer transitional cultures.

5.2.3 Overcoming anxieties related to making friends

Building friendships generally resulted in positive cultural connections. Transitioning to college and forging these friendships was inherently emotion-laden. Excitement, anxiety, and stress commingled for students in this study before and during the college transition. The prospect of renegotiating relationships with parents and high school friends combined with meeting new

people and establishing new friendships in an unfamiliar environment, in part, contributed to these varied emotions. Navigating these processes evokes anxiety and fear of failure or loneliness. Jill, a white female in her first year, exemplified this sentiment, “I definitely had the anxieties of going to college; meeting new people is always a fear.” Deepti, an Asian female in her first year, also expressed her fears about meeting new people, “I didn’t have anyone else from my high school [here] so I think it was more just a scared feeling of like I’m not going to meet anyone.” The uncertainty of the outcome of whether students would successfully meet not just friends in general, but the right types of friends contributed to feelings of trepidation:

My freshman year I was more nervous about [making friends] and little unsure, just because it’s a new experience...living with my roommate for a semester especially was a little bit of a challenge. A little nervous, a little scared, a little timid, a little bit confused about expectations you know like socially. Elle (white female in her second year)

Nervousness around forming new connections with peers on campus hinted at the independence that students perceived accompanying the transition to college during their first year.

These emotions may have been heightened for some first-generation students who handled murky expectations about college life. Rahmi’s parents who did not attend an American university, imparted in her the importance of finding friends with similar motivations: “[My parents and I] honestly didn’t know what to expect, they just told me to get good grades and not to do stupid things...[don’t] go with the wrong crowd like my mum would say.” In another interview, Brooke, a white female in her first year, said her pre-college expectations were vague while discussing the challenges she had in adjusting to the institutional culture:

It’s been a little rough at times. You know my dad joked when he was a senior in high school he had applied to college and everything. He was getting ready to go, but he was

just absolutely terrified. He jokes he was terrified so he joined the marines instead. So, that kind of gives you a feeling of how intimidating college can be to us [first-generation college students]. So, being the first one in my family to experience that has been a little rough at times because you know [my peers] have known what's been going on at school. For Brooke's father, higher education was perceived to be so intimidating that he joined the marines. This narrative, which Brooke grew up hearing, positioned higher education as intimidating. Brooke also noticed that her peers who had a parent or parents who attended college more easily understood how the institution functioned. Brooke's sentiment evidenced pressures that a few first-generation students in the study shared and situated college attendance as a broader cultural marker of socioeconomic mobility. Yet, traversing an institution's particularities was not always apparent and friendships can help first-generation students navigate unfamiliar norms and processes. While family members were supportive of higher education among the first-generation students I interviewed, peers taught some students, like Brooke, the particularities of an institutional culture:

My family can't necessarily...know the difference between college and high school...I found a lot of friends who were older and they've been offering me tips where they can. So...having a support system...that kind of knows what you're going through...that's really important...but of course...can be a little rough.

For Brooke, securing supportive friends who could provide her with insider knowledge of the functionalities of the institutional culture facilitated aspects of her transition. This insider knowledge assisted Brooke in understanding norms ranging from mundane tasks like reserving laundry machines to finding parties where other students socialized. As Brooke noted in her

interview, her family, while supportive, did not have that prior cultural knowledge that could have prepared her for what to expect at MAU.

The pressures to succeed in college may even be so great that some first-generation college students steer away from cultivating friendships, casting them as distracting from academic success. Mimi, a Black female in her first year, expressed a sense of pressure for classroom success that led her not to place a primary focus on friendships:

I'm not just here...to make friends, but I'm actually here to like get an education...so I can be able to graduate, get a good job, and do better for me so like my family doesn't [have to struggle] for every generation from forever and ever. So, like I'm going to actually do something where my kids' lives will be better than how my life was, like my life was better than my mom's life.

Mimi described her responsibility as a first-generation student was to capitalize on her education from MAU to increase her economic and social mobility for future generations. Expectations from parents and pressures expressed by first-generation college students added to the stresses of the college transition. As with Mimi, these pressures may veer students away from focusing on friendships. Such views may emanate from regarding the academic and social activities of college life as competing dichotomies and indicate a need to rebrand the academic and social as cooperative spheres that can be harnessed to reinforce transitional success. Friendships, however, can open first-generation students up to new networks of informal institutional information that eases and facilitates certain aspects of transition.

5.2.4 Risking vulnerability to cultivate friendships

Beginning this process of friendship development required students to step outside their comfort zones and risk vulnerability and failure in making new friends early in the college experience. Students noted feelings of stress to make friends quickly during new and transfer student orientation week. Elle recalled, “I felt like a lot of the pressure of orientation week to really get to know the other people around you.” When I interviewed Kayla, she described the ways in which she had to overcome her fearful emotions in order to cultivate lasting friendships during orientation week:

I had to be a little vulnerable to make friends and that was the second hardest thing to deal with and after that once you can get through those first two initial feelings and meet people and talk to them I think that’s where the friendship starts and then it snowballs into something that just is a lot easier to manage because you’ve already shared something emotionally.

Kayla detailed the ways in which emotions played an influential role in growing and nurturing her friendships. Risking an emotional bond or connection often required students to operate outside their comfort zones. Taking these risks also required determination and resiliency when failing to cultivating lasting bonds with peers:

I went to an [orientation] week event and I literally was talking to someone and they like walked away from me. It’s like okay, that’s okay, like I’m just going to go somewhere else...all right I’m going to go to the events even though I don’t have a friend to go with I can just find someone there or meet someone there. That’s how I met like a lot of friends just by going up and talking to people. Clara (biracial female in her first year)

Friendship development, therefore, can be a stressful aspect of the transitional process that does not always lend itself to guaranteed or immediate success. Within these examples, students risked vulnerability and exhibited perseverance. Clara's determination was only reinforced externally as she proceeded to talk to new people and come across as cool and unaffected by the peers who dismissed her attempts to socialize with them. Such norms guided the peer transitional culture that existed within a broader institutional spectrum. Once developed, friendships were foundational to not only other transitional processes, but they were also consequential to the experiential interpretations of institutional culture.

5.3 NAVIGATING THE FIRST YEAR WITH CONSTELLATIONS NOT YET ASSEMBLED

Many students in this study established constellations that resulted in the creation of a support system that allowed for the cooperative interpretation and processing of institutional culture. Because of their friendships, all but ten students in the sample stated that they felt connected at MAU. These ten students said that they had not yet established lasting or meaningful peer connections at the conclusion of their first year; for these students, their constellations of campus support had not been assembled by the end of their first year. This subset of students also all claimed a minoritized identity, and several students claimed an identity where their minoritized race, sexual orientation, or gender performance intersected. While their perceptions of MAU culture still occurred through some cooperative co-processing through interactions in classrooms, club meetings, or the residence hall floor, they did not receive the same level of support that other students I interviewed often described. For these students, friendships were deeply desired

and recognized as inherently valuable to the college transition. Joe, a white male in his first year, discussed the ways in which a friendship group would have been helpful in his transition to MAU:

One thing I regret most definitely—I would tell [a new student] to make new friends because friends are essentially like basic connections when you are in college. People you study with, people you talk with, who you get lunch with, all that stuff. That’s just one of the biggest experiences we’ve got. I’m not necessarily sure that’s an experience I can talk about though.

Arati, an Asian female in her first year, described her similar experience, “You might not think [making friends is] so hard. In the beginning...people were already settled for the most part...I don’t feel like I found my place here. I’m still looking.” Making the connections that ease transitioning to college life, therefore, occurred beyond the course of an academic year for this subset of students.

In the absence of core friendships, the college transition for these students increased self-reliance and self-reflection. Although these students outlined challenges in making friends during this transitional period, they also demonstrated a perseverance that allowed them to complete their first year without the same constellation of campus support that their peers enjoyed. This subset of students, who explained their difficulty making friends, had an individual identity that was minoritized or marginalized within the broader, hegemonic culture:

I’m gay...so it was so yeah they didn’t always give off a totally welcoming face when I first met all the guys on the floor...I would be watching sports or playing video games and that is sort of familiar to me, so I would just step [into the lounge] trying to get to

know them...I don't know, [making friends] was kind of hard. Samuel (Latino male in his first year)

Throughout his first year, Samuel explained later in his interview how he continued to try to assemble a constellation of support:

[During orientation week], I was with my best friend from high school [who also attends MAU] and I was like, "This is bullshit. We're meeting new people tonight." And so there was these three girls at the table [in the student union] and we talked to them and I spent like my first three weeks here going back to [their residence hall] and seeing these girls again and again...I stopped interacting so much with those girls [eventually]. But [stepping outside my comfort zone] was great. I was so happy [to have gotten close to them] at the beginning of the year and that was good.

Conversing with other men on his residence hall floor, connecting with a classmate over a shared Spanish language, trying to stick with a friend from high school, and boldly introducing himself to new students in the student union did not result in lasting friendships for Samuel. In fact, one of the reasons Samuel participated in the research study was to further hone his abilities in talking to new people. Through these conversations, Samuel related his identity as a gay man as influencing, though not deterring him in his efforts to make friends.

Students' minoritized identities intersected in ways that can make it challenging to connect with others who have similar intersecting identities. For example, Hayden claimed multiple minoritized identities—black, light-skinned, gay, female, and genderqueer. These identities intersected in ways where she was unable to find footing with a core group of friends:

In terms of my race, I think that has been the most disappointing...because I haven't made any Black friends...I am light skinned and I don't know if like certain people don't

want to talk to me, because I am light skinned, I have had to deal with that before many times...I do want to be surrounded with people who look like me and have the same interests as I do. That hasn't happened unfortunately...But, I've been forced to stand up for myself more in like what I believe in...not even about like who I am, but for women...if I don't stand up for them, who is going to stand up for me? So, I think that having, you could have like, because of my race, because of my sexual identity, my gender identity, it's been hard for me to fit in. I don't know where to fit in. But knowing that I am those things, it makes me want to have a voice for myself, people like me, and people who aren't like me.

Like her peers, Hayden acknowledged a desire to fit in with others with similar identities and dispositions. However, Hayden's intersecting identities left her questioning her place at MAU. By acknowledging the role that her intersecting identities played in her experience of the institutional culture, Hayden suggested the ways in which her race, skin color, sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation limited her friendship network. However, Hayden relied on individual activism as an outlet for rebuking these limiting cultural scripts. Some minoritized students in this subset exercised self-reliance, through individual activism, in a way that produced self-awareness and signaled perseverance and strength. It also illustrated the exclusionary nature of friendships groups and the ways in which institutional culture allowed constellations to preclude already vulnerable student populations.

Brandon, a white male in his first year, revealed during his interview that he did not view himself as fulfilling the typical masculine script associated with college life for men. As a result, he sacrificed friendships. The men that Brandon noticed on his floor conveyed attitudes and behaviors that fulfilled cultural scripts related to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005):

There is a lot of stratifications with the guys who are like really cocky, really confident...I guess seen as—you know—like dominant with girls. It seems as though they try to fit in they try to dress a certain way, they try to go to parties...just being popular with women.

Brandon observed and interpreted the culture promoted by the friendship groups on his floor, noting the ways it made him feel excluded:

Since I wasn't into [parties and romantically pursuing women] you know I wasn't like ostracized, but I just wasn't you know seen the same way. I guess I wasn't seen to be cool enough...but, I talked to them you know. I hung out in some of the rooms even if they were doing something illegal you know. I mean I honestly didn't want to hang out.

Brandon's effort to make friends with his floormates involved him sometimes putting himself in uncomfortable situations with alcohol or marijuana in an attempt to gain acceptance in this group. This culture was so disconcerting that Brandon considered transferring to another institution, a thought he withheld from his academic advisor in order to paradoxically fulfill a hegemonic script of masculinity:

Brandon: I did think about transferring just because I didn't completely like the culture at MAU. You know, I couldn't really find a lot of people that I could you know really socialize with...

Max: Okay. Whenever you say the culture at MAU, what do you mean by that?

Brandon: Just the way people are and the way that people react to [situations], just to different types of groups at MAU. Um. I don't know [it's] just the overall feeling I get from being here...I guess just talking to friends in general would just help me transition.

I feel for the most part I was able to you know deal with it myself. You know, transition into college like pretty much on my own.

Max: Okay. Was [your academic advisor] helpful in terms of any of the social adjustment, transition?

Brandon: I never talked to her about [me not making friends]...I thought I shouldn't. I mean she asked how I was doing and everything. But, I mean I said "Fine," which was half-true, half-lie...I didn't really want to talk about that stuff there.

While Brandon ultimately did not transfer at the end of his first year of college, he struggled with assembling a constellation of campus support, while his performance of masculinity ran counter to the illustrations and expectations he experienced and observed on the floor. Brandon even placed himself in uncomfortable situations in an effort to gain friendships. However, differences in goals and interests left Brandon confused by and at odds with the culture that was being perpetuated on his residence hall floor. To Brandon, this specific compartmentalized culture was MAU. Brandon did not communicate his concerns with a staff member, still partially fulfilling the confusing hegemonic script about men concealing their emotions in order to appear dominant, cool, and controlling (Kimmel, 2008).

In his interview, Joshua, a white male in his first year, described himself as "thriving" with only one friend. Like Brandon, Joshua also resisted talking about challenges he encountered in establishing a constellation in order to appear cool:

I got a persona that I want people to see. Then, I've got things behind the scenes that I don't want people to see about me. Talking to a staff member or an upperclassman about that it makes me seem way too vulnerable, and that's not where I wanted to be.

Perceived emotional vulnerability for Joshua and Brandon led them to withhold from staff and peers the transitional challenges they were encountering regarding the formation of meaningful friendships. While aware of campus resources, Brandon and Joshua seemed to follow an invisible cultural script that silently directed the hegemonic performance of their gender. This cultural script, existing within the broader societal structure, influenced their perceptions and interpretations of campus culture. As Brandon noted, the campus culture surrounding the friendship groups was a phenomenon he perceptibly felt.

Fostering friendships was an essential part of the transition process that spanned beyond the first year of college for some students with minoritized identities. MAU culture for these students was not regarded with the same level of support, but relied on different peer interactive mechanisms—classrooms, clubs, residence halls—for co-construction. Emotional support and buffering friction encountered with the institutional culture was notably absent from these co-constructions. Yet, these students channeled individual strength and perseverance throughout their first year, remaining hopeful in their ability to assemble a constellation during their second year. Hegemonic gender performance and heteronormativity invisibly guided the formation of constellations for students at MAU, especially through the gendered organization of residence hall floors. Students with identities that bucked hegemony experienced more challenges in connecting with peers over shared backgrounds and interests, ultimately navigating their transition without a core friend group.

5.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter explores how friendship constellations form in ways that facilitate and contribute to interpretations of institutional culture during the first-year transition. Friendship groups facilitate and ease transition by buffering negativity through positive peer support. This support stabilizes students as they re-figure relationships with parents and high school friends, negotiate a new physical environment, and learn norms for student behavior. Students select friends who appear similar through gender, race, or political dispositions. Students feel themselves risking emotionally to establish a constellation of campus support during this rapidly changing time.

Institutional culture allows friends to share experiences in traversing the culture and formulating a common bond as they co-construct these situations. However, institutional culture is not always intuitive. First-generation students, for example, rely on friends to assist in communicating nuances and norms. Students of color, meanwhile, draw strength from each other in deflecting discrimination embedded within a broader cultural context. Yet, constellations for many students remain compartmentalized and students rely on specific individuals for defined purposes and activities. Still, some students with intersecting minoritized identities end their first year without having made significant friendships and rely on self-reflection to make sense of transitional and cultural processes. The experience of building and maintaining friendships is varied for students. Envisioned as constellations, these friendships serve as supports that aid in the filtering interpretations of institutional culture.

6.0 IDENTITY AND INTERCONNECTION THROUGH CAMPUS RITUALS

Institutions of higher education are saturated with rituals, ceremonies, and traditions that communicate values and assumptions related to their institutional cultures (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Manning, 2000). Even pedestrian routines or campus situations can be broadly interpreted as meaning-laden institutionalized rituals (Birnbaum, 1988). Rituals, ceremonies, and traditions evoke emotional responses through personalized and collective perceptions of the shared experience (Manning, 2000). In considering the ways in which first-year students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture, I investigate the affective meanings that students ascribed to campus rituals and traditions. Throughout my analysis, I remain attuned to students' emotional experiences in relation to their transition to MAU. First, I utilize popular men's sporting events, described by participants in this study, as sites for exploring athletics as institutionalized campus rituals that normalized and regulated connection and affect sharing among students. Next, I examine a formal first-year women's candle lighting ceremony as a means through which implicit institutional messages about mattering were communicated to students. Through these kinds of institutional rituals, students gained affirmation of their individual place within MAU and developed an enriched sense of belonging. These rituals, therefore, assumed meaningful roles in students' transitional experiences, inspiring collective identification and personalized notions of mattering.

6.1 COLLECTIVE IDENTIFICATION, BELONGING, AND CAMPUS ATHLETICS

I like screaming [at the games]—I like it. It was relaxing...The MAU student section is wild and it also feels like I am a part of MAU. Samuel (Latino male in his first year)

Within the MAU culture, sporting events—primarily football and men’s basketball games—recurred as mechanisms that promoted connection, belonging, unity, and commonality. Nearly 80 percent of the sample discussed football and men’s basketball games as meaningful campus experiences. These shared experiences were highly emotive and comprised of multiple rites and traditions—like cheers or songs—that generated positive feelings. Cheers or songs, for instance, dictated scripted behavioral and emotional responses when the team performed in a certain manner. Experiencing these traditions with much of the student body reinforced institutional patterns through which highly expressive emotions were normalized. In this sense, sports provided an emotional outlet that promoted connectivity among students through ritualized activities that amplified collective affects.

Football and men’s basketball games became outlets for students to release, experience, and share emotions. Elle, a white female in her first year, viewed games as a space to escape routine and share emotions with other students: “It’s a unique thing and you can go somewhere and just lose yourself for a little bit and just go wild.” In a sense, the football stadium and the basketball arena became ritualized spaces that inculcated commonality through shared emotional experiences. When I interviewed Kiyoshi, an Asian male in his first year, he advanced this notion when describing his behavior at campus sporting events: “The spirit—I’m always trying to reciprocate that [spirit] with others...reciprocate that to them and just amplify it.” Sharing, reciprocating, and intensifying emotions allowed sporting events to serve as an outlet that students described as fun and even relaxing. Moreover, as Kate, a white female in her first year,

explained pride and spirit were palpable at football and basketball games: “There is always so much energy [at the game] that it’s like it’s contagious. It’s hard not to have a fun time...to feel that school pride.” MAU spirit and pride spread among students through the shared emotional experiences generated by sporting events’ traditions and rites. Pride in MAU’s teams provided a point of collective identification around which many students rallied. Football and basketball games, while highly gendered, male-dominated, and celebratory of hegemony, created memorable spaces that allowed the transitive sharing of emotion. In effect, the football stadium and basketball arena became transcendent ritualized spaces for MAU students to release emotions.

Students in the sample described sporting events influencing their sense of belonging. Vicky, a white female in her first year, stressed that not attending athletics events during her first year was a lingering regret. Vicky stated that she was poised to rectify this her sophomore year and planned to attend sporting events, marking a conscious effort on her part. One of the reasons that Vicky felt that she missed out on these events was because of the positive sense of belonging she inferred from her peers through social media posts they made while at sporting events. Luke, a white male in his first-year, described sporting events as the singular activity that drives MAU unity: “This camaraderie [at sporting events]...this one thing that unifies MAU in a way that nothing else really does is just really cool.” Within the moments of a sporting event, MAU students cheered for the common goal of team victory. Sharing this goal produced feelings of kinship, connection, or belonging. Nadifa, a Black female in her first year, advocated that all students should experience a football game during their first year: “I think every student should go to at least one football game because that’s where you really feel MAU unity...that’s when everyone is on the same page.” These sporting events aided students in their transition by

allowing them to experience kindship, camaraderie, and identification with the broader student body. It allowed first-year students to connect institutionally to MAU in an abstract manner. These experiences were institutionalized and a fixture of the MAU culture. A few of the students in the study even identified athletics as one of MAU's core values. The belonging that football and men's basketball games reinforced through shared goals and emotions perpetuated positive perceptions of campus life as well as a sense of belonging. For some students, these events were the only sites where their MAU connection existed:

I don't have a sense of community in my major so I felt that going to events, like the football games, helped me feel like I belonged at MAU and that I had a sense of connection with other people...[at the game] I'm a MAU [mascot] now...[it's] like I go to MAU...other than that I'm just a [STEM] student. Elle (white female student in her first year)

While pursuing a niche field of study with a cohort of only five other students, Elle achieved belonging and connection to other students through MAU athletics events. Although sense of belonging and connection can also occur outside of these events—such as through clubs and organizations, classrooms, or research experiences—athletics events served as a neutralizing mechanism that diminished the discrete classifications that majors and fields of study produced. Bella, an Asian student in her second year, discussed the wholeness that MAU athletics created for her by casting majors as irrelevant during games:

Everyone that goes to MAU [games] is on the same team and no one really cares if you're an art major or a business major...you just cheer "Go MAU!"...you emphasize that sense of community that MAU gives you when you go to a game.

Athletics, therefore, produced wholeness or fullness of community that was otherwise fragmented into nebulous constellations that tangentially overlap. The singular goal of cheering the team and rooting for victory razed barriers that compartmentalized majors may have produced by invoking unity through enthusiastic pride. This pride was perceived and felt in ways that contributed to students' positive experiences.

Some students in the sample substantiated that they were so fulfilled by these campus experiences that they purchased season tickets, participated in sleepovers in the arenas the night before a game, and attended games with as parts of their routines. Logan, a white male in his first year, privileged games if they interfered with one of his classes: "I'll skip class if I have to so [I can] go to those football games." As Logan later noted, football games felt familiar and were comfortable ways to express emotions because of their situation in the larger societal structure as well as in his own upbringing: "I grew up with [football]. Every Sunday during football season, [I] watch every game that's on TV. One time, I watched football from 10am to 11pm...wasting my day...[but] it was still fun." Football for Logan served as a familiar source of comfort and connection to his life before college. Pride in MAU sports also reminded Molly, a white female in her second year, of the community cultivated in her hometown: "From my background...sports have always been a big part of my life. That was kind of like just always the way you bonded and you connected as a community." For these students, MAU sports felt familiar and aided in the transitional process of acclimating to a new institutional culture. The continuity that sports provided for some students provided easy entry into conversations with others. In her interview, Molly said, "No matter what you can probably find some sort of point of conversation about sports with anyone." Therefore, sports served as a primary vehicle through which individuals forged connection to others.

Using sports as a shared interest over which to connect was more prominent among men in this study. Interest in campus sports can also impede some relationships among men. For example, Joshua, a white male in his first year, described a strained relationship with his roommate, Micah, because of Micah's disinterest in sports:

Micah wasn't really into sports much and when I say I'm into sports I mean that's basically all I care about...His parents provided him with free tickets and he never used them. That's like a big basis of many of my relationships...sports, and that's just something we didn't have [in common].

In spite of living together, Joshua and Micah's different interests in sports led to an indifferent and superficial relationship that Joshua characterized as lacking depth. Shared interests in athletics and attending athletics events with friends contribute to how connections were formed, friendships were deepened, and belonging was felt.

6.2 SYMBOLIC INCORPORATION, INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT, AND THE CANDLE LIGHTING CEREMONY

Aside from attending athletics events, students in this study found salient meaning by participating in rituals and ceremonies (a) that they chose and (b) that celebrated their individual identities. These rituals, ceremonies, and traditions created spaces for specialness and connection to flourish, while varying from pedestrian campus routines. Distinguished in this manner, these types of campus rituals signaled the extra-ordinary by inspiring feelings of importance and mattering within students. In other words, these rituals, which students selected, helped them feel empowered as integral to MAU; students connected into MAU, as opposed to

just being a part of MAU. Logan summarized how the activities he chose prompted this deeper meaning: “Oh, definitely the [rituals of the] groups I’ve gotten involved with are more meaningful...That’s stuff that I am interested in...rather than [rituals] that I have to be involved in.”

These rituals contrasted with required campus rituals, like the freshman convocation ceremony, that occurred during orientation week for first-year students. Convocation featured institutional leaders and a ceremonial welcoming of the freshman class. However, it proved to be unmemorable for all but a handful of the participants in this study. Jill, a white female in her first year, exemplified the sentiment about convocation that nearly every other student in the study expressed: “I vaguely remember it. It wasn’t too memorable for me...I can’t even tell you who I went with.” The required nature of the ceremony, coupled with its rigid formality as well as students’ nervous emotions of having just arrived on campus, allowed convocation to leave little impression upon students. However, a formal candle lighting ceremony, designed exclusively for first-year women, proved to be memorable, meaningful, and influential in their first-year transition.

An annual campus ceremony for first-year women that I call the Candle Lighting Ceremony kindled deep feelings of belonging and connection to other MAU women and to MAU’s history. The Candle Lighting Ceremony marked the end of orientation week, occurring the evening before classes began for the fall term. To attend the event, first-year women had to pre-register and wear semi-formal attire. Set in the campus chapel, institutional leaders and alumnae delivered speeches about the ceremony’s rich background and first-year women’s special place in MAU history. The ceremony culminated in alumnae lighting first-year women’s candles as a symbolic incorporation into not only MAU, but also its specialized narrative for

women. Women departed the ceremony with not only their sentimental candleholder, which served as a keepsake of the ceremony, but also with a strong sense of their mattering at MAU.

Various aspects of the Candle Lighting Ceremony signaled a deviation from the ordinary and entry into the extra-ordinary. Before the event, selecting outfits with friends provided a means for socializing, as Natalie, a white female in her first year, described: “Getting dressed up [for the Candle Lighting Ceremony], my one [female] friend helped me get ready...That’s, at least for girls, a way to bond, just helping each other get ready for looking nice.” Semi-formal attire for the event, gendered through implicit femininity, marked this event as special from daily routine and provided a way for women to connect with other women. The standards for attire established by the institution reinforced gender as a guiding implicit force within the MAU culture. Requiring pre-registration and reserving attendance for first-year women also served as a way through which the institutional culture recognized first-year women. Sophie, a white female in her first year, perceived these factors contributing positively to the ceremony: “It’s nice because it’s only like girls that do it...It just sets you apart from like [men], and then people like choose to do this. They have a meaning.” The meaning derived from being only with other first-year women who chose to attend the ceremony ignited a range of positive emotions for these women. Kate, a white female in her first year, experienced happiness and excitement that in some ways expedited her transition to MAU: “[The ceremony] really helped me. It made me feel really connected to MAU and connected to the alumnae. I just felt happy, really excited, and eager...I felt really happy throughout the whole [ceremony].” The persistent positive emotions that Kate described lasted throughout the ceremony and occurred as a result of the celebration of her gendered identity. These positive emotions resulted in an overall sense of enthusiastic openness to being initiated into the institution as an MAU woman.

The Candle Lighting Ceremony prominently contained the symbolic action of alumnae lighting first-year women's candles, which promoted a sense of specialized incorporation for the women attending the ceremony. The candle lighting itself served as a moment in which women attending the ceremony deepened their connection to other MAU women. Kayla, white female in her first year, explained the specialness she felt when an alumna lit her candle during the ceremony: "There's [women] who went before you and [women] who will come after you, all sharing that unique experience." Sharing a ritual that repeated throughout time heightened the historic sense of connection that Kayla felt. Clara, a biracial female in her first year, considered the symbolism imbued with being written into MAU's history through the action of candle lighting: "[This is] me being symbolic: we are taking on the role of being the next women generation at MAU." Between Kayla and Clara, the Candle Light Ceremony weaved women's sense of self into the past, present, and future of women at MAU. Symbolism, epitomized through the act of candle lighting, served as a ritualistic act of incorporation that signaled to these first-year women their induction into a supportive and historic network.

While symbols and ceremonial actions presented the Candle Lighting Ceremony as special and celebratory, the underlying messages inculcated a positive sense of belonging and mattering. Specifically, the Candle Lighting Ceremony succeeded in transmitting to first-year women that the institution cared about their situation within the culture and implied the importance of their contributions to MAU. These messages were especially powerful for first-year women, many of whom noted that this message served as a pivotal moment in their transition to MAU. Sara, a white female in her second year, reflected thoughtfully upon the role that the Candle Lighting Ceremony played in her transition to MAU:

You're just starting this journey...it doesn't seem like you're that connected to this university yet...but all of a sudden you get to partake in this ceremony as so many other [women] that have gone on to do such amazing things...[those women] have been here and stood where you're standing...so amazing and humbling, but also...motivating...it was the first sign that you were a strong member of the community, and the first time MAU valued you.

Sensing for the first time her value to the institution in recognizing her potential and celebrating her power was an influential transitional moment for Sara. Such institutional validation recognized first-year women's sense of power, contributed to their belonging, and affirmed the strength of their identity. As Becca, a white female in her first year, explained during her interview receiving these messages from prominent institutional leaders in this ritualized space contributed to her feelings of mattering:

The presence of high-up MAU people [at this ceremony]...make us realize that the high-up people care about us....that kind of community makes us feel like we have more of an attachment to it...we have a sense of belonging and...we matter.

Through care and mattering, Becca found herself sensing attachment and belonging to MAU in a richer and more pronounced way. Meanwhile, Deepti, an Asian female in her first year, interpreted these messages as empowering: "The Candle Lighting Ceremony was a pretty cool, unifying way of introducing the women to MAU and saying you're making a big difference for [MAU] history." Connecting to the history, projecting women's future contributions, and championing their identities as strong and central to MAU success created for Deepti a deeper sense of unity with the institution. Thus, this ceremony represented a deep level of MAU's

institutional culture which transmitted to first-year women positive messages about their identity, their strength, and their importance.

The Candle Lighting Ceremony served as a ritual that marked the end of orientation week and the beginning of the academic term. It relied on strategies to create, through broad and specific symbolism, a special and extra-ordinary space. Together, the various aspects of this ceremony worked in concert to transmit positive messages related to care and mattering from the institution to first-year women. These messages reinforced to first-year women that they mattered. These messages were particularly powerful because it was the first time that institutional messages that affirmed their identity. As a result of these messages, women attending the ceremony perceived a deep sense of belonging and mattering

6.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, I explored the ways in which campus rituals played an influential role in how first-year students experienced, perceived, and made sense of institutional culture during their transition. More specifically, I examined the ways through which rituals—as variously defined by students in the study—elicited emotional responses and influenced interpretations of the institutional culture. Sporting events and a formal first-year women’s candle lighting ceremony served as sites through which to explore and deepen our understanding of the meaning that students make of these types of experiences. It also allowed these activities to situate themselves as central and integral to participants’ first-year transitional experiences. Sporting events served as regular rituals that celebrated normative gendered scripts and that hearkened back to students’ familiar background experiences. Football and men’s basketball games united students around a

singular goal and provided a context for emotional release and sharing. Through this emotional release, shared among students at the game, feelings of belonging to the broader student community emerged. In this institutionalized ritual, connection was, thus, fueled by togetherness. Similarly, the annual first-year women's candle lighting ceremony followed some aspects of a gendered script, but ultimately championed and celebrated women's roles within MAU. Positioning women as powerful sent implicit messages about care and mattering that first-year women internalized, resulting in the generation of an enriched connection to the institutional culture. Through my analysis, I demonstrate in this chapter that campus rituals play crucial roles in how students make sense of institutional culture and highlight how students ascribe affective meaning to these activities.

7.0 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation explores the ways in which students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture during their first year in higher education. The first year was selected as an ideal point of entry to conduct this research because it signals a transition from high school to college. This transition generally marks a shift in academic expectations, independence, and friendship groups (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012; Sullivan, 2014). Highlighting the recentness of these transitional changes provided a way to discern how students experienced and made sense of institutional events, rituals, and situations, while privileging their emotions throughout the process. This purpose of this study was to explore first-year student transition through institutional culture in order to offer new conceptual knowledge about undergraduate student experiences with institutional culture. This research remains relevant because positivist and post-positivist research paradigms occupy much higher education research and practice (Guido et al., 2010; Manning, 2010; Mertens, 2010). Furthermore, previous research has not thoroughly explored the processes with which students engage during their transition to higher education (Fischer, 2007; Kane, 2011; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Consequently, in shifting paradigms, first-year student transition provides the space through which not only to explore these institutional culture's transitional processes, but also to highlight variation among these experiences.

This research study centrally positioned individuals' meaning-making activities with institutional culture by remaining attuned to the interpretations and affects they ascribed to meaningful situations. Through semi-structured interviews, 62 students at a middle Atlantic university reconstructed salient transitional experiences that occurred during their first year. Using a cultural constructivist methodology informed by a constructivist theoretical perspective allowed me to grapple with the abstract meaning that participants made of their experience, while also centering their salient experiences in my analysis. The results of this study broadly expose the complexity of co-construction that is integral to interpreting individual experiences within an institutional culture. In this chapter, I review the key findings of the study, the study's limitations, and suggestions for practice and future research.

7.1 KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

7.1.1 Learning institutional culture—an ongoing, multifaceted process

Learning institutional culture is a complex process that is often summarized in succinct and generalized terms in the literature (Keyton, 2011; Kuh & Hall, 1993; Parker, 2000). Current research most often seeks ways to explain and understand culture, instead of the processes associated with the ways in which it is learned and perpetuated (e.g. Schein, 2010). To the extent that researchers seek to understand culture, they often do so in order to suggest methods to guide, manage, or manipulate to improve organizational efficacy (Keyton, 2011; Schein, 2010). As a result, the learning processes associated with students and cultures are rarely examined (exceptions Manning, 1993, 2000).

This research study deepens the literature by enriching our understanding of the specific ways in which culture is transmitted to new students. In exploring the institutional culture at MAU, this study finds that learning institutional culture is an ongoing process that occurs throughout a student's first year in higher education, relating to the notion that students transition through their entire first year. This study adds to that conceptualization of student transition by suggesting that learning culture relates to students' transition *to* an institution *through* their first year (Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012). Learning and subsequently enacting culture occurred for students in the study through immersion and observing then replicating more advanced students' behaviors. While these are two prominent ways that culture was learned by students in this study, there are other mechanisms through which students may learn institutional culture (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Manning, 1993).

Furthermore, immersion and observation were not mutually exclusive and often described by participants as being both used throughout the transitional process and dependent upon the situation. For example, a first-year student entering a classroom populated by more advanced students for the first time might observe her peers' behaviors and then imitate behaviors she assumes to be appropriate. Observing behaviors of more advanced students in this manner broadens Manning's (1993) assertion that students learn culture from peers through language, myths, and sagas. While verbal communication certainly plays a role in the cultural learning processes, silently looking to more advanced students for guidance privileges and codifies their statuses as cultural knowers inscribed with knowledge not yet attained by first-year students. Peers, especially more advanced students, assume roles as cultural conduits who convey particular cultural information to students (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Manning, 1993; Scanlon et al., 2007; Weidman, 2006). However, students within an institutional culture of

higher education enjoy relatively high turnover due to regular cycles of graduation. For this reason, memorable, powerful, or even recent machinations of cultural knowledge more easily retain their eminence among students. As Kuh and Whitt (1988) point out, “‘always done it this way’...can mean one or two years in the life of a student group” (p. 87). Therefore, what students perceive to be longstanding norms for behaviors may have become codified relatively quickly. However, the potency and privilege of the knowledge of more advanced students with institutional experience prevails among students in their first-year who learn the ways of life at an institution in order to achieve community (Schein, 2010) and succeed (Kuh & Hall, 1993; Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

Immersion served as another key way through which institutional culture was learned among students in their first year. Merely having experiences that resulted in mastery of the physical environment by navigating the location of campus buildings, establishing a daily schedule and routine, and experiencing various facets of campus life served as broad ways students described immersing themselves in MAU culture. As one student suggested, life at MAU was learned by living it. This supposition suggests that learning an institutional culture may reflect similarly to learning a foreign culture during an immersive experience (Goldoni, 2013). Moreover, trial and error served a more precise mechanism to examine the ways in which students learned culture. Trial and error proved to be memorable for students because it resulted in negative emotions that they wanted to avoid in the future. Failing an exam for the first time or wearing a rival institution’s insignia on a sweatshirt activated a corrective mechanism aimed at realigning behavior to fit within the institution’s cultural norms. Students generally accepted this corrective feedback because it related, as Schein (2010) suggests, to unconscious desires for acceptance and connection. Knowing the idiosyncrasies of institutional culture and enacting the

peer norms proved one's membership as a veritable MAU student. This finding, thus, adds to the general body of research that suggests that peers influence behaviors and adds to illuminating their roles in communicating culture (Keyton, 2011; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Love, 1997; Schein, 2010).

7.1.2 Friendships—Filters of culture and constellations of campus support

The associations between friendships and a host of positive outcomes (i.e. belonging, retention, persistence, or post-graduation success) recur in the literature (Astin, 1993b; Scanlon et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1975; Weidman, 2006). For college students, friendships serve the critical role of supplying encouragement and social support, which aids in transitioning to higher education (Azmitia et al., 2013; Bishop & White, 2007; Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012; Scanlon et al., 2007; Smith & Zhang, 2008). Developing new friendships during the first year becomes a vital task in the transition to college (Hicks & Heastie, 2008). Yet, experiences with college friendships deserve additional attention because their inherent complexity leaves them understudied (Kane, 2011; McCabe, 2016). More specifically, the functionality of campus friendships within an institutional culture rarely appears in the literature. Schein (2010), operating from an organizational employment perspective of institutional culture, argues that subcultures (akin to friendship groups) are siloed operators within a broader and more dominant institutional culture. The present study's findings, however, reveal loose interactions among students' compartmentalized networks. The key findings of this research study advance our knowledge of campus friendships for college students, adding a new dimension of understanding institutional culture.

For participants in this research study, friendships that were developed during the first year appeared as an interconnected constellation that engendered campus support. Envisioning campus friendships as constellations, students manage a nebulous compartmentalization of peers. In this way, students in the study anchored themselves with a core group of friends and clustered other friends based on defined interests. Friends located within these compartments were utilized for specific activities, like playing a sport together, or transactional purposes, like reviewing course material together to prepare for a test. The friendships that students in the study described appeared to be vast, and all but a few students discussed familiarity with other students on campus. Examining the composition of friendship groups from this study in this manner suggests that first-year student friendships remain diffuse and compartmentalized, notions similarly suggested in the literature (Kane, 2011; McCabe, 2016). However, this study overwhelmingly had students describe their networks as compartmentalized, while just 10 students reported few or no close campus connections, McCabe (2016) accounts for several patterns of students' college friendships, including "compartmentalizers" and "samplers." Compartmentalizers refer to students with defined clusters of separate friendship groups that seldom interact outside of their cluster, and samplers describe students with individual friendships that rarely overlap (McCabe, 2016). These types of friendship patterns, like the friendship patterns of students in this study, appear to be diffuse. McCabe (2016), however, describes these friendship patterns throughout and beyond college. Because this study only focuses on first-year student transition, it is possible that first-year students' social networks begin as largely compartmentalized and shift throughout the remainder of their collegiate careers.

Friendships in this study were described by participants as homogenous. Students commonly connected over shared interests in media, music, television shows, or sports (Kane, 2011). However, this homogeneity runs deeper than merely pop culture interests. For instance, McCabe's (2016) study reveals homogeneity of friendship groups based on gender, race, and social class. While friendship networks in this research study were nebulous, students described their core group of friends as generally homogenous based on gender and political dispositions. Students in this study maintaining friends of the same gender was not surprising because residence hall floors at MAU are assigned by sex. However, political dispositions may relate more broadly to social class, race, or geographical area, which predict political affiliation (Gelman, Park, Shor, & Cortina, 2010). Although this is speculative, core friendship groups in this study may be more similar based on social class, race, or geographical region. This study adds to current literature on the homogeneity of friendships (Kane, 2011; McCabe, 2016) by incorporating homogeneity of political dispositions as playing a role in the development of campus friendships.

Understanding the structure and composition of friendship groups is important to making sense of the ways in which campus friendships filter and affect students' perceptions of the institutional culture. Students in this study relied upon friendships as situated in diffuse constellations of campus support to grapple with culture. In particular, students utilized their constellations to reframe, refigure, and resituate potentially jarring or abrasive encounters with the institutional culture, thus marking interpretative cultural reconstruction as a cooperative activity conducted among friends. The ways in which these constellations contributed to this reconstruction produced numerous interpretations and perceptions of institutional culture. In other words, the same event could be interpreted differently by different groups based upon their

unique co-construction. This finding supports previous literature that suggests that institutional cultures are neither singular nor complete (Goldberger, 2009; Kuh & Hall, 1993; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 2010), while adding that friendship groups contribute to minimizing negative experiences within the culture.

Interactions among diffuse compartmentalized constellations created and sustained by students contribute to the overall institutional culture. Institutional culture thus becomes the confluence of compartmentalized constellations and referential peer groups working across the institution and enfolding students, faculty, staff, or other institutional actors. This study contributes to the literature that institutional culture is not monolithic and that it is the composition of multiple, distinct, overlapping subgroups each with their own (sometimes competing or paradoxical) perspectives and assumptions (Birnbaum, 1988; Keyton, 2011; Kuh & Hall, 1993; Schein, 2010). The synthesis of these subcultures or subgroups within the institutional culture creates a “mosaic of organizational realities” (Morgan cited in Kuh & Hall, 1993, p. 10). Viewing friendships as constellations provides a magnified glimpse of the processes that transpire within these individual mosaic tiles that collectively comprise an institutional culture. This finding illustrates how the meaning of institutional culture made at the subcultural level shapes the overall culture.

Collective perspectives and assumptions influence the ways in which situations occurring within the cultural context are interpreted. In this way, students’ perceptions of institutional culture align with Love’s (1997) description of institutional culture as “fabric that is continually created and recreated by members of the community...members weave together their values, beliefs, and assumptions with those of others in the institution” (p. 383). This study adds to Love’s (1997) suggestion by finding that emotions were also relevant to the creation and

maintenance of participants' perceptions of MAU. Perceptions were generated from the convergence of individual and institutional values, beliefs, assumptions, and affects and aided by constellations of campus support during the transitional process. In this study, campus friendships particularly aided students in overcoming friction encountered in the culture and contributed to students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). It is important to note that each student in this study completed his or her first year. Consequently, participants' ability to reconcile, reframe, or maintain solidarity between personal and institutional values, beliefs, and assumptions may relate to persistence from perceiving institutional match or congruence (Habley et al., 2012; Tinto, 1975). Future studies may more pointedly pursue this line of inquiry from a cultural perspective, partly by including the perspectives of students who depart institutions or higher education altogether. These findings provide knowledge of the structures and functions of campus friendships for college students by enhancing our understanding how these friendships filter and create institutional culture.

7.1.3 Institutionalized rituals—Transmitters of feeling

Institutions of higher education remain replete with rituals that communicate institutional values and evoke individual affect (Manning, 2013). This research study explored the affective inscriptions students at MAU engendered through two types of institutionalized rituals—men's football and basketball games and an annual first-year women's candle lighting ceremony. A key finding of this study was that these rituals produced in students feelings of belonging, camaraderie, and community. The literature suggests that sense of belonging facilitates transition and retention (Azmitia et al., 2013; Fischer, 2007; Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). All students in this study completed their first year and expressed

intentions to continue at MAU, which may suggest that the feelings of belonging that students described contributed to their decision to return to MAU.

While these two exemplar rituals were prominent in the data and the analysis, this study more pointedly reveals that the mechanisms that catalyzed these positive feelings differed among the rituals. Indeed, Manning (2000) suggests that every iteration of a ritual is distinctive and unique; ritual can, therefore, only ever provide time and context-bound glimpses of culture. As a result, analyzing rituals never provides complete explanation. Instead, each examination of a ritual adds nuanced utility and complicated understanding of the phenomenon. While the role of ritual within an institutional culture is theoretically considered in the literature as a means to understand cultural transmission (Birnbaum, 1988; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Manning, 1993; Schein, 2010), analysis of actual rituals within higher education rarely appears (exceptions are Magolda, 2000, 2003; Manning, 2000). The findings in this study examined the ways in which students ascribe affective meaning to campus rituals and tradition and provide an opportunity to better understand rituals during a student's transition to higher education.

Men's athletics events emerged as sites for study participants to experience belonging and connection. These activities provided students with the opportunity to escape the academic demands of their MAU lives and connect with other students. Shouting, cheering, and singing songs engendered institutional spirit and pride among students. Athletics events, therefore, became ritualized spaces through which the outpouring of emotion was normalized. Sharing emotions with numerous students created the perception of unity, and students described cheering for an MAU victory as satisfying, often putting aside the differences in their academic backgrounds during the event. The bonds established through this shared experience re-fueled students' enthusiasm. Sensing others' excitement, students mirrored, replicated, and amplified

their peers' enthusiasm to contribute to the overall spirit of the football stadium or the basketball arena, especially when attending these events with friends. These emotional activities coupled with expected traditions led many students in the study to explain men's sporting events as highly satisfying and emotive experiences that inculcated within them a sense of belonging and connection to MAU.

First-year women, meanwhile, who pre-registered for and attended a formal candle lighting ceremony entered a space that similarly produced feelings of belonging. The formality of this annual institutionalized ritual contrasts with the raucous traditions occurring during athletic events. The candle lighting ceremony simultaneously marked incorporation and entrance to the institution (Manning, 2000). In particular, this ceremony signaled to first-year women for the first time that they mattered to the institution. Their identity as women was celebrated in a retelling of women's roles in the MAU organizational saga, and they were inducted into the history of other empowered MAU women. Symbolic actions (e.g. having first-year women's candles lit by alumnae) invoked a further sense of mattering, which spurred a sense of belonging and a deep sense of connection to other MAU women. Mattering within an institutional culture remains especially relevant for marginalized student populations, like women (Love, Boschini, Jacobs, Hardy, & Kuh, 1993).

Analyzing these rituals reveals that traditions reinforced unity through shared emotions and produced feelings of belonging; mattering to the institution likewise espoused feelings of belonging. Strong institutional cultures inspire within members feelings of belonging (Kuh & Hall, 1993). Moreover, these findings reveal that institutionalized rituals have the potential not only to reinforce and transmit assumptions and norms (Schein, 2010) and evoke emotions in students (Manning, 2000), but also to transmit feelings among students. Affects experienced

through ritual manifest themselves within an individual, but they do not permanently remain hidden. Affects are eternally entwined with bodily displays (Hochschild, 1983), which are discernable to others:

Bodies can catch feeling as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear—in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every kind of conceivable passion. (Gibbs cited in Ahmed, 2010, p. 36)

In short, students' experiences with rituals may evoke emotional responses or feelings, like belonging. These feelings may then be indirectly transmitted to other students. Thus, ritual serves as a device that transmits emotions among people. This finding adds nuance to our conceptual understanding of ritual by prompting us to resituate the role of emotions in ritual. This analysis also lends itself to one of the few cultural examinations of higher education rituals. Together, these findings contribute to the literature that highlights the value of sense of belonging during transition (e.g. Strayhorn, 2012).

While the rituals outlined in these key findings are reported by students as overwhelmingly positive and inclusive, we must cautiously consider their implications. As mentioned previously, my analysis does not attempt to offer a complete elucidation of ritual. Yet, institutional leaders should remain critical of the underlying assumptions that may undergird rituals, like the ones described at MAU. For instance, institutionalizing men's sporting events as campus rituals may support hegemonic forms of masculinity that purport aggression, violence, and dominance (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2008). These events may contribute to the broader culture in which men are denigrated for sharing vulnerable emotions outside the socially acceptable vehicle of sports (Kane, 2011; Kimmel, 2008). In this vein, college athletics suffer

criticism for exploiting the profitability of Black men's athletic talents (Overly, 2005) to build expensive sporting facilities (Gaul, 2015) or to increase student applications (Pope & Pope, 2009). Ritualizing the celebration of men's athletics in this manner masks damaging cultural scripts and risks perpetuating a form of masculinity that results in the subjugation of women, marginalization of gay men (Connell, 2005), and exploitation of Black men (Overly, 2005).

The candle lighting ceremony, meanwhile, potentially restricts the celebration of women's identity to a singular point in time, minimizing college women (or other minoritized student populations enjoying similar rituals or traditions) outside this space (Love et al., 1993). This ceremony may also reinforce a complicit performance of femininity with requirements for semi-formal feminine dress during the ceremony (Butler, 1999). Taken together, the implications that undergird these rituals can be interpreted as sustaining a hegemonic gendered cultural script reinforced by normalized heterosexuality that results in what Bourdieu (2001) refers to as masculine domination. These rituals, although described by students in the study as inclusive and positive, may simultaneously be experienced as alienating or isolating, especially among minoritized students who follow countercultural scripts that defy hegemony. Therefore, institutional leaders and student affairs educators should employ cultural perspectives to critically deconstruct campus rituals in order to establish opportunities that center minoritized populations and inculcate lasting feelings of genuine mattering and non-tokenized significance.

7.1.4 Emerging variation among minoritized students' transitional experiences

Throughout the themes of this study, minoritized students encountered and endured differential interactions with the institutional culture. Previous research suggests that in order to succeed in higher education minoritized students effectively need to shed their previously held cultural

values and assumptions (Tinto, 1975, 1994). This research adds to the literature that refutes this claim (Tierney, 1992) through several emerging trends that will require additional investigation in future research. First, students of color, like white students, maintained a diffuse constellation of friendships across campus. Both populations of students also had a tightly knit core group of friends. For many Black students in this study, this core group consisted of other students of color (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Stearns, Buchmann, & Bonneau, 2009), who were met through cultural student organizations (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Fischer, 2007; Guiffreda, 2003). These connections facilitated transition by expediting a sense of belonging and helped students reframe marginalization, racism, oppression, and microaggressions (Fischer, 2007; Johnson et al., 2003; Locks et al., 2008; Park, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1994). Unique to students of color, this study also finds that core groups further served as wells of individual empowerment and perseverance cemented by supportive peer encouragement.

This research also supports the current literature that suggests that cultural student organizations serve as positive sources of connection and support for students of color (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; DeAngelo, Schuster, & Stebleton, 2016; Sidanius, Levin, Laar, & Sinclair, 2004). For students in this study, maintaining cultural connection through these organizations stabilized their cultural values; students often cited sharing implicit assumptions through these organizations that would have otherwise required verbal explanation. In this way, cultural values were not shed to assimilate to a dominant institutional culture (Tierney, 1992). This emerging finding potentially advances our understanding of the ways in which minoritized students from underrepresented racial backgrounds situate themselves and exist within an institutional culture.

This study also connects to previous research that finds that students of color perceive low academic expectations from peers and other institutional actors (Locks et al., 2008). This finding was particularly relevant to students of color with an MAU scholarship. The threat of scholarship revocation due to low GPA added to the implicit assumption of academic failure for students of color. The pressurized stress for this subset of students impels the ways in which they interpreted underlying institutional messages and power differentials regarding scholarships. Students of color endure the same challenges as white students in transitioning to college, and they also have the added burden of navigating perceived expectations of failure within institutional culture (Fischer, 2007; Locks et al., 2008). This study adds that scholarship maintenance may exacerbate these stresses during the transition to higher education. Institutional leaders, therefore, might consider extending grants to students of color in their first year without the academic requirements tethered to scholarship maintenance. Instead, these grants could be connected to transitional learning experiences or active engagement in incorporating students of color as designers of the cocurriculum in an effort to centralize their voices within the institution (Love et al., 1993). Moreover, institutional leaders should continue to dismantle campus climates that perpetuate negative and limiting cultural scripts about minoritized populations. Such measures begin with moving from restricting diversity on campus to cultural celebrations to incorporating social justice in practice (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015).

While most students of color in the study enjoyed friendships, only minoritized students in this study explained challenges in making lasting friendships. This finding relates to the literature on feelings of alienation and isolation on campus (Azmitia et al., 2013; Henry, Fuerth, & Figlio, 2010; Risquez et al., 2007; Sidanius et al., 2004). The ten students in this subgroup

included participants from racial backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in higher education as well as individuals following countercultural gender scripts that bucked hegemony. For several students, race, sexual orientation, and gender performativity intersected. These participants remained optimistic about making friends and demonstrated self-reliance that resulted in hopeful self-empowerment in the face of transitional isolation. Future research needs to consider transitional experiences within institutional culture at the intersections of race, gender, and gender performance in order to better account for the variation these students experience.

This research study begins to show the variation in the transitional experiences of minoritized students from underrepresented backgrounds. My analysis adds to our knowledge of the ways in which minoritized students develop perceptions, experience institutional culture, and situate themselves within the institution. Although this study set out to also highlight variation in the transitional experiences of first-generation college students, the experiences of first-generation students in an institutional culture demands additional future research.

7.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

This research study expands our understanding of the theoretical work related to student success and institutional culture. Seminal theories largely place the onus for student success on the student by examining the amount of energy students invested into academic tasks (Astin, 1984, 1993b), the quality of students' effort in educationally purposeful activities (Kuh, 2009; Pace, 1979, 1982), and students' integration, assimilation, and internalization of institutional values (Tinto, 1975, 1994). Although Kuh (2009) acknowledges institutions' roles in implementing

programs and interventions that maximize students' engagement, these theories do not fully address the external barriers or minimizing cultural scripts that dampen aspirations and hamper student success (Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996). Theories related to institutional culture do, however, generally account for the reflection of broader societal forces within institutions (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 2010). Effectually, prominent theories in higher education purport that achievement in higher education environments impels students to sever past relationships and cultural values in order to adapt to an institution (Tinto, 1975).

A number of researchers have pushed against these notions by suggesting students of color may never be able to truly or fully integrate into institutional environments because their inherent cultural values will eternally be contested within the institution (Nora et al., 1996; Tierney, 1992; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). These researchers also demonstrate that these theories overtly privilege one culture over another (Tierney, 1992). Higher education's history of exclusion and perpetuating privilege may, therefore, only be repackaged through these seminal theories (Hurtado, 1992; Rendon, 1994; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Broadening student success and working toward social justice, thus, requires the exploration and incorporation of the lived experiences of minoritized students in order to expand the ways in which we create knowledge (Espino, Vega, Rendon, Ranero, & Muniz, 2012; Hurtado, 1994). This exploration also demands an understanding of the intersections of race, class, and gender and the counter-spaces created by students with multiple minoritized identities (Espino et al., 2012; Rendon, 1994; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). In this way, knowledge about the institutional power inherent in racism may be challenged through students' perspectives and experiences with prejudice and discrimination on campuses (Hurtado, 1992, 1994; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Understanding the lived experiences

for students of color opens the opportunity for the creation of policies, programs, and spaces that are simultaneously liberating and transformative (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002).

This research study represents the perspectives and experiences of minoritized students and illustrates the ways in which minoritized students navigate institutional culture. In line with previous research (Hurtado, 1994; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Tierney, 1992), minoritized students in this study did not shed their past assumptions in order to integrate into a dominant culture. Instead, minoritized students assembled a constellation of campus support centered around a core group of friends that assisted in reframing and deflecting discrimination on campus. These core friends were mostly other students of color. For students within the Connections (CXN) student organization, these core friends were other students of color navigating the first-year transition and the institutional culture while maintaining a scholarship. This theoretical contribution confirms the significance of campus racial attitudes in transitional processes that students of color experience (Espino et al., 2012; Hurtado, 1992, 1994; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rendon, 1994). As evidenced in this study, campus racial climates were influenced not only through institutional power differentials—as was the case with CXN students—but also through marginalizing norms firmly entrenched within peer cultures. Even seemingly innocuous perspectives of white students in this study perceiving college as a bubble represent underlying racialized viewpoints. Peer and institutional cultures, thus, contribute to the ways in which students of color experience, perceive, and make sense of racial attitudes on campus. Through their core friend groups, students of color in this study clearly pushed against and resisted the cultures that perpetuated delimiting attitudes toward minoritized populations. Thus, minoritized students existed paradoxically within and beyond the bubble that encapsulated and protected their mostly white peers. In this way, this research pushes our understanding of

theory forward by suggesting ways in which minoritized students' resistance results in counter-spaces or counter-cultures that oppose hegemony.

The fact that only students in this study with a minoritized identity or with intersecting minoritized identities experienced campus isolation represents a problem with the ways in which some students experience an institutional culture. Cultural assumptions related to race, sex, sexual orientation, gender, and gender performance played roles in minoritized students' isolating experiences. Not only is work around better relating these students' experiences to theory vital, but it is also necessary to understand and decenter the hegemonic perspectives of majority students that contribute to the isolation that these students endured. For example, many students in this study conveyed attitudes of unaffectedness when detailing their campus experiences related to their race, gender, or sexual orientation. As one participant summarized, "My race, gender, and sexual orientation definitely hasn't hurt my college experience. I am a white straight male, so I kind of hit the—I don't want to say hit the jackpot—but like really, I kind of did." Therefore, unpacking the cultural assumptions that contribute to institutional forces that constrict minoritized populations may help in building theory that promotes social justice, empowerment, and awareness, which may lead to institutional cultures where students with minoritized identities thrive.

More broadly, we should consider the communicative processes that all students encounter throughout their lives that dictate the cultural scripts and norms that they follow. Culture is an influential force that permeates myriad aspects of one's life and undergirds our societal institutions. Therefore, we should theoretically contend with the immutable force of culture and the outcomes it produces. Accounting for institutional culture and cultural perspectives in higher education research and in theory building provides an opportunity to

investigate and interrogate the multiple perspectives of the various populations that occupy institutions of higher education.

My findings and analysis suggest that cultural perspectives of higher education serve as theoretical tools that are integral in uncovering the limiting and marginalizing scripts that affect students' perspectives and experiences. Exploring the tacit assumptions inherent in systemic structures provides an opportunity to represent the multiple, competing, and paradoxical perspectives of campus cultures that simultaneously exist among various participants of higher education. This study confirms that returning to and renewing cultural perspectives of higher education provides a mechanism through which to present new understandings of these multiple experiences, while remaining cognizant of the reconstruction of minoritized students' experiences. This reconstruction fills a theoretical gap by accounting for the ways in which minoritized students make meaning of institutional culture through the filters produced by their constellations of campus support. These interpretations help us understand minoritized student experiences within broader institutional and peer cultures. Further theoretical work should be done to imagine how restructuring and opening college campuses can promote success for increasingly diverse student populations, while defusing discriminatory forces tacitly infused in peer and institutional cultures.

7.3 LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Two limitations of this research study are of worth noting: (a) the sample and (b) the representations offered by participants. While this sample size is rather robust for qualitative research (Mertens, 2010; Seidman, 2006), first-year students living in campus residence halls at

MAU remains at about 92 percent. All but one of the participants in this study resided on campus during their first year. The findings are most readily transferrable to other residential institutions with a similar representation of students living on campus during their first year. This raises questions about how these findings might transfer to institutions without many residential students. All students in the sample completed their first year at MAU and indicated their plans to return for the following year. As a result, their positive perceptions may influence the overall data and this study lacks the perspective of students who departed the institution during their first year. In addition, women of color in STEM fields comprise most of the Black or African American students in the sample. Therefore, there may be limitations in accounting for the variation in the overall lived experiences of Black or African American students.

Next, cultural constructivism relies on the researcher's inundation with the data to develop abstract interpretations regarding tacit assumptions and underlying beliefs that affect broader cultural processes. This interpretation was done through my individual affective perceptive filter of reality, which was only complicated by real and perceived power differentials between the participants and myself. This power dynamic, affected by my age, educational level, and role as a researcher, may have (in)directly influenced participants during interviews and during member checking (Seidman, 2006). This was a limitation that I did not sense, however. In fact, I inferred that students were open and honest about their experiences at MAU. I relied upon my years of professional experiences interacting with first-year students to establish rapport and relied on techniques to engage students in a comfortable conversation. Students openly detailed their experiences, including outlining their experimentations with illegal drugs or alcohol, which I took as a sign that differential power dynamics were mostly minimized.

Finally, institutional cultures kindle positive or special affects for cultural insiders (Schein, 2010). Aspects of the semi-structured interview may have created friction for members when answering questions that may have made the institutional culture appear to be functioning negatively. As a result, these participants may have desired to protect the culture's representation by overcompensating with positive experiences or by minimizing dysfunctional attributes, which may have influenced the overall data (Schein, 2010). For instance, one student in the study revealed in her interview that she would describe MAU only positively to her friends from high school. She rationalized concealing negative aspects of the institutional culture by saying, "I don't want to scare people about my own school...I don't need people chastising me saying, 'Well why don't you just transfer?' So, I just tread lightly when I describe MAU." While this participant was open about how she concealed negative aspects of MAU from her high school friends, other participants may have concealed or minimized negative aspects of MAU during their interviews, although it is only speculative whether they did.

This findings from this research study suggest several other areas for future research that work to expand not only our understanding of institutional culture, but also transitions across higher education. This research study examined the transitions that occur during the first year at largely residential Middle Atlantic University. Future research needs to consider how more advanced students serve as cultural conduits that transmit to first-year students institutional assumptions and peer norms. This perspective would broaden the understanding of the present study. Other research related to first-year student transition can be expanded to include cultural perspective. For example, the literature needs to address broader sources of transition related to higher education. Transitions occurring as students graduate college and enter the workforce, transitions of student affairs educators beginning work at new institutions, and transitions among

community college students to four-year institutions would all account for new understanding the ways in which individual navigate cultural change. As mentioned previously, future research should also consider the intersections of race, gender, and gender performance in order to illuminate transitional experiences within the institutional culture for these specific student populations. Intersections with other identity statuses, like ability or veteran status, might also be incorporated in unpacking and complicating cultural perspectives of higher education. This line of future research serves to illuminate the variation in transitional experiences for minoritized individuals located within an institutional culture. Expanding our conceptual knowledge of transition in these ways provides the opportunity to further understand the unique role that institutional culture plays in the overall higher education experience.

7.4 CONCLUSION

The research study explores the ways in which first-year students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture during their transition to higher education. In particular, this study considers the ways in which students learned cultural norms, relied on friendship networks to interpret institutional culture, and ascribed affective meaning to campus rituals. Cultural constructivism with a constructivist theoretical perspective guided this study, providing a paradigmatic shift from the positivist and post-positivist paradigms entrenched in higher education research and practice (Guido et al., 2010). The constructivist perspective centers the variation in students' individualized experiences while recognizing the complexity associated with the inherently socially constructed nature of higher education (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Manning, 2000).

My analysis, guided by this theoretical perspective, fills a gap in the literature by pointedly examining the processes associated with college student transition. Current research focuses on measuring the outcomes associated with transition through a number of concepts (e.g. Azmitia et al., 2013; Mayhew et al., 2012; Palmer et al. 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). Understanding processes, however, provides the opportunity for us to begin to unravel the complexities of campus cultures that impinge upon student success, retention, and persistence. While this study does not draw causal links between these processes and success, retention, or persistence, it does serve as a way to bolster our understanding of the inherently dense and emotional processes students experience as they navigate and make meaning of an institution's culture. Moreover, the themes and key findings described in this dissertation contribute to better understanding the perspectives and experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, a current need in higher education research (Fischer, 2007; Perna & Thomas, 2008; Stuber 2011). These themes and key findings from this study allow us to critically examine and interrogate the assumptions undergirding institutional actions in an effort improve outcomes for all students and incorporate social justice practices throughout the academic landscape.

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL TEMPLATE

Dear [NAME],

I am contacting you on behalf of Max Schuster who is with the University of Pittsburgh School of Education conducting a research study entitled, “Exploring first-year student transition through organizational culture.” This research study is being conducted under the supervision of Michael Gunzenhauser, PhD. I am approaching you to participate in the research study because you are a first-year or second-year student at the [Mid-Atlantic University]. I would like to invite you to participate in an interview with the researcher that would last between 30 and 60 minutes and consist of several open-ended questions about your experience with transitioning from high school to college during your first-year.

A breach of confidentiality is a possible risk, but the researcher will do everything he can to maintain confidentiality of your participation in this study. All records pertaining to your involvement in this research study are kept strictly confidential through a unique code that will be assigned to your information. Your name will be separated from this coded information during storage and files will be kept on a University of Pittsburgh School of Education server behind the University of Pittsburgh firewall. There are no direct benefits to you by participating

in this research study. However, you may learn more about yourself during the interview. If you elect to complete an interview, you will receive a [MAU] t-shirt and \$5 incentive at the end of the interview.

Forty first-year students and 20 second-year students are being asked to participate in this research study. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this study at any time. If you decide to participate in this research study, any information you would provide during the interview or throughout the course of the research study would not impact your standing at [MAU]. If you are interested in participating in this research study, please contact Max Schuster at mts31@pitt.edu to learn more about the research study and coordinate an on-site or telephone interview. Thank you for considering participating in this study.

Sincerely,

[GATEKEEPER NAME]

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND INTRODUCTORY SCRIPT

Introductory Script: The purpose of this research study to examine the experience, perceptions, and attitudes that students gain during their transition to higher education. For that reason, I am interviewing 40 first-year and 20 second-year students at [Mid-Atlantic University]. I am asking students to complete an interview that will last between 30 and 60 minutes. If you are willing to participate, I will ask you about your experiences during your transition to [MAU] and what you learned about yourself during this transition. Any information you provide during the interview or throughout the course of the research study will not impact your standing at [MAU].

A breach of confidentiality is a possible risk, but I will do everything I can to maintain confidentiality of your participation in this study. All records pertaining to your involvement in this research study are kept strictly confidential through a unique code that will be assigned to your information. Your name will be separated from this coded information during storage and files will be kept on a University of Pittsburgh School of Education server behind the University of Pittsburgh firewall. There are no direct benefits to you by participating in this research study. However, you may learn more about yourself during the interview. If you elect to participate in an interview, you will receive a [MAU] t-shirt and a \$5 incentive at the end of the interview.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this research study at any time. This study is being conducted by Principal Investigator, Max Schuster under the supervision of Dr. Michael Gunzenhauser. I can answer any questions that you may have or you may contact Dr. Gunzenhauser at 412-648-2119.

INTRODUCTION

- Tell me about your background and how you chose this institution.
 - Current class year
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Race
 - Major(s)
 - Hometown
 - Are you the first person in your immediate family to attend college?

ENGAGEMENT

- Tell me about how you have engaged in college so far this year.
- What have been important experiences in your college life so far?
- Describe how connected you feel with the university community.
 - Sense of belonging
 - Sense of place
 - Sense of loyalty
 - Satisfaction
- How do you make meaning of the rituals or ceremonies of the institution, like Convocation?
- What have you learned about yourself since coming to college?

OVERVIEW TO TRANSITION

- Describe what has been important in your transition to college.
- What has been challenging in transitioning to college?
- What are you most proud of since coming to college?
- What experiences do you think someone needs to have as a student during his or her first year at this particular institution?
- How would you define college life?
- When students come to college, they typically receive messages from their institution, friends, classmates, faculty, or staff about who they are or their identity. What messages have you received from people at this institution about your identity or who you are since coming to college?

RELATIONSHIPS

- Thinking back to the beginning of the year, how did you go about meeting new people?
- Tell me about how you feel about your connections to others at the institution.
- Describe your relationship with your friends on campus.
 - What types of things do you do with friends? What do you do for fun?
- Who has helped you in adjusting to college life?
- How has social media played a role in your adjustment to college life?
- How do you keep up with people from home?
 - What did your family tell you about going to college or this institution?
 - What might be different about your relationships with your high school friends?

CULTURE

- How would you describe this institution to your friends?
- If someone outside of the institution were to ask you what this university values, what would be important for you to tell that person?
- How do you relate to the values of the institution?
- How do you relate to the traditions of the institution?
- How did you learn about the way of life at the institution?
- What emotions or feelings does being at the institution bring up for you?
 - What feelings do you have that make you want to stay or depart this institution?

CONCLUSION

- Where do you envision yourself after graduation?
- What about your experience have we not yet discussed that you think is important for me to know?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND RATIONALE

Table 6. Interview Protocol and Rationale

Question	Rationale	Relationship to RQ
Introduction	This section provides an entry point to the discussion by asking a question that helps the interview get started.	
Tell me about your background and how you chose this institution.	This question warms up participants by giving them the opportunity to detail their hometown background, high school experiences, or reason for selecting MAU. These background characteristics also play a role in students' experiences (Astin, 1984; Weidman, 2006).	1
Engagement	This section deals with ideas related to student engagement, involvement, or integration as well as sense of belonging. In particular, these questions relate experiences and feelings with campus activities or events.	
Tell me about how you have engaged in college so far this year.	This question serves as another way to begin and frame the discussion. It provides an entry point by allowing students to recall what experiences they had during the year. This allows students to begin reconstructing (Seidman, 2006) experiences which are salient. Students' engagement experiences may relate to performances of campus culture (Kuh, 2009). This also gives space for students to discuss classroom and outside the classroom activities (Habley et al., 2012; Reason, 2009).	3, 4
What have been important experiences in your college life so far?	This question follows up on the previous question by asking students to make a value-based judgment on which experiences they have had are important (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Tinto, 1975), which is crucial in inviting participants to reconstruct their experiences (Seidman, 2006).	2, 4

Table 6 continued

Describe how connected you feel with the university community. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sense of belonging ○ Sense of place ○ Sense of loyalty ○ Satisfaction 	This question and its following probes begins to transition the student to think about their connections to others on campus. This sense of connection relates to ideas of integration (Tinto, 1975) and sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), which have been used in studies of transition (Habley et al., 2012). Sense of place, loyalty, and satisfaction are also listed to recognize that students may also talk about their connection through these similar concepts (Astin, 1993b).	4
How do you make meaning of the rituals or ceremonies of the institution, like Convocation?	This question pointedly directs students to their feelings and experiences with the formal ceremonial or ritualistic manifestations of institutional culture by deciphering and making sense of the meaning of these activities (Hall, 2003; Manning, 2000).	4
Transition	These questions deal with experiences and situations encountered and navigated as they made the move from high school to college. These questions offer points for reflection and allow students to engage with aspects of institutional culture without directly naming the term, which is likely unfamiliar (Schein, 2010).	
Describe what has been important in your transition to college.	This opens this section invites students to begin thinking about their experiences in adjusting to life at college. Typically, there a number of experiences students gain that may relate to challenges, transmission of institutional knowledge, learning shock, or turning point experiences (Honkimaki & Kalman, 2002; Palmer et al., 2009; Scanlon et al., 2009).	1, 4
What has been challenging in transitioning to college? What are you most proud of since coming to college?	Depending on the answer above, these questions serve as follow-up questions that prompt students to consider positive and potentially negative experiences in coming to college. These questions seek to uncover the processes associated with transition by exploring it from different angles.	2
What experiences do you think someone needs to have as a student during his or her first year at this particular institution?	This question invites participants to think beyond themselves. They can project and imagine what advice they may give a potential student entering his or her first year about what activities or behaviors encourage transition (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2013; Ott, 1989). This question targets institutional culture by allowing participants to discuss what experiences may define or make an MAU students (Love, 1997).	2
How would you define college life? How did you learn about life at this institution?	The crux of this question targets institutional culture in terms that would be more familiar to college students. This question and its follow-up aim to uncover not only how students envision college but what they have learned about that way life, focusing on cultural transmission processes (Smith & Zhang, 2008).	2

Table 6 continued

When students come to college, they typically receive messages from their institution, friends, classmates, faculty, or staff about who they are or their identity. What messages have you received from people at this institution about your identity or who you are since coming to college?	This question intends to focus more pointedly on the transmission process and will be asked as a follow-up pending the answer of the previous questions. Institutional actors, such as peers and faculty, play a role in students' transitional experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sullivan, 2014).	2
What have you learned about yourself since coming to college?	This question requires the participant to be introspective about their identity and their development. For students, identity is associated with coming college and serves as an outcome of transitional processes and socialization (Weidman, 2006).	1
Relationships	Campus relationships contribute to the ways in which individual experience the institution and facilitate transition. These questions focus on the relationships that students have formed as well as their perceptions of the ways in which relationships work on campus. Since institutional culture is often the confluence of various niches and enclaves (Love, 1997) determining the ways in which relationships work in this context relates to the present study (Schein, 2010).	
Thinking back to the beginning of the year, how did you go about meeting new people?	This question invites participants to reconstruct the ways in which their friendship networks were formed and structured. It also seeks to understand the strategies students relied upon to create these new networks (McCabe, 2016; Smith & Zhang, 2008).	1, 3
Tell me about how you feel about your connections to others at the institution.	This broadly invites participants to talk about other potential relationships with faculty or staff at the institution (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2013; Mara & Mara, 2010; Rosenbaum & Becker).	3
Describe your relationship with your friends on campus. ○ What types of things do you do with friends? What do you do for fun?	This question ties to together information about friendships and their activities on campus. This provides students with a unique way to tell a story about how their relationships and activities with friends unfold.	2, 3
○ Who has helped you in adjusting to college life?	This question asks participants to consider key influences who have aided with transition. Establishing new peer networks and obtaining support appear in the literature as helpful to positively navigating transition in higher education (Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Smith & Zhang, 2008; Terenzini et al., 1994).	3
How has social media played a role in your adjustment to college life?	Social media is a potent tool for maintaining connection to family and friends (Stephen-Abetz & Holman, 2012). Since technology has evolved the ways in which we now communicate, it should be considered because it may shed light on the separation phase of integration that Tinto (1975) previously suggested.	1, 3

Table 6 continued



How do you keep up with people from home?	This considers the ways in which family and high school friends may communicate messages to students about higher education (Kim & Diaz, 2013) as well as how networks may be resituated with family (Arnett, 2000).	2, 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What did your family tell you about going to college or this institution? ○ What might be different about your relationships with your high school friends? 		
Culture	This set of questions encourages students to consider their relationship and situation to the institution. This line of questioning serves as the most notable form of an intervention by pressing students for information they may not have previously considered (Mertens, 2010)	
How would you describe this institution to your friends?	This question seeks to understand how students represent the institution to an outsider (Schein, 2010)	1
If someone outside of the institution were to ask you what this university values, what would be important for you to tell that person?	This question follows-up by asking participants to think more analytically about their description of the institution by considering its values (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 2010).	1, 4
How do you relate to the values of the institution?	This asks students to place themselves in the culture centrally and consider their relationship and alignment to institutional values (Love, 1997).	1
How do you relate to the traditions of the institution?	This asks students to think more about the activities at MAU that carry with them symbolic meaning (Hall, 2003; Magolda, 2003; Manning, 2000; Schein, 2010)	4
What emotions or feelings does being at the institution bring up for you?	Decisions about persistence are rife with emotion (Keup, 2002; Nalbone et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1975) and this question encourages students to identify how these emotions relate to their decision to remain or depart higher education (Berger & Milem, 1999).	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What feelings do you have that make you want to stay or depart this institution? 		
Future Self and Conclusion	These questions set the tone for concluding the interview. This point in the process provides participants to enrich their background information by sharing their future goals, if they were not discussed earlier in the protocol and invite students to share additional pertinent information.	
Where do you envision yourself after graduation?	This question tackles persistence and invites participants to reflect upon their future goals beyond MAU. It considers whether students see themselves graduating from MAU. This helps students align their behaviors, attitudes, and goals in this discussion (Perna & Thomas, 2008).	1
What about your experience have we not yet discussed that you think is important for me to know?	This question invites participants to share other memorable stories or recollections that have not been explicitly mentioned in the interview. This type of question invites participants to share new information or stress importance already discussed	1

APPENDIX D

HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION OFFICE EXEMPT APPROVAL LETTER



University of Pittsburgh *Institutional Review Board*

3500 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
412) 383-1480_ 
(412) 383-1508_  (fax)
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

Memorandum

To: Max Schuster, MEd
From: IRB Office
Date: 1/4/2016
IRB#: [PRO14090001](#)
Subject: Exploring first-year student transition through organizational culture

The above-referenced project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board. Based on the information provided, this project meets all the necessary criteria for an exemption, and is hereby designated as "exempt" under section 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)

Please note the following information:

- Investigators should consult with the IRB whenever questions arise about whether planned changes to an exempt study might alter the exempt status. Use the "**Send Comments to IRB Staff**" link displayed on study workspace to request a review to ensure it continues to meet the exempt category.
- It is important to close your study when finished by using the "**Study Completed**" link displayed on the study workspace.
- Exempt studies will be archived after 3 years unless you choose to extend the study. If your study is archived, you can continue conducting research activities as the IRB has made the determination that your project met one of the required exempt categories. The only caveat is that no changes can be made to the application. If a change is needed, you will need to submit a NEW Exempt application.

Please be advised that your research study may be audited periodically by the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office.

APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Table 7. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Class Year	Gender	Race	First-Generation Status	Field of Study
Aaron	1	M	White	N	STEM
Adalynn	1	F	Asian	N	Social Science
Adam	1	M	White	N	STEM
Arati	1	F	Asian	N	STEM
Becca	1	F	White	N	Undecided
Ben	1	M	Asian	N	STEM
Brandon	1	M	White	N	Humanities
Brooke	1	F	White	Y	STEM
Carlos	1	M	Latinx	N	Pre-Professional
Charley	1	M	White	N	STEM
Chloe	1	F	White	N	STEM
Clara	1	F	Biracial	N	Undecided
Darius	1	M	Black	N	STEM
Deepti	1	F	Asian	N	STEM
Gina	1	F	White	N	STEM
Hayden	1	GQ	Black	N	Pre-Professional
Heather	1	F	White	Y	STEM
Janice	1	F	White	N	STEM
Jason	1	M	White	N	STEM
Jill	1	F	White	N	Pre-Professional
Joe	1	M	White	N	STEM
Jonas	1	M	White	N	Humanities
Joshua	1	M	White	N	STEM
Julian	1	M	White	N	STEM
Julie	1	F	Asian	N	STEM
Elle	2	F	White	N	STEM

Table 7 continued

Kate	1	F	White	N	Pre-Professional
Kayla	1	F	White	N	Humanities
Ken	1	M	White	N	STEM
Kiyoshi	1	M	Asian	N	STEM
Latrice	1	F	Black	N	Undecided
Laura	1	F	Black	Y	STEM
Leigh	1	F	Black	N	STEM
LeMarcus	1	M	Black	N	STEM
Logan	1	M	White	N	Undecided
Luke	1	M	Biracial	N	STEM
Maddy	1	F	White	Y	STEM
Mia	1	F	White	N	Social Science
Mimi	1	F	Black	Y	Social Science
Nadifa	1	F	Black	N	STEM
Natalie	1	F	White	N	Pre-Professional
Oscar	1	M	Asian	N	STEM
Rachel	1	F	Black	N	STEM
Rahmi	1	F	Black	N	STEM
Samuel	1	M	Latinx	N	Undecided
Sophie	1	F	White	N	Humanities
Summer	1	F	White	N	STEM
Tara	1	F	White	N	Humanities
Tim	1	M	White	N	STEM
Vic	1	M	Asian	N	STEM
Vicky	1	F	White	N	Pre-Professional
Aubrey	2	F	White	N	Social Science
Bella	2	F	Asian	N	STEM
Carolyn	2	F	Black	N	STEM
Devesh	2	M	Asian	N	STEM
Helena	2	F	White	N	STEM
Kyle	2	M	White	Y	Social Science
Molly	2	F	White	N	STEM
Nkechi	2	F	Black	N	STEM
Sara	2	F	White	Y	Social Science
Shawn	2	M	White	N	STEM
Tessa	2	F	Black	N	STEM

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