"No One is Gonna Tell Us We Can't Do This": The Development of Agency in Student-Initiated Community Engagement

Shuli A. Archer
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“No One is Gonna Tell Us We Can’t Do This”:
The Development of Agency in Student-Initiated Community Engagement

A Dissertation Presented
by
SHULI ARIEH ARCHER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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College of Education
Educational Policy and Leadership
“No One is Gonna Tell Us We Can’t Do This”:
The Development of Agency in Student-Initiated Community Engagement

A Dissertation Presented

by

SHULI ARIEH ARCHER

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When I began this journey over 10 years ago, I thought I’d be done in five or six years. But life happened – beautiful and complicated, including the birth of my three children, a cross-country move, and a full-time job – making the dissertation important but not the most. The gift of summers off in 2017 and 2018 brought me back to the stories of my participants and the deep desire to finish what I started.

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ABSTRACT

“NO ONE IS GONNA TELL US WE CAN’T DO THIS”: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGENCY IN STUDENT-INITIATED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

FEBRUARY 2019

SHULI ARIEH ARCHER, B.A., BARD COLLEGE

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Directed by: Professor Ryan S. Wells

By its simplest definition, service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) connect work in the community and reflection on that work with credit-bearing academic courses. SLCE has been critiqued for, among other things, an incomplete consideration of power dynamics, and scholars and practitioners have recently expressed a desire to reinforce service-learning as primarily promoting agency, or the capacity to make change in society. Student-initiated community engagement programs offer a unique perspective and context to study agency. These programs, much like student-initiated retention projects, provide spaces where students take the lead in curriculum development, community partner relationship development, and program administration.

Using Emirbayer and Mische’s (1999) trichordal theory of agency as a framework, this qualitative case study of a student-initiated and student-run community engagement program utilized in-depth, three-part phenomenological interviews to explore how seven student leaders made meaning of their experiences and their development of agency. Secondary research questions explored if and how participants felt connected to SLCE as a field and/or movement.
Through inductive and deductive data analysis, major themes emerged that cut across all seven participants. Their sense of agency was influenced by structural components within the student-initiated community engagement program, including the program (1) being mission- and relationship-centered, (2) using particular pedagogical strategies, and (3) enrolling a critical mass of people of color in both student and student-staff roles. In turn, the participants’ sense of belonging in the program; awareness (including self-awareness, awareness of academic and career paths, and awareness for education access and equity); and their skill development were important factors in their development of a sense of agency. Trends in their sense of agency – named transformation, elevation, and frustration – illustrated some of the ways participation in student-initiated community engagement impacted them during the program and beyond. Ultimately, student-initiated community engagement can provide an important pathway for the development of agency, and offers lessons for all community engagement and service-learning programs, be them student-initiated or not.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is a Sunday night in the middle of winter. The air is chilly and the sky is dark. I pull my car into a tight spot lined with snow and ease out of the driver’s side door. As I approach the apartment, I see some of my fellow workers pile out of a nearby car. We are all smiles as we approach the door.

The apartment entrance leads into a small kitchen – what one might call a “one-but kitchen” – with four or five people squeezed in. As I greet those in the room, someone comes around the corner with a tray full of chocolate-covered strawberries. The oohs and aahs commence. She places the tray in the refrigerator and then welcomes me into the living room. Our group totals at least 15 people – mostly undergraduate students, but also one faculty member and two other graduate students. People are sitting everywhere – couches, the floor, desk chairs, stools – and some are standing along the wall. Our facilitator, the program coordinator, opens the meeting with a quick greeting, after which we take turns running into the kitchen to fill our plates. As we fill our bellies, there is excitement in the air. The meeting begins. This is Bridging Communities¹.

The agenda for this meeting is long. We grapple with concerns about the upcoming year – funding, staffing, programming, and more. Each concern is critical. Because Bridging Communities is student-run program, our decision-making determines our destiny. People around the room speak with passion and encourage others to speak.

¹ The name of the organization was changed in order to better protect the confidentiality of its members and of the study participants.
Much of our discussion is not only about logistics but also about changing the system and making education more accessible to the youth we serve.

As the hours pass, we delve deeply into most of our agenda but do not get through all of it. We know each topic is important, yet there is never really enough time. At the close of the meeting, people hug each other goodbye, open the door, and return to the blustery night. We know our work is not done, but for tonight this must be enough.

Background

As a pedagogical and educational strategy, service learning and community engagement (SLCE) have garnered increasing attention in recent years. Institutions of higher education exhibit a growing commitment to this practice through the creation of SLCE offices and centers, courses and programs, and even public service majors and minors. These measures are for good reason: SLCE has been shown to benefit students both cognitively and affectively, with such gains as increased critical thinking skills, writing skills, and a commitment to celebrating diversity and difference (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1997; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). As community engagement and service-learning become more integrated into institutional structures, however, some scholars have expressed concerns that the movement has stalled and that many of its original goals are getting lost (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009).

Scholars including Boyte (2007, 2008) advocate that a crucial next step in the service-learning and community engagement movement is to return to a focus on agency. Agency, or “the capacities of human communities and groups to act cooperatively and collectively across common problems and challenges” (Boyte & Mehaffy, 2008, p. 3), becomes crucial to understand because of its connection to working in a diverse
democracy. One possible approach to promoting student agency can be examined by considering the role of the student within service-learning classrooms, community partner sites, and in programs overall. Mitchell (2005), for example, advocates for exploring power dynamics between students and service-learning faculty and administrators by inviting students to be co-facilitators, increasing their responsibilities on site over time, and engaging in prolonged service relationships.

But what happens when students take control of the service-learning programs administratively? Student-initiated community engagement programs\(^2\) draw attention to power dynamics in the classroom and at the administrative level. These programs are diverse in type, with many being student-founded, student-funded, and student-run at all levels – in the classroom, at the service site, and administratively. Considering the connections between student-initiated community engagement and students’ development of agency offers important insights into power dynamics in service-learning approaches. In turn, it may offer suggestions for invigorating the service-learning and community engagement movements in higher education institutions nationally.

**Purpose and Design**

This qualitative case study utilized in-depth, multi-part phenomenological interviewing to explore the experiences of student leaders in Bridging Communities, a student-initiated community engagement program located at a public research university in the Northeastern United States. The program describes itself as a “student-initiated outreach program that connects … students with local community-based organizations

\(^2\) See, for example, programs at Portland State University, University of California Berkeley, University of Virginia, and Indiana University-Perdue University Indianapolis.
and schools through tutoring-mentoring partnerships, college awareness activities, and policy advocacy” (Program website). While the program does not exclusively enroll or serve people of color, the majority of college students enrolled and youth served are African American, Latinx, and multiracial college students and youth. Through the in-depth interviewing process, study participants were asked to make meaning of their experiences in the program generally, and to reflect on how their involvement in the program influenced their sense of agency.

While this study is not specifically about race and social identity, all discussions about service-learning that are critical in nature are to some extent about race, class, other social identities, and power in society (Chesler & Scalera, 2000; Mitchell, 2008; Castañeda & Krupczynski, 2018). This dissertation research focused on a program that is social justice-oriented and enrolls a critical mass of students of color. Even more, however, the program, its credit-bearing courses, and its initiatives take a critical race perspective (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), focusing explicitly on historically marginalized communities in the context of racism, classism, and other forms of oppression. Because of these elements, issues of race, other social identities, and their relationship to power dynamics in service-learning are crucial components of this project.

Research questions included:

1. How does involvement in student-initiated community engagement influence student leaders’ understandings of agency (i.e., the capacity to take action and to work for social change)?

---

3 When using the terms “people of color” and “students of color,” I consider the broadest use of the term to include people of all oppressed racial and ethnic groups, including African Americans, Latinxs, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Native American Indians, and Middle Eastern/Arab Americans.
a. How do student leaders describe what their sense of agency was like before they joined the program?

b. How did their sense of their agency change over the course of the program?

c. How do the student leaders see their future roles in community and political life?

2. How do student leaders describe their work – as service-learning, as activism, or as something else?

3. How do students see themselves connected to a larger service-learning and community engagement effort, institutionally, regionally, and/or nationally?

**Conceptual Framework**

This project rests in a Deweyian perspective of education in that it is grounded in the notion that students learn from their experiences. This is true not only in a more traditional sense of service-learning where students are bringing theory to the community and the community to theory, but also in co-curricular experiences. In student-initiated community engagement programs, students are immersed in educative experiences – as students, as supervisors, and as administrators. These experiences should, in the philosophy of Dewey (1938), provide lasting impacts on the students. In such experiences, students are engaged not only in administrative tasks of facilitating service-learning experiences, but they are also engaged in what Dewey (1938) called “collateral learning”:

Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned. For these attitudes are
fundamentally what count in the future. The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning. (Dewey, 1938, p. 48)

In other words, students in student-initiated community engagement are not only soaking up content of service-learning courses or program development skills, they are also learning about how to be civic actors long after their college years end.

Beyond the work of Dewey, other traditions are called in that have informed this work. Drawing on the work of Daynes and Longo (2004) and Stevens (2003), Stoecker (2016) challenges the field to look more deeply into the settlement house movement of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century as a critical component of any service-learning conceptual framework. About settlement houses, Stoecker writes:

The purpose [of the Toynbee settlement house] was to build on a growing interest among students of Toynbee and others to directly engage with the great social issues of the day and create a more systematic means to connect the privileged with the marginalized. … In the best cases, it was about empowering the people of an excluded neighborhood while offering them informally packaged higher education from which they were normally excluded, and educating the privileged in the externalities of their privilege in the the hope that all could come to a common understanding of the path to the good society. (pp. 13-14)

Settlement houses, then, provide an important conceptual framework in addition to Deweyian concepts, in that settlement houses equipped students to look at structural and systemic differences and to learn from and with people in the community (not just learning from experience, as is presented in Dewey’s work).

Stoecker (2016) also advocates that conceptual frameworks for service-learning and community engagement lift up social movements and activism from the 1960s and 1970s as essential to the history of service-learning:

Consider for a moment that perhaps the best higher education service learning done in the history of the United States was done under the label of “student activism.” This was service learning that was intellectually rich and explicitly civically engaged – in other words, political and unabashedly focused on social
change. And it was massively widespread…. This engaged learning rarely got credit in the classroom. (p. 15)

This historical framework feels especially applicable to the current study, as several of study participants were drawn to terms like “activism” and “community organizing” as descriptors of their work with Bridging Communities.

In sum, the conceptual framework for the current study draws on more than just Dewey, but also draws on the influences of the settlement house movement and social movements from the 1960s and 1970s. While Dewey can be leaned on for elevating the importance of experiential education and experiential learning, the history of settlement houses and student activism can provide the roots for much of how Bridging Communities views systems of power and privilege.4

With these perspectives in mind, this project will draw from several streams of literature, including critical service-learning (e.g., Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Butin, 2008, 2010; Mitchell, 2005, 2008; Rhoads, 1997) and Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) chordal triad theory of agency. These streams frame the study’s focus on service-learning and civic agency. They compliment one another in offering a comprehensive framework for the development of agency within larger systems of oppression and injustice.

While these literatures inform this research, they do not confine or restrain the project. One of the most exciting aspects of qualitative research, in-depth interviewing in particular, is the way it makes space for participants to make meaning of their experiences. In the analysis of the data, the above-mentioned theories will inform the findings (deductive), but themes will also be allowed to emerge from the voices of the

---

4 See Chapters 2 and 3 of Stoecker’s (2016) book for a fascinating investigation and unpacking of the theoretical frameworks of institutionalized service learning.
student leaders (inductive). The latter is in line with Merriam’s (1988) recommendations for case study methodology, which emphasize inductive theme development from findings.

Ultimately, this research explores the development of agency in student-initiated community engagement and offers recommendations for ways that critical service-learning approaches can expand to inspire student agency at all levels of service-learning and community engagement work.

**A Note about Language: Community Engagement and Service-Learning**

Language and naming are dynamic and ever-changing, and names have significance and power. When I first began this project, I preferred the term *service-learning*, only using the term *community engagement* on a limited basis. Early drafts of the manuscript were littered with the term “service-learning,” and it was the prominent term used in my research questions, and subsequently in the interviews.

As the research process unfolded and I continued working in the field, I began to question centrality of the word *service* in “service-learning”. Butin (2010) writes that practitioners and scholars working from a political perspective are going to question the concept of service critically and may “balk at the seemingly patronizing label of service-learning as being just that, service” (p. 11). While Butin interrogates the practice more so than the term, I wondered if the label *service-learning* was patronizing too. As data analysis unfolded and I neared completion of this project, the questions and doubts became louder and louder.

Consequently, I revised this manuscript in the final stages of writing. *Service-learning* is still used throughout the paper, as it is a key search term for the field. With
that reality, I use the phrase *service-learning and community engagement* and the acronym SLCE. However, I elected to change the name “student-initiated service-learning” to “student-initiated community engagement” to broaden the category and to describe the work of Bridging Communities in terms the participants might feel more comfortable with. In the final chapter, I discuss and reflect on naming and considerations for the field moving forward.

**Significance**

In recent years, a call has been made to focus on agency in education and in service-learning in particular (e.g., Boyte, 2007, 2008; Boyte & Mehaffy, 2008). While several studies focus on students’ sense of agency (e.g., Youniss & Yates, 1997) and efficacy (e.g., Beaumont, 2008, 2010), more can be learned about how students come to see their own agency through their service-learning and community engagement experiences. In turn, we know very little about student-initiated community engagement efforts. The current project explores and seeks to learn from this unique approach to service-learning and community engagement.

In addition, calls for future research in service-learning and community engagement suggest shifting a focus from outcomes to incorporating and informing theory (Kahne, 2008). The qualitative nature of this project will allow for a deeper exploration of “how and why” questions, as opposed to “what” questions. More specifically, this project unpacks the layers of students’ understandings of their agency as well as how their involvement in student-initiated projects interweaves with their development of agency. Through such an exploration, implications for theories about student agency in service-learning and community engagement can emerge.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This study explores how student leaders in Bridging Communities, a student-initiated community engagement program, made meaning of their experiences in the program and their development of agency. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature relevant to the exploration of agency in student-initiated community engagement efforts. The chapter starts with definitions, specifically the terms service-learning, community engagement, and agency. I will briefly review the philosophy of critical service-learning, focusing specifically on its conceptualizations of power and agency. In connection to critical service-learning, student-initiated community engagement will be defined and described. The later part of the chapter will present empirical research on service-learning and community engagement and the concept of agency as well as related notions of efficacy, empowerment and activism.

Service-Learning and Community Engagement: Definitions

Defining service-learning and community engagement is contested terrain. One often-cited definition of service-learning is that of Bringle and Hatcher (1995), that service-learning is

a course-based, credit-bearing, educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

In this view, service-learning is seen as a curricular and pedagogical practice that integrates service into coursework. In a broader definition, Furco (1996) refers to service-learning as an umbrella term that encompasses academic and co-curricular activities. This
continuum approach presents “service-centered” work such as community service at one end of a continuum and activities that could be perceived as more “learning-centered,” i.e., internships, at the other end. Morton’s (1995) landmark conceptual article on service-learning differentiates between a range of thick and thin service-learning approaches, as well as charity, project, and social change orientations, to exhibit the complexity of a definition of service-learning. Ultimately, the field of service-learning encompasses a broad range of notions and approaches.

Butin (2010) proposes that rather than settling on one definition for service-learning, we should consider it to consist of four different perspectives – technical, cultural, political, and antifoundational. While such perspectives are not completely isolated from one another, exploring service-learning in this way can offer important insights for scholars and practitioners. The process and goal of each perspective is different. Each approach leads to different “implications for how we understand faculty buy-in, student engagement, community involvement, and a host of other critical components of the institutionalization and transformative power of service-learning in higher education” (Butin, p. 8).

When the Carnegie Foundation designed an elective classification for community engagement in 2005, they developed a definition for community engagement that is now used by many in the field (Kniffin & Clayton, 2017; Saltmarsh & Johnson, 2018). The Carnegie definition, as explained by Saltmarsh and Johnson (2018), includes two parts: the first focuses on the processes of engagement and the second on the purposes. Central to the standards of the [Carnegie] classification is that partnership relationships between the campus and the community are characterized by collaboration, reciprocity, and mutuality. (p. 3-4)
In that spirit, Saltmarsh and Johnson emphasize that community engagement is not meant to encompass all things community-focused, externally facing, or experientially-based. Rather, the Carnegie definition focuses on “activities across the campus that embody the characteristics of engagement and that directly impact the educational experiences of students, the scholarly work of faculty, and/or align with and reinforce both” (p. 4). This definition would encompass service-learning experiences as defined earlier in this section; it could also encompass community-based research projects that may occur within or outside the bounds of credit-bearing courses.

While acknowledging the range of definitions possible and the weight that each definition carries, I will point to both Bringle and Hatcher’s (1995) definition of service-learning and the Carnegie definition of community engagement for the purposes of this project. This is because Bridging Communities, the case for this qualitative project, utilizes a credit-bearing course that includes reflective components. In turn, Bridging Communities is “grounded in the qualities of reciprocity, mutual respect, shared authority, and cocreation of goals and outcomes” (Saltmarsh & Johnson, 2018, p. 4). Butin’s (2010) recommendations for considering four perspectives of the term service-learning will be revisited in Chapter 6.

**Toward a Theory of Agency**

The idea of agency “has maintained an elusive, albeit resonant, vagueness” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962). This ambiguity is not clarified by the many terms it has been attributed to, such as “selfhood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962). Rather, its connection to this range of terms can make it more difficult to understand.
Boyte and Mehaffy (2008) define agency as “the capacities of human communities and groups to act cooperatively and collectively across common problems and challenges” (p. 3). In other words, agency is the ability of people to work for change. Boyte (2008) considers agency in a civic context: working for change for the public good and the benefit of society as a whole, rather than solely for personal benefit. Youniss and Yates (1997) define agency as “a sense that one can make a difference in society” (p. ix). In a nod to Erikson’s (1968) theory of identity development, they cite agency as one of three core principles of identity (the other two being social relatedness and political-moral understanding). Youniss, McLellan, and Yates (1997) later connect agency to the concept of civic identity, which they describe as including “the establishment of individual and collective senses of social agency, responsibility for society, and political and moral awareness “ (p. 620).

In their critique of social theories of education, Aranowitz and Giroux (1985) assert that numerous theories exist focusing on the ways schools reproduce the injustices of society, but few theorize about the role of human agency and people working to resist reproduction. In line with these criticisms, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) critique the broader notion of agency as one that “tends to remain so tightly bound to structure that one loses sight of the different ways in which agency actually shapes social action” (p. 963). A theory of agency is useful to fully explore the role of the individual and groups in working for change and in resisting reproduction.

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5 In recent years, scholars and practitioners at Indiana University Purdue University-Indiana (IUPUI) have focused on civic identity and the civic-minded graduate. See, for example, Bringle, Studer, Wilson, Clayton, & Steinberg, 2011, and Steinberg, Hatcher, & Bringle, 2011.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) offer a theory of agency that considers the role of the individual within a larger system and explores the process of how one takes action. A key component of their theory is the role of time and the ways human agency ebbs and flows in relationship to time. They define agency as:

the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (p. 970)

In other words, agency is a notion in which people, bounded by time, work to maintain and alter their environments as a response to social problems. Their theory is also cognizant of how time is culturally situated: “it matters to what degree they understand time as something fixed and determinate, or conversely, as something open and negotiable” (p. 985, Emphasis in the original).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) focus on the role of time within human agency and the dynamic unfixed nature of engagement. Their theory offers a chordal triad of agency consisting of the components iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation. These components correspond with three temporal orientations of action: past, present, and future. Emirbayer and Mische explore the interplay of structure and agency, rather than seeing them as somehow opposite or, on the other hand, related in direct and measurable ways. The elements of the chordal triad theory of agency will be expanded upon next.

Past-oriented Agency: The Iterational Element

The iterational element comprises the way a person’s past experiences and habits impact their current actions. Often associated with terms such as “routines, dispositions,
preconceptions, competences, schemas, patterns, typifications, and traditions” (p. 975), this element is the more fixed of the three elements. The iteration may be so hidden as to be unconscious from the actor and yet is crucial in setting one’s direction. Past-oriented agency plays an important role in shaping expectations of the actor, “the sense that ‘I can do it again’” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 981). These expectations have a huge impact on burnout: if a person does not believe s/he can keep doing the work, whatever it is, his or her sense of agency will decrease. “The maintenance work that goes into sustaining expectations has practical as well as ontological importance, allowing not only for a sense of consistent identity amidst change, but also for social coordination within contingent and interdependent environments” (p. 981).

The connection of past-oriented agency and reproduction can be seen in theories of agency such as those by Willis (1977) and Fine (1982). In both Willis’ study of working-class youth and Fine’s study of high school dropouts, youth rejected dominant paths of education. For Willis’ “lads,” their rejection of mental labor in exchange of the manual labor valued by their communities was an act of resistance and yet served to reproduce class structures already in place. The high school dropouts in Fine’s study were academically on par with their classmates and had a critical view of the political climate of the institution, yet their act of resistance – dropping out – disconnected them from avenues that could lead to their own empowerment. As Aranowitz and Giroux (1985) describe, “By leaving school, these students placed themselves in a structural position that cuts them off from political and social avenues conducive to the task of radical reconstruction” (p. 93).
In these cases, the “iterational dimension remains primary, since choices continue to reflect a deeper stratum of culturally and social-psychologically rooted predispositions, thereby contributing to the reproduction of social structures” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 982). In turn, the iterational dimension provides a real blend of social structures, personal experiences and personal psychology, time, and context. Theories of resistance and agency then are not in contrast to structure but within the bounds of structure and reproduction; this corresponds to Aranowitz and Giroux’s (1985) call for new theories of resistance and agency that better consider and honor theories of reproduction.

**Future-oriented Agency: The Projective Dimension**

Many contemporary theories of agency focus on past-oriented agency and notions of habit. Through that lens people are seen as being stuck in their habits and traditions and less able to change themselves or to work for change on a societal level. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that people in fact can change:

> As they respond to the challenges and uncertainties of social life, actors are capable of distancing themselves (at least in partial exploratory ways) from schemas, habits, and traditions that constrain social identities and institutions. This capacity … enables them to reconstruct and innovate upon those traditions in accordance with evolving desires and purposes. (p. 983)

Because of the possibility for change and growth, the projective element of agency is critical.

The future-oriented element of agency is “an interactive, culturally embedded process by which social actors negotiate their paths toward the future, receiving their driving impetus from the conflicts and challenges of social life” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 984). The essence of this element is in the imagined, the possible, the hypothesis, or the ways that actors are working to change their past patterns by imagining
how they might respond differently to situations presented to them. These projections are how actors imagine their world can be different.

The projective element is the mediator between past-oriented and present-oriented agency. While one envisions future possibilities, one reflects on past experiences – what Emirbayer and Mische call *anticipatory identification*. This identification process can help “clarify motives, goals, and intentions, to locate possible future constraints” (p. 989). Beyond this reflective component, the projective element consists of three aspects: *narrative construction* (imagining possible scenarios); *symbolic recomposition* (considering how one can reframe past approaches in new and different ways); and *hypothetical resolution* (narrowing down to one or two possible approaches for action). The projective element ends in action – what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) call *experimental enactment*.

**Present-oriented Agency: The Practical-Evaluative Dimension**

In the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, people make decisions about what actions to take. Ultimately, past-oriented agency (habits) and future-oriented agency (imagination) lead to this moment. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) emphasize that context matters here: in light of this, terms such as “practical wisdom, prudence, art, tact, discretion, application, improvisation, and intelligence” have been used to describe this element.

The practical-evaluative dimension is multifaceted, connected to a range of issues including judgment, consciousness, and notions that we are all connected and at the same time subjected to “restrictive notions of gendered identities and social positions,” or structure (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 997). This dimension is also connected to
creativity and abilities to be “clever” (p. 997) and “calculated” (p. 997) while also being intentional about our actions. Ultimately, as the projective dimension consisted of three elements, present-oriented agency consists of three: problematization (recognizing that there is a problem that needs addressing), decision (deciding what to do, relying on scenarios imagined in the projective dimension), and execution.

The Chordal Triad in Concert: How the Three Dimensions Relate

As noted earlier, Aranowitz and Giroux (1985) call for theories of agency that are dialectic, that explore the relationship of agency to structure and propose modifications of theories of reproduction that allow for people to be agents of change rather than static participants in a fixed system. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) attempt to describe the various components of agency in relationship to time as well as in relationship to structure.

For Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency is not completely disassociated from the past, and is connected to structure and the ways we as individuals are a part of a larger system. The goal for exploring agency, according to their theory, is not to place agency and structure at opposing ends or to see them as directly related, but rather to consider how their relationship is dynamic and ever-changing:

[A]s actors alter or shift between their agentic orientations, dialogically reconstructing the internal composition of their chordal triad, they may increase or decrease their capacity for invention, choice, and transformative impact in relation to the situational contexts within which they act. (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1003)

Ultimately, the nature of agency is constantly evolving as we shift our focus amongst the three elements of agency. As the emphasis shifts between past-, present-, and future-oriented agency, our tendency to act and the ways we act are affected.
Emirbayer and Mische (1998) also draw an important distinction between *agency* and *action*. Agency, or the capacity to act, differs from taking action itself. Emirbayer and Mische argue that while agency and action shape one another, they can still be isolated for exploration. Importantly, though, agency is always a part of action-taking; “hence there are no concrete agents, but only actors who engage agentically with their structuring environments” (p. 1004). Agency “guarantees that empirical social action will never be *completely* determined or structured” but “there is no hypothetical moment in which agency actually gets ‘free’ of structure” (p. 1004).

To better understand agency in the context of service-learning and community engagement, I point to specific examples of civic actions that may result as one develops a greater sense of agency. Agency, Youniss and Yates (1997) posit, consists of political and moral actions like voting, joining special-interest organizations, discussing political issues, working to protect local communities, and changing environmental conditions for health and safety. There are thousands of such actions that adults typically take collectively. … Such actions count because they determine political outcomes, such as elections of local boards, and determine how people perceive the society in which they live. These perceptions, in turn, become grounds for actions because they motivate individuals to collective behavior they might not otherwise pursue. (p. 28)

Ginwright (2008) cautions that much of the research on civic engagement and civic actions utilizes a narrow conception of actions, particularly emphasizing voting patterns and organizational involvement. This narrow conception often ignores actions of youth of color in poor communities, hence characterizing them as uninvolved. A broader conception of action might also include “using YouTube to document and expose poor school conditions, or organizing peers to walkout of school using [social media]” (Ginwright, 2009, p. 44).
Summary

Kahne (2008) argues that the bulk of research on service-learning focuses on outcomes at the expense of theory. Exploring the relevance of Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) theory of agency to service-learning experiences may offer an interesting window into not only asking if students develop a sense of agency but how and why this does or does not develop. In turn, connecting an exploration of agency to student-initiated community engagement programs can offer more insight into this unique and exciting approach to service-learning and community engagement practice.

Power, Agency, and Structure in Education

Merriam-Webster (2012) defines power as the “ability to act or produce an effect,” and the “legal or official, authority, capacity, or right… possession of control, authority, or influence over others.” These definitions present power as something coming from an individual, as well as something bigger and more ambiguous, coming from institutions and governments.

The way power is understood has a huge impact on how one approaches conversations about the relationship between power and agency. If power is considered to be a bottom-up notion, power and agency can be overlapping concepts: “people power” and agency could be one and the same under some views of agency. On the other hand, if we consider power from a more structuralist perspective, power comes from above and potentially eliminates or overshadows human agency.

Many social theories of education (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Gramsci, 1971) focus more on structure at the expense of human agency. In most reproductive theories, for example, schools are seen as spaces that reproduce the dominant structures and

> The educational system helps integrate youth into the economic system, we believe, through a structural correspondence between its social relations and those of production… Different levels of education feed workers into different levels within the occupational structure and, correspondingly, tend toward an internal organization comparable to levels in the hierarchical division of labor. As we have seen, the lowest levels in the hierarchy of the enterprise emphasize rule-following, middle levels, dependability, and the capacity to operate without direct and continuous supervision while the higher levels stress the internalization of the norms of the enterprise. [This is similar] in education. (pp. 130-131)

Thus, there is a vertical connection between schooling and the system of production, with schools preparing students, primarily based on social class and other markers such as race, for specific labor roles. Importantly, the hidden curriculum, the curriculum below the curriculum, teaches this classed system to students. Examples of this curriculum include tracking and various behavioral expectations based on a student’s “level” (p. 131).

Giroux (1983) and Aranowitz and Giroux (1985), along with Boyte (2007), have critiqued reproductive theories for disempowering the individual. By considering power to be structural rather than individual, human beings are simply part of the system and incapable of changing it. Giroux (1983) writes:

> [P]ower is a characteristic of structures that not only constitute and position human behavior, but that deny the very efficacy of human agency. Put another way, it is the force of material practices and the constituting social relations they produce that, in this case, reduce human beings to props or supports of structurally determined roles. (p. 129)

In this view, individuals are less agents of change than subject to predetermined roles and structures. In contrast to this framing of power, Boyte (2007) argues that power can be in
the hands of the people just as it can be in the hands of institutions and larger governmental entities. It can be “what people do in reciprocal interactions to get things done” (Boyte, p. 14).

**Notions of Power in Service-Learning and Community Engagement**

Service-learning has been praised for a range of student outcomes, yet traditional approaches to service-learning have been critiqued for ignoring structural systems of power. Butin (2010) describes traditional approaches as focusing more on individual students and notions that individual students can “help” communities “in need”. Butin lays out the power dynamics in service-learning as follows:

(a) volunteer activities done by

(b) individual students with high cultural capital

(c) for the sake of

(d) individuals with low cultural capital

(e) within the context of an academic class

(f) with ameliorative consequences. (p. 6)

Such a framework has led to what Gilbride-Brown (2008) calls a “victory narrative” – the idea that service-learning supports the learning of all students and is to the benefit of all communities.

Critical service-learning scholarship draws attention to the numerous power relationships that lie below this framework. Broadly speaking, critical service-learning possesses three thematic aspects that make it different from traditional approaches to service-learning (Mitchell, 2005). These themes include a focus on social change, analyzing power structures within society at large, and attention to mutuality or
reciprocity in relationships between community and colleges/universities (Mitchell, 2008). Critical service-learning scholars advocate for a social justice or justice-learning approach that emphasizes the “four r’s” – *respect* for all parties involved, *reciprocity* with community partners, *relevance* of the service activities to the curriculum and coursework, and *reflection* as a means of connecting the service to the curriculum and thinking more deeply about the issues involved (Butin, 2007).\(^6\)

For the purposes of this project, I am particularly interested in the way critical service-learning conceptualizes power relationships. This is most clearly seen in how the field encourages analysis and exploration of the distribution of power in society. Much of the focus in critical service-learning scholarship has been on the treatment of the community by the university and students – service-learning has been “labeled as charity or ‘forced volunteerism,’ critiqued for reinforcing already established hierarchies, and deemed paternalistic” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 12; e.g., Boyle-Baise, 1998, Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, Sleeter, 2002).

Beyond considering university-community power dynamics, critical service-learning tends to embrace the tenets of critical pedagogy, namely the notion of power in relation to the individual’s positionality. Rhoads (1997) describes the notion of positionality within critical pedagogy:

> One of the central goals of critical education is to help students recognize their positionality and how various forces mitigate their ability to develop critical consciousness. Such a level of consciousness is necessary for students to write their own histories and to transform their social worlds… Coming to terms with positionality of students, as well as teachers becomes part of the intellectual and reflective process involved in teaching and learning. (p. 212)

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\(^6\) For a more detailed overview of critical service-learning and its major tenets, see Mitchell, 2008.
Critical service-learning encourages students to explore their positionality in relation to each other and to members of the community where they serve. In some respects, service-learning practitioners also encourage students to consider their positionality to authority – instructors, administrators, staff – although, as Zlotkowski, Longo, and Williams (2006) point out, less attention is paid to this power dynamic.

Positionality between student and teacher, as well as students and administrators is of particular interest in this project. In his book, *When Students Have Power*, Shor (1996) describes a teaching experiment where he attempted to facilitate student empowerment in his classroom. Rather than beginning the semester with a fixed syllabus, assignments, and attendance expectations, he invited his students to take control. This experiment, which Shor describes as “unfamiliar, non-standardized, counterhegemonic, localized pedagogy” (p. 122), resulted in a near collapse of the course. One student, for example, pushed him on his attendance policy, questioning why she even needed to be in the classroom at all. Ultimately, Shor finds that power-sharing with his students offers them “great responsibility for their educations, which can translate into a more intense relationship between them and the learning process” (p. 199). He contends that such power-sharing is valuable for a democratic society: “The reinvention of power is thus a contingent ideal and an unpredictable experiment appropriate for education in a society that calls itself democratic and may yet become so” (p. 200).

While critical service-learning approaches rely on the tenets of critical pedagogy, more is to be learned about the role of students in service-learning classrooms. An exploration of student-initiated and student-run courses and programs can offer critical
service-learning scholars and practitioners important insight into student power much in the way Shor (1996) explored through his teaching experiment.

**Student-Initiated Community Engagement**

While much of the literature on critical service-learning focuses on power within the university-community partnership, less is known about the ways students take on power-sharing in service-learning classrooms and community engagement programs. A few service-learning scholars (e.g., Zlotkowski, Longo, & Williams, 2006; Mitchell, 2005) have considered the importance of students within service-learning arrangements, encouraging practitioners to explore ways to diversify the roles of students, catapulting them into leadership positions as supervisors at community sites, teaching assistants in the classroom, and staff in campus offices. The most extensive attention paid to the subject is by Zlotkowski, Longo, and Williams (2006) in their edited volume, *Students as Colleagues*. In their introduction to the volume, Zlotkowski et al. argue that service-learning will not reach its full potential in higher education until students are brought into leadership and collegial roles. Their edited volume provides extensive descriptions of programs that have utilized students in a range of leadership roles.

For the purposes of this project, I am defining student-initiated community engagement in broad terms. It is an umbrella term including any service-learning/community engagement effort initiated by students. Two examples of such

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7 More recently, Longo and Gibson (2011) edited the book, *From Command to Community: A New Approach to Leadership Education in Colleges and Universities*. The book showcases the power and potential of community-engaged leadership as an important pathway for leadership education on college campuses, in addition to more traditional leadership education offered through student affairs. While there are certainly parallels with this volume and the work of student-initiated community engagement like Bridging Communities, it takes a broader look at leadership opportunities and leadership education within service-learning and community engagement. It is an informative volume and offers many promising practices about community-engaged student leadership.
efforts include the Alternative Spring Break program based at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (Addes & Keene, 2006) and the Student Teaching Students (STS) initiative of LEAD USA in Williamstown, MA (Dillon & Van Riper, 1993). Addes and Keene (2006) describe the Alternative Spring Break Program as a “professorless classroom” (p. 229) where student leaders design curriculum and teach each class meeting. Based on Freirean notions of praxis and shared learning environments, student leaders model that students possess the power and potential to teach and to lead reflection on service-learning experiences. In STS (Dillon & Van Riper, 1993), students design and teach their own service-learning courses. Students undergo a rigorous course development process by consulting with a working committee and with supportive faculty members. Students also conduct assessment and evaluation of their courses. In both examples, students take on leadership at the instructor level, as well as in other capacities such as connecting with community partners. Both projects are directed by non-student staff (i.e., faculty or, in the case of LEAD USA, staff at an off-campus non-profit organization), yet do rely on student-input at all levels of functioning.

Bridging Communities, the program in focus for this project, is the extreme version of the projects presented in Zlotkowski et al.’s (2006) volume on student leadership in service-learning. Bridging Communities was not only initiated by students, but is run by students and funded by students. Student leaders in the Bridging Communities program develop curriculum, administer the program, and receive funding from student government, which allows them a great deal of autonomy within the university. While students may seek advice from faculty and staff, the creation, maintenance, and destiny of this student-initiated program is in the hands of students.
The name “Student-Initiated Community Engagement” is a nod to student-initiated retention projects (SIRPs; Maldonado, 2010; Rhoads, Buenavista, & Maldonado, 2004; Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). Rhoads, Buenavista, and Maldonado (2004) describe SIRPs as student-initiated efforts by students of color to increase retention and persistence of students of color on college campus. But more than being student-initiated, SIRPs tend to be student-run and student-funded as well. SIRPs are quite diverse in their goals and intentions, including projects that target outreach to students on academic probation, projects that include credit-bearing courses exploring admissions, and projects focusing on peer tutoring and mentoring. By connecting the college experience to racial and ethnic identities, students empower each other, find community, and succeed academically. In a sense, student-initiated community engagement could be seen as a version of student-initiated retention work. This is particularly true for Bridging Communities because a major goal of the program is to recruit underrepresented students from the surrounding community and to retain students of color currently on campus.

Student-initiated community engagement can have broad implications for the role of students in service-learning efforts. With that in mind, it is valuable to situate service-learning and community engagement efforts, student-initiated or not, within the academic sphere. As Zlotkowski et al. (2006) write in their introduction to Students as Colleagues:

[I]t is critically important to understand that what we here propose and document does not in any way imply a retreat from service-learning as a fully legitimate academic undertaking. To deepen its academic and social impact and to further the process of its institutionalization, we suggest that we revisit the roles students can and should play in making service-learning an essential feature of American higher education. (para. 6)
In other words, I do not advocate repositioning service-learning and community engagement to student affairs. Instead, I offer an exploration of student-initiated community engagement as a way to consider the diversity of approaches to service-learning and the potential of such a project. This is particularly important if student-initiated community engagement has the potential to foster agency amongst students who might not traditionally be involved in service-learning on campus, particularly students of color and first-generation college students (Gilbride-Brown, 2008).

**Service-Learning: Empirical Findings**

More than two decades of research have amassed numerous findings regarding positive impacts of service-learning. This “victory narrative” (Gilbride-Brown, 2008) of service-learning frames both community service and service-learning as means for students to gain academic skills and learning outcomes; personal and social outcomes, including increased sense of agency; and relationships to institutions, such as retention and persistence. This section will briefly review these findings, with a closer look at findings around agency and related concepts including efficacy, empowerment, and activism.

While several definitions of service-learning, community service, and civic engagement weave in and out of research, one consistent quality seems to hold across all definitions – the positive impacts of involvement on students. In the third edition of “At A Glance,” a report summarizing the large body of service-learning research, Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray (2001) list a multitude of positive outcomes. For example, in regards to personal and social outcomes, service-learning positively impacts interpersonal relationships, leadership skills, communication skills, and understanding of identity (e.g.,
Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000; Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jones & Abes, 2004). Studies by Eyler and Giles (1999), as well as research out of the Higher Education Research Institute (i.e., Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000) report service-learning and community service’s positive impacts on grade point averages, on the ability to connect academic content to daily life, and on academic learning overall. These findings hint at the victory narrative of service-learning – that it is an effective pedagogy for students, faculty, institutions, and, for the most part, community partners.

There are glimmers under the surface, however, that hint at a different reality. For example, while much of the literature on service-learning reports that students develop an appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1997; Astin & Sax, 1998), some scholars report that service-learning can lead to a greater application of blame on community members, often working-class people and people of color, for the injustices they experience (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; O’Grady, 2000; O’Grady & Chappell, 2000). In turn, Mitchell and Donahue (2009) found that students of color can grow increasingly frustrated in predominantly white service-learning college classrooms. As their chapter title attests, students feel as though they are “do[ing] more service” in class than in the community, as they work to educate their peers about their misconceptions of the community.

In addition to these concerns, concepts are defined differently across studies. Personal outcomes in particular are not defined consistently and studies show mixed results, even contradictory ones. Gilbride-Brown (2008) writes that “concepts like personal efficacy, citizenship development, or cultural competence are [often] unclear…. 
[which] paints a confusing picture” (pp. 41-42). This conflation is exemplified in the varying definitions of agency, efficacy, empowerment, and activism are defined.

Figure 1 illustrates my attempt to tease apart these terms.

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**Efficacy**

“people’s subjective level of skill mastery, confidence in general abilities, and persistence” (Knapp et al., 2010, p. 238, Footnote 1)

*Political efficacy*: “the belief that political change is possible and that we have the capacity to contribute to it through deliberate judgments and actions” (Beaumont, 2010, p. 525)

**Empowerment**

“the confidence that people can join with others in organized efforts to have a positive impact on local conditions or community problems” (Knapp et al, 2010, p. 238)

**Agency**

“the capacities of human communities and groups to act cooperatively and collectively across common problems and challenges” (Boyte & Mehaffy, 2008, p. 3)

**Action**

- Examples of civic action include “political behaviors such as voting, joining special-interest organizations, discussing political issues, working to protect local communities, and changing environmental conditions for health and safety” (Youniss & Yates, 1997, p. 28).

- Ginwright (2008) encourages inclusion of additional examples such as “using YouTube to document and expose poor school conditions, or organizing peers to walkout of school using My Space” (p. 44) as a way to capture involvement of youth of color in poor communities.

Figure 1: The relationships between efficacy, empowerment, agency, and action.
In the figure, efficacy and empowerment are at the top of the flow chart, indicating that they influence a person’s sense of agency; agency, in turn, influences action. Activism is not a part of the figure because activism is more of an orientation that can overlay over the other constructs.

In the sections that follow, I will share findings on connections between service-learning and personal outcomes of agency, efficacy, empowerment, and activism, in an attempt to tease apart the constructs while also exploring overlaps.

Service-Learning and Agency

Research on service-learning has shown mixed results regarding how service-learners see themselves as agents of change within their communities. One prominent investigation of service and agency was conducted by Youniss and Yates (1997), resulting in their landmark book, Community Service and Social Responsibility in Youth. Using Erikson’s (1967) theory of identity development as a foundation, Youniss and Yates consider the relationship between youth identity development and community and political participation. Through their investigation of the experiences of a group of high school students engaged in service-learning, they theorize that community service involvement leads to, as Kahne and Sport (2008) describe, “opportunities for Agency (as students respond to social problems), Social Relatedness (as students join with others to respond to a societal need) and Political-Moral Understanding (as students reflect on and discuss the relationship between what is and what should be)” (p. 6). Ultimately Youniss and Yates (1997) argue that “gaining a sense of agency and feeling responsible for addressing society’s problems are distinguishing elements that mark mature social identity” (p. 36).
Written reflections from the students in Youniss and Yates’ (1997) study support their theoretical framing of identity and agency. Students recalled their service-learning experience, a social justice religion course on homelessness, as a key milestone in their development. The course “roused sensitivity to poverty, the distribution of wealth, the humanity underneath the dirtiness of homelessness, and the possibility within these alumni to be part of the solution instead of passive observers to society’s problems” (p. 132). The course experience remained prominent in the memories of all of the participants, even if they disagreed with the social ideology of the course or, in the years after the course, did not continue to volunteer in the community. The impact of the course is reflected in the words of one participant, written six years later:

Was a lasting impact made upon me…? I do not pass a homeless person without emptying my pockets. I do not stay silent when someone starts making fun of gays. I make sure to vote when a measure of gun control comes up…. I don’t know where my Chemistry 101 book is but my social justice book is still on my shelf. (Participant 212, quoted in Yates & Youniss, p. 134)

While the work of Youniss and Yates (1997) shows a positive relationship between service and the development of agency, Miller (1997) was surprised to find a different result – a negative relationship between participation in a semester-long service-learning course and students’ views of their agency (rather than use agency, Miller uses the term power or the ability to make a difference). Students in Miller’s study reported a significant reduction in their sense of agency. When he disaggregated the data, Miller found that one subgroup, male students of color who were sophomores and social science majors, showed the largest drop. Miller does not see this as a downside to the practice of

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8 This is an excellent example of Gilbride-Brown’s (2008) concerns regarding inconsistent definitions for terms related to personal outcomes. I have renamed Miller’s “power” as agency because his definition is the same as Youniss and Yates’ (1997) definition of agency
service-learning. Rather, Miller reframes this reduction as a benefit – that service-learning can offer students a developmentally appropriate intervention and shift them from an idealistic to a realistic view of their place in society.

I am troubled by this last finding in particular: the notion that a service-learning course resulting in students seeing themselves as having less agency is a good thing. Why would that be a good thing? Why would it be a positive outcome for students, male students of color in particular, to walk away from a course experience accepting their their lack of agency within society? In my view, this can be seen as good only if we see service-learning and community engagement as a victorious pedagogy, as only producing good. I, however, do not believe this finding to be good; rather, I wonder if it reflects a flaw in our work, in our pedagogy, and in our ability to empower all students in our classrooms.

**Service-Learning, Efficacy, and Empowerment**

The victory narrative – that the majority of personal outcomes for service-learning students are positive – extends to findings around efficacy. Using Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data, Astin and Sax (1999) found that a range of outcomes, including efficacy, were positively related to involvement in service during college. Using additional CIRP data to investigate the long-term impacts of service involvement ten years after college entry, Astin, Sax, and Avalos (1999) again found a positive relationship between service involvement and a range of outcomes, including sense of efficacy.

In recent years there has been increasing attention paid to the relationship between service-learning and political efficacy. Much of this stems from mixed-methods research
by Beaumont (2010, 2011) and her colleagues on political engagement, which includes service-learning as well as political discussion, relationship-building with leaders and activists, internships, and even role-playing. Beaumont (2010, 2011) focuses on the development of sociopolitical learning and its relationship to political efficacy, or “the belief that political change is possible and that we have the capacity to contribute to it through deliberate judgments and actions” (p. 525). Efficacy, according to Beaumont, is a major component of agency.

The research on sociopolitical learning is extensive, but there is one finding in particular that has important implications for an investigation of student-initiated community engagement. Beaumont (2010) found that various pathways of sociopolitical learning can lead to the development of efficacy and can work to increase the efficacy of groups who tend to show lower levels of political efficacy, such as women and people from working class and poor backgrounds. Interestingly, the pathway of “political action skills” seems to have the greatest effects on increasing efficacy, even equalizing it amongst all groups. Beaumont writes:

Finding ways to emphasize political skills that help students work collaboratively and incrementally toward concrete political goals – organizing a group, running a meeting, getting publicity, lobbying political institutions – seem to offer the greatest potential for enhancing both greater political efficacy overall and enhancing political equality by making efficacy achievement less dependent on background assets. (p. 229)

Beaumont’s finding about political action skills has important implications for student-initiated community engagement, particularly programs that engage in teaching students such skills and providing them the opportunity to practice such skills. Student leaders in Bridging Communities, for example, have the opportunity to engage in all of the practices that Beaumont describes – organizing, lobbying, running meetings, marketing,
etc., in addition to other political strategizing such as collaborating with other student groups regionally and nationally. If Beaumont’s findings hold true, the combination of the political activities of Bridging Communities’ work and the identities of program participants, who are mostly women and people from underrepresented groups, would lead to their increased efficacy as a result of their participation in the program.

In addition to findings about efficacy, the notion of empowerment has been shown to be positively related to involvement in service-learning. As Figure 1 indicates, the concepts of empowerment and efficacy have a direct impact on agency. While agency is the ability to take action, empowerment and efficacy have to do more with a person’s confidence to take action. Knapp, Fisher, and Levesque-Bristol (2010) construct efficacy as a more individualistic notion – thinking one is capable of making change to oneself as well as supporting other individuals. Empowerment relates more to working for change within a group context, defined as “the confidence that people can join with others in organized efforts to have a positive impact on local conditions or community problems” (p. 238). Some studies (e.g., Munter, 2002) have shown that student empowerment is an outcome of service-learning generally. Knapp et al. (2010) found that the impacts of empowerment can be long-lasting, impacting students’ sense of their future civic engagement more strongly than their sense of self-efficacy (e.g. Knapp et al., 2010). In other words, when students feel empowered they are more likely to believe they will continue to engage in their communities in the future.

Ultimately, the conceptual lines between empowerment and efficacy feel a bit blurred when trying to connect Beaumont’s (2010, 2011) notion of efficacy to Knapp et al.’s (2010) efficacy in relation to empowerment. While Knapp and colleagues see
efficacy as a more individualistic concept, Beaumont’s depiction seems to describe efficacy in a more communal context. This project will not necessarily answer the questions of how efficacy and empowerment are similar or distinct from one another. What is more important here is the ways that these concepts are related to agency. Beaumont describes efficacy as an important component to agency; indeed, empowerment too would seem to be related. How confident one feels about their ability to work for change would certainly seem to impact their actual ability to take action in their and other communities.

**Service-Learning and Activism**

“[M]ost publications on service-learning,” Bickford and Reynolds (2002) argue, “avoid the term *activism* or steer clear of the traditions of activism or grassroots political organizing” (p. 237). One could argue, however, that there is a relationship between agency and activism. Recall that we have defined agency as the tendency to act; is agency, therefore, the tendency to be activist-oriented?

It may be possible that activism is not often explored as an outcome of service-learning because of its assumed political nature. Scholars may avoid this term in an attempt to be neutral and to disconnect service-learning and community engagement from a specific agenda. Bickford and Reynolds (2002) advocate that the notion of activism can and should be interjected into service-learning work. Activism can be introduced into service-learning work by, for example, considering connection as well as difference in student-community partnerships, and focusing on the bigger picture of social problems...
and structural inequality. Such characteristics bear much in common with a critical
service-learning approach and the notion of positionality in.\(^9\)

The relationship between service-learning and activism is important to consider
when exploring the student-initiated community engagement project. Just as student-
initiated retention projects are seen as activist projects to empower students of color to
challenge power dynamics on college campuses, so too are student-initiated community
engagement projects. In a way, some participants involved in student-initiated
community engagement might argue that their participation is less service-learning and
more activism, that they do not consider themselves service-learners or as part of a
service-learning movement but rather activists working for social change.

I introduce the notion of activism here for a few reasons. One, I want to propose
that agency and activism are related concepts and that they may be components of a
larger construct. Just as agency, efficacy, and empowerment are seen to be related,
activism, or having an activist-orientation, should be part of this conceptual picture. Two,
I want to honor the likelihood that student-initiated community engagement work is often
seen as activism, not only by the students themselves but by others on campus.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Numerous scholarly efforts, primarily quantitative but also qualitative, show that
service-learning and community service involvement can lead to an array of positive
outcomes, but there is more to be learned. Much of the service-learning research to date
has focused on outcomes, at times at the expense of the development of theory. As Kahne

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\(^9\) See *Change! A Student Guide to Social Action*, Myers-Lipton’s (2017) book on developing social
activism courses for examples of academic service-learning courses that intentionally integrate student
activism with community engagement.
(2008) and Kezar (2002) argue, if outcomes overshadow attention to theory, it is much more difficult to understand the complex nature of student development.

Exploring the development of theory in addition to service-learning outcomes can be beneficial particularly when it comes to notions of power and agency in service-learning. The concept of agency, as well as empowerment, efficacy, and activism, has been described in a range of ways in the research and deserves to be teased apart. How do student leaders involved in student-initiated community engagement make meaning of their experiences and their development of agency? Do they identify the different, if nuanced, notions of agency, efficacy, empowerment and activism? What is important to them?

Learning more about student-initiated community engagement projects has much to offer. Hollander and Burack (2008) note, “We simply don’t know enough about implementation and scaling up good programs” (p. 12). Because the role of students in service-learning programming is still being explored (Zlotkowski et al., 2006), listening to the voices of students involved in student-initiated community engagement has much to yield.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Overall Design and Rationale

This phenomenological case study of a student-initiated community engagement program used qualitative research methods to better understand the lived experiences of students who were involved. Phenomenological case study methodology fits into the larger methodological framework of case study research. When using a case study strategy, the researcher aims to offer an in-depth and detailed examination of a particular organization, person, or event (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Case study research is grounded in a constructivist perspective, which cites the importance of the human experience in the creation of reality and meaning; it does not, however, ignore that notions of objectivity exist and are warranted (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Within case study methodology, methods can be qualitative and/or quantitative in nature. This investigation is characterized as a phenomenological case study because while case study is the broader approach, phenomenological in-depth interviewing (Seidman, 2006) was the primary avenue for data collection.

A case study approach was valuable to this study for a variety of reasons. Yin (2003) outlines the circumstances under which a case study approach can be utilized. First, the focus of the study should be to answer “how” and “why” questions, gathering a deep description of experiences beyond just answering “what” questions. In turn, case study can be valuable when participants’ behavior or experiences cannot be altered. Lastly, a case study approach can be useful when the context, not just the participants’
stories, are important to the study and are also not clearly distinct from the phenomenon itself.

**Selecting the Case**

Miles and Huberman (1994) define the case in case study research as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25) and the “unit of analysis” (p. 25). Going deeper into bounding a phenomenon, Baxter and Jack (2008) encourage scholars to ask: “do I want to ‘analyze’ the individual? Do I want to ‘analyze’ a program? Do I want to ‘analyze’ the process? Do I want to ‘analyze’ the difference between organizations?” (p. 546). In consideration of those questions, I defined the case in focus for this study as students involved in student-initiated community engagement, using one particular program as a context in which to gather data. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to select the case, as well as the study participants. Purposeful sampling, as described by Merriam (1998), is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). The Bridging Communities program was chosen for being a unique case, one that possesses “unique, atypical, perhaps rare attributes” (Merriam, 1998, p. 62).

This study is a case within a case: not only does it look at Bridging Communities, but more specifically the experiences of student leaders and their development of agency. The setting of student-initiated community engagement combines with the students’ experiences as participants and staff members to provide the context in which the students’ sense of agency is developed and applied. In turn, the case study is bounded in
time (Gerring, 2004), in that student leaders were asked to reflect on their experiences at a particular span of time in the organization’s existence.

**Case Description**

Housed at a large public predominantly white research university in the Northeastern United States, Bridging Communities is a student-founded, student-funded, and student-led organization that promotes college access through the college-positive\(^{10}\) tutoring and mentoring of K-12 students, as well as through other programmatic events such as college tours and trainings. The mission of Bridging Communities is “to increase college access and success for underrepresented students by building partnerships with local schools and community organizations; offering college awareness, preparation and success activities; and advocating for enhanced institutional and public policies and practices” (Program website, 2012). The program consists of several components: a yearlong credit-bearing service-learning course, retention programs for university students, policy-advocacy efforts on- and off-campus, and outreach programming including college tours for middle and high school students from surrounding communities.

**Background**

Efforts to initiate the program began in the fall of 2005. At that time, a budget vacancy was left when the university’s ALAANA (Asian, Latinx, African American, and Native American) office was relocated from under the umbrella of the student

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\(^{10}\) Massachusetts Campus Compact (2007) describes college positive as a “framework that changes the way college student volunteers think about their work with youth… [and] to understand that the question to ask is not *are* you going to college, but *where* are you going to college? … [The framework aims] to help college students understand the valuable positions they can hold as coaches, educators and advocates” (p. 12).
government to a different location on campus. To explore ways that this money could be allocated, a small group of undergraduate and graduate students began investigating possibilities for a new program that might support underrepresented students on campus. Based on feedback from interviews with a range of campus and community constituents, the group drafted a proposal for an outreach and retention program that would focus on college access, building and sustaining reciprocal community-university relationships, and on-campus efforts to support the retention of underrepresented students. The student government approved the proposal and provided funds to support a pilot of the program. Following the pilot year, the program became recognized as an agency of the student government and has since collaborated with other offices on campus to expand services. The program partners with schools and after school programs in two nearby cities that are within a thirty-minute drive from the campus, with some programs having an explicit focus on science, technology, and engineering.

**Staffing Structure**

The program depends primarily on undergraduate students for its functioning. Undergraduate students work in paid positions as program administrators (program coordinators, office manager, and accountant); site coordinators to provide direct on-site support to tutor-mentors; outreach coordinators to invite community groups to campus for tours; retention coordinators that focus on retention initiatives for university students; and policy advocacy liaisons to other campus organizations also working on the issues of college access and success. The program employs a small number of graduate students in the roles of course instructors and one as a program coordinator. A core team, consisting of two program coordinators (one undergraduate and one graduate), a faculty advisor, and
an AmeriCorps VISTA member, provides support to the staff. An advisory board consisting of students, staff, faculty, and community members offers direct oversight of the program. Importantly, the student government must approve the program’s budget annually.\footnote{This case description reflects the organizational structure up until 2017; the staffing structure has changed slightly since then.}

In addition to being student-led, the program employs and enrolls predominantly students of color, another feature that makes it different from other service-learning and community engagement programs at the same university. While the university’s student body consists of approximately 10 percent students of color, the program consistently enrolls students of color at much higher percentages, with anywhere from 50 percent or more students in the classroom representing a range of non-White races and ethnicities. Students in the program self-identify as Puerto Rican, Latino/a, Dominican, African American, Black, Cape Verdean, Middle Eastern/Arab, Bi/Multiracial, Asian American, and White.

**Program Components**

The program is able to offer trained tutor-mentors (the name the program calls its students who work with community partners) to serve students in nearby communities because of key structural elements. First, all tutor-mentors are required to enroll in a four-credit interdisciplinary service-learning course for two semesters. The fall course explores the ways race, class, and other socio-historical factors shape students’ access to public education, as well as engaging students in exploring the role of social and cultural diversity in their own lives, and reciprocal university-community relationships (Program
Course Syllabus, Fall 2009). In class meetings, graduate instructors lead students in interactive activities including large group discussions, small group discussions, and work in pairs, as well as in reflective writing activities. Out-of-class writing assignments urge students to reflect on their personal and social identities and the way these identities may or may not have influenced their personal educational histories. Outside of class, students engage in approximately six hours of tutoring and mentoring at a range of community sites, most typically working with middle school students in in-school and after school settings. The students’ performance at their tutor-mentoring site, as evaluated by a site coordinator (a student staff position, typically filled by an alumnus of the course), makes up a significant portion of their course grade at 40 percent.

The spring semester course enrolls the same group of students and shifts to focus on two components: access to higher education and participatory action research. Class readings and discussion engage students in both components. Students participate in semester-long project teams where they research a topic of interest and implement an action project, either at their community site or on the university campus. All students present their projects at the end of the semester to their peers and to members of the larger community.

Students are integrated into a very structured web of support through on-site supervision and transportation to and from their community sites. While driving students to and from site, site coordinators engage students in reflective conversations about how the course material connects to their experiences with the youth. In addition, site coordinators supervise students on site and offer pointers and suggestions as to how to effectively support the youth. Site coordinators maintain ongoing relationships with staff,
teachers, and administrators at community organizations so that Bridging Communities can best be informed as to how to continually improve university-community relationships. Finally, site coordinators, in conjunction with other program staff, offer ongoing training and support on topics such as youth empowerment, tutoring strategies, and boundary-setting. Between the support students receive in the course as well as relationships they form with site coordinators and their peers at their tutor-mentoring sites, students have a well-rounded support and supervision structure.

**Successes and Challenges**

The program has experienced both successes and challenges since its birth in 2006. The program has received state and national recognition over the years (e.g., Massachusetts Campus Compact, 2007). The student-run nature of the program is embedded in a large university structure and is often faced with bureaucracy on a number of levels, including through campus administration. Further, a reliance on full-time students who are often highly involved on campus can present challenges to the day-to-day operations of a multilayered organization. Lastly, the funding streams for the organization are somewhat complicated, made up mostly of student government funds but supplemented through various university offices and grants. The organization is asked – and asks others – who on campus should ultimately be held responsible for funding university outreach programs. Such questions, however, could ultimately threaten the very existence of the program as a student-run entity. Despite these challenges, the organization works hard to maintain its independence as a student-run entity in order to do the work it feels is most powerful for students and community partners.
Phenomenology and In-Depth Interviewing

This case study employed phenomenological methods, in-depth interviewing in particular. Phenomenological research aims to describe the lived experiences of people and how they make-meaning of their experiences. Creswell (1998) describes this as an exploration of “the structures of consciousness in human experiences” (p. 51). In phenomenology, researchers seek out the essence “or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). Researchers, in turn, work to suspend their judgment through bracketing (setting aside) or bridling (intentionally reflecting on one’s involvement with the phenomenon; Dahlberg, 2006).

In-depth interviewing “combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology” (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). Ultimately, phenomenological in-depth interviewing in this study offered a way to learn from the stories of students involved in student-initiated community engagement and to treat them as experts of their work.

The Interview Series

The interview structure followed methodology outlined by Seidman (2006) in his book, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*. Seidman advocates that the first interview consists of eliciting a life history as it relates to the phenomenon; the second involves a thick description \(^{12}\) of the phenomenon; and the third interview focuses on meaning-

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\(^{12}\) The term “thick description” is borrowed from anthropology (Geertz, 1973). A thick description is considered to be a complete description of the phenomenon in process. A thick description of a participant’s involvement in student-initiated community engagement may include recreating a “day in the
making. Through the three-interview structure, the researcher makes space for participants to tell their stories, past and present, and to reflect on the way the phenomenon in focus fits in with their life experiences. In turn, the repeated interviews, each 90 minutes long and happening ideally within a three-week period, allow for continued reflection on experiences. Rather than having one opportunity to describe their experiences in student-initiated community engagement, participants in this project had repeated opportunities to add on to their stories, go into depth about them, and offer the context for which their experiences and perspectives occurred. In addition, the length of the interview allows the participant to relax into the interview and to go into depth, rather than rushing through it for fear that time will run out.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, over the telephone, and online via Skype. Face-to-face interviews were used whenever possible. For example, the first four participants were all interviewed face-to-face during the summer months of 2011. Because the location of the last three participants varied, phone or Skype video interviews became necessary. While telephone interviewing (and, by assumption, interviews conducted online) has limitations, it is considered an adequate alternative for individual interviews (Shuy, 2002).

The three-interview series has important parallels with Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) theory of agency. As noted in Chapter 2, Emirbayer and Mische cite agency as having three orientations – past-oriented agency, or habits; future-oriented agency, or imagination; and present-oriented agency, or judgment and practical application in the present moment. The interview series provided participants with the opportunity to go

life” and describing their daily involvement in student-initiated community engagement in as much detail as possible.
into depth about various aspects of their lives, past, present, and future, thus aligning with the various elements of the theory. The first interview, for example, constituted the life history aspect of the series. Through storytelling about one’s past experiences with education, family and friends, and thoughts about identity, participants illuminated their habits and traditions. Through each of the three interviews, participants were invited to explore their habits and patterns, as well as their future-orientation/ability to imagine (particularly in interview three) and practical, present-oriented, judgment and application (particularly in interview two as well as three).

An explanation of each interview follows. For a list of interview questions and prompts for each of the three interviews, see Appendix B.

The First Interview: A Life History

As Seidman (2006) notes, “the first interview establishes the context of the participant’s experience” (p. 17). In this life history interview, participants were invited to describe their previous life experience up until their involvement in the program. They were asked to reconstruct early childhood experiences with family and friends and to reflect on early experiences with identity awareness and access (or lack of) to educational opportunities. As conversations moved to focused more specifically on agency, participants were asked to reconstruct times in their lives where they recalled experiencing a sense of agency or, the opposite, when they felt incapable of taking action.

The Second Interview: Deep Description

In the second interview, participants were asked to reconstruct the details of their involvement with student-initiated community engagement. This included all aspects of their involvement, such as the yearlong introductory service-learning course, all staff
positions they held, committee involvement, and work with community partnerships. In this interview, I encouraged participants to focus on details and answers to “what” questions; participants were asked to postpone any reflection on their experiences until the final interview.

Initially, the content shared in the second interview could have seemed obvious to participants. They could have, for example, assumed that I would have known the “day in the life” aspect of their work because I too worked for Bridging Communities, and also had access to job descriptions and course syllabi. I emphasized, though, that the goal of the second interview was to learn and listen to their particular reconstruction of their roles and experiences.

**The Third Interview: Making Meaning**

Moving from a focus on details and thick description, in the third interview participants were prompted to explore the ways they understood and made meaning of their experiences. As Seidman (2006) notes, meaning-making “addresses the intellectual and emotional connection between the participants’ work and life” (p. 18). I asked participants to reflect on the role of student-initiated community engagement in their life and, more specifically, the ways their involvement in student-initiated community engagement influenced their sense of agency.

While the third interview explicitly asked participants to make meaning of their life history as it connected to the details of their involvement in student-initiated community engagement, each interview provided a context to create meaning. As Seidman (2006) notes, the re-creation of their past and their involvement in the phenomenon (i.e., student-initiated community engagement) encouraged a selection of
details that created meaning in and of itself. The inclusion of certain details and ultimate exclusion of others allowed participants to highlight what was important to them.

**Additional Interviews**

For the first four participants, a fourth interview took place that is important to emphasize here. The first four participants were part of an earlier phase of research (described in the next section), where research questions were slightly more broad. Because of that, the three-part interview process for the first four participants did not include specific questions about agency as a construct. As a result, I added a fourth interview and walked participants through questions about agency. The fourth interview was structured in three parts, with questions first about life history and agency, then a deep description about their experiences in BC specifically related to the development of agency, and then finally asking them to make meaning about their development of agency prior to, during, and since BC. This is a limitation to this study, in that the first four participants were interviewed in a slightly different manner than the other three participants.

Follow-up conversations occurred with some participants well after the original interviews took place. Because data collection and analysis occurred over an extended time period, I followed up with participants as I got closer to the writing of the project. These conversations were less interviews and more check-ins to see how participants were doing, where their lives had led them, and to ask for their feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript, Chapter 4 in particular (i.e., member checks).
**Participant Selection and Phases of Data Collection**

Just as the case was selected through purposeful sampling, so too were the seven participants who took part in this project. Again, the purpose of this study was to learn about how participants in student-initiated community engagement made meaning of their experiences and the way they understood their development of agency through their experiences. As Merriam (1998) notes, “the criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases” (p. 61-62). In order to best answer the research questions, information-rich cases had to meet the following criteria:

1) The participant enrolled and completed the yearlong introductory service-learning course affiliated with the student-initiated community engagement program;

2) The participant held a staff position for at least one year in addition to being enrolled in the course.

Prolonged engagement was important for several reasons. By taking the yearlong course, the participant was introduced to the social justice framework critical to Bridging Communities’ approach to community engagement. In turn, participants also completed the spring participatory action research project component, intended to exemplify the program’s experiential youth empowerment approach to pedagogy. Through at least one year of service to the organization as a staff member, the participant ideally gained a greater understanding of the organization as a student-run collective working for social change. With these criteria in mind, the pool of information-rich cases was vastly reduced. While the program typically enrolls 20-25 students in the introductory course
annually, approximately half that number is employed as student staff members each year. In turn, not all staff members are graduates of the introductory course.

Data collection occurred in two phases. In phase one of data collection – the preliminary phase – I experienced a crucial opportunity to interview information-rich cases. Prior to contacting any study participants, I completed an application for Human Subjects Review and submitted it to the Institutional Review Board officer of the Education department. Although the original application referred to this phase as a pilot study, my dissertation committee convinced me that the term “preliminary data collection” was a more accurate label.

Once I received IRB approval, I contacted participants who fit the selection criteria and who I knew to be information-rich cases. This was known to me partly through my own involvement in the organization, as well as through network, or snowball, sampling. Network sampling, described by Merriam (1998) as the most common, encompasses asking participants to assist in identifying “cases of interest from people who know people who know people who know what cases are information-rich, that is, good examples for study, good interview subjects” (Patton, 1990, p. 182). I reached out to prospective participants via email, briefly describing the study and the time commitments of the interview series. Four individuals responded with interest and agreed to participate. After scheduling in-person interviews, I emailed participants a consent form (see Appendix A), which was then reviewed during the first interview. Ultimately, the three-interview series with this first group of participants was conducted within a three-week time period.
The first phase of data collection was then paused in order for me to complete my dissertation proposal and get it approved. At that point, phase two of data collection began, essentially a continuation of the previously approved study. In the dissertation proposal, specific questions about agency were added to the interview protocol, which again was approved by a committee.

As I moved into phase two, I conducted a fourth interview with the first four participants to allow a follow-up conversation focused on their sense of agency. The interview prompted them to explore how their sense of agency evolved before and as a result of their involvement in Bridging Communities. As I proceeded through the second phase, I noticed a common thread amongst the four participants’ stories: relatively long employment with the organization and more or less positive experiences. As a result, I sought to interview students who did not fully fit the criteria (sometimes known as “negative cases” – Seidman, 2006, p. 51). For example, I invited a former student of mine to participate because I knew that she chose to leave the organization after working there for only one semester; while I did not know the details of why she left, I knew her story did not match the stories shared by the first four participants. Overall, I conducted the three-interview series with three additional participants in the second phase, with interviews taking place over the telephone or online via Skype.

Overall, a total of 25 interviews were conducted in phases one and two. All digital interview files were saved in a password-protected folder on my personal computer and were sent to a professional transcriber for transcription.
Table 1: Participant demographic information and years of involvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Years of Involvement (including course)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arnold</td>
<td>African American man</td>
<td>Four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atabex</td>
<td>Black Puerto Rican woman</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francesca</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>White woman</td>
<td>Three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Persian woman</td>
<td>One and a half</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nia</td>
<td>Haitian American woman</td>
<td>Four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theodore</td>
<td>White man</td>
<td>Four</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a All participants chose pseudonyms in order to better protect their confidentiality.

**Saturation and Sufficiency**

The number of participants necessary to adequately represent any phenomenon varies, ranging anywhere from five participants to 25 (Creswell, 1998). Seidman (2006) recommends using the notions of saturation and sufficiency to determine when you have interviewed enough participants.

Sufficiency refers to making sure that you have a sufficient number of participants so as to reflect the range of experiences with the phenomenon and so that people outside of the study can connect with the stories of the participants (Seidman, 2006). The seven participants I interviewed represent a wide range of identities as well as experiences with the program. I interviewed one of the organization’s founders; students who were involved in the program for three or four years (almost the entirety of their college years); a student who was involved for two years; and one student who was only involved for three semesters and chose to leave midyear. I heard stories of great love for the program, stories of disappointment, stories of feeling deep connections, and stories of disconnect.
and frustration. Each participant’s story was rich and deep – particularly in the ways their life circumstances led them to participate in Bridging Communities and how they made meaning of their time with the organization.

Beyond sufficiency, saturation became a major consideration as I proceeded through phase two of data collection. While I could have continued reaching out to information-rich cases, I elected to stop interviewing after the seventh participant.

Researchers must consider a wide range of factors when determining saturation. I needed to consider if continuing to interview would add new information for the project. In turn, I had to factor in considerations such as time and resources (Seidman, 2006). Feeling confident sufficiency and saturation were reached, I conferred with and received support from my dissertation committee to wrap up interviewing and dive deep into data analysis.

**Additional Data**

As Merriam (1998) notes, case studies often utilize document analysis and observations in addition to interviewing to achieve a more holistic description and analysis of the case. To that effect, I used various documents to write up the case description in this chapter, including the organization’s “history” binder, which consisted of old meeting minutes, by-laws, and their original application for funding. I also referenced course syllabi, job descriptions, staff manuals, and web content. For the opening of this manuscript, I relied on field notes taken as a participant observer at a staff retreat held during the 2010-2011 school year. All documents were for context-setting and background, so they were not analyzed as data for the purposes of informing the research questions.
**Data Management and Data Analysis**

Creswell (1998) describes the stages of qualitative data analysis as a spiral, a dynamic process beginning with data management and ending with the drafting of a narrative or an account of the phenomenon. In between these stages exist several “analytic circles” (p. 142) that loop around and around. These circles include (1) data management; (2) reading and memoing; (3) describing, classifying, and interpreting; and (4) representing and visualizing.

The data management circle included saving and backing up all digital interviews on my personal computer. While I began the project with the goal of transcribing all interviews myself, it quickly became clear that I did not have the skill to transcribe interviews in an efficient and effective manner. Thankfully, working with a professional transcriptionist proved to be immensely time efficient and helpful. After receiving each digital transcript, I re-listened to each interview and proofread transcripts, correcting any errors and adding information that was missing from the documents. After storing all files in a password-protected folder, I uploaded all interview files into NVIVO data management software.

Next, I entered the reading and memoing circle of analysis. I spent a great deal of time “getting a sense of the whole database” (Creswell, 1998). Repeated reads of transcripts in their entirety gave me a sense of the full experiences of each participant. During these reads, I created notes exploring possible themes and categories in the interviews, and then wrote a memo after each interview reflecting on each interview in its totality.
Next, I moved onto coding – or, as Creswell (1998) describes, the describing, classifying, and interpreting circle of the analysis spiral.\(^{13}\) For this step, I relied primarily on phenomenological analysis approaches (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenological analysis, the describing stage consists of the researcher describing the meaning of the phenomenon as he or she interprets it. Through “marking what is of interest in the text” (Seidman, 2006, p. 117), I made lists of statements from the data where participants described how they experience the phenomenon. Statements were then grouped together into categories or “meaning units,” and a list of codes was developed to aid in further analysis (see Appendix C). Meaning units were developed both inductively – i.e., coming from the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) – and deductively, with some thought and connection made to theory and concepts laid out in Chapter 2. I also continued memo writing in this stage, where I reflected on the meaning of the codes and the patterns in the participants’ stories.

The next step, interpretation, involves developing a textural description, a structural description, and an overall description – the “essence” – of the phenomenon. The textural description focuses on the what of the phenomenon, while the structural description explains the how of the phenomenon. The essence aims to capture both of these descriptions, offering an overview of the meaning of the phenomenon. Memoing continued to be important in this stage of analysis. This stage also happened nearly in unison with the writing up of participant narratives.

\(^{13}\) For this aspect of my work, I want to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Ximena Zúñiga, and I want to acknowledge the ways my work with her impacted my own coding process. My development of codes was greatly influenced by the research I conducted with Dr. Zúñiga and her many colleagues as part of a multi-university research project on intergroup dialogue. See Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga’s (2013) book, *Dialogue Across Difference*, to learn more about this project.
Seidman (2006) describes two ways a researcher can share the interview data: as profiles and as themes. In this project, I present a version of both. As I continued to reflect on and interpret participants’ stories, I began the crafting of narratives for each participant. While I initially looked to create a profile, or a complete story using only the participant’s words, in the end I crafted narratives blending participant’s words (in lengthy block quotes) with some of my own narration and thematic interpretation. With this, I aimed to both “reflect the person’s consciousness” (Seidman, 2006, p. 120), while also describing the themes, or meaning units, as a way to find connections between participants. Because of the small number of participants, I elected to craft a narrative about each of the seven participants.

As I traversed these many stages, I consulted with my doctoral advisor throughout, sharing memos, lists of codes, drafts of narratives, and finally full complete chapters. I also relied extensively on member checks, maintaining steady contact with some, but not all, of the participants in my study. I shared interview transcripts, as well as drafts of my writing – sometimes brief passages and sometimes lengthy excerpts. I was most curious to see if I had captured the essence of their experiences and the ways they made-meaning of their time with Bridging Communities. They were most supportive in all the ways they were able – whether it was a brief text or a longer phone conversation.

**My Role as the Researcher**

As an insider in this study (Creswell, 2009, might describe this as “backyard research,” p. 177), I should explain my own role within the organization. I served as a staff member and instructor for the program from September 2009 until May 2011. As a result, some of the participants are former colleagues of mine, and one of the participants
is a former student of mine (her participation occurred years after she was in my course). In a way, I will be in this study just as much as the participants are. I am deeply invested in this work and am highly invested in the outcome. Because I believe in student-initiated community engagement, I passionately seek answers to the impact of this work on students, and to ways a program like Bridging Communities can inform student roles in community engagement generally.

Inevitably, my role as an insider impacted the interviews and the interviewees in a range of ways, positive, negative, and somewhere in-between. My relationships with some of the participants and with the program may have helped them to feel more at ease in the interview setting and less concerned with explaining any in-group terms or concepts. On the other hand, participants may have felt inclined to amplify their experiences, whether for social desirability or for other reasons. Ultimately, I believe (and hope) my ongoing relationships with participants both as students and as colleagues allowed them to feel comfortable and to be fully honest about their experiences.

Bracketing, a critical aspect of phenomenological research, was especially crucial because of my personal involvement and my belief in student-initiated community engagement. It is no secret that I am deeply committed to this work and to BC in particular. On the other hand, as a member of the program for two years I also became aware of the challenges that any organization faces as they attempt to do potentially controversial work using a staff of part-time, often over-committed individuals. Hycner (1985) emphasizes that bracketing – suspending judgment – must happen throughout all steps of data analysis: during the initial read-through and marking of the full texts, then again during the development of themes. While complete and total objectivity is not
possible – Hycner writes that “this would be to fall into the fallacy of ‘pure objectivity’ that natural science has often been prone to” (p. 281) – three important steps aided me in checking on how well I bracketed my own perspectives. First, I reflected on any assumptions I had about the participants, their experiences, and their stories. Next, I dialogued with my doctoral advisor about these assumptions and asked for his ongoing support to challenge my interpretations of the data. Finally, numerous member checks provided an additional step in challenging my assumptions.

Additional Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The notion of trustworthiness is crucial for any research undertaking. Rossman and Rallis (2003) note that all researchers must conform to two components of trustworthiness – following standards that are “acceptable and competent” (p. 63) and being ethical in all phases of research. While underlying assumptions for qualitative research projects may vary, it is important to reflect on the truth-value, the methodological rigor, and the applicability of the project to other situations (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

The three-part interview series provided built-in structures to secure the truth-value of the project as well as methodological rigor. Because participants had three opportunities to meet with the interviewer (and, in the case of four of my participants, four opportunities), they were consistently offered the opportunity to reflect on and clarify their stories. In addition, member checks offered an additional safeguard.

In-depth interviewing achieves usefulness or applicability primarily through the depth of the conversations that manifest and the nature in which the data is shared. In-depth interviewers aim to, as Seidman (2006) describes, “go to such depth in the
interviews that surface considerations of representativeness and generalizability are replaced by a compelling evocation of an individual’s experience” (p. 51). This can open up two means of making connections: first, the researcher making connections between the stories of the participants, and, second, the reader making his or her own connections to the participants’ stories (Seidman, 2006).

**Following Chapters**

Chapter Four presents narratives for all seven participants. The narratives allow the reader to learn more about each participant, who they were coming into their years with Bridging Communities, and how their Bridging Communities experiences impacted their sense of agency. Each narrative is structured in two parts: an introduction to the participant and their lived experiences prior to joining BC, and an exploration of their BC experiences via four major themes – sense of belonging, awareness, skill development, and organizational structure – that emerged across most of the narratives. Lengthy interview excerpts are included throughout to allow participants to speak in their own words. Chapter Five looks across the four major themes, to glean the collective experiences of the group; the chapter also explores the secondary research questions about service-learning and community engagement generally.

The final chapter presents trends in the participants’ development of agency during their time with Bridging Communities and explores the participants’ experiences in the overall context of theories of agency and identity development. I close with a reflection on implications of the participants’ experiences for practitioners in service-learning and community engagement, with a deep dive into considering student roles and student empowerment in this work.
CHAPTER 4

PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

This chapter presents narratives about each of the seven participants interviewed for the study. The narratives are divided into parts: first, the reader will learn the participant’s backstory and key elements of their life prior to coming to the U and becoming involved in Bridging Communities (BC). Next, the narratives examine participants’ experiences with developing agency through their time with BC. This exploration is grouped into four themes – sense of belonging, awareness, skill development, and structure – that were common across most of the seven participants’ stories. Narratives include longer block quotes throughout to allow participants to speak for themselves as much as possible. This extensive look at the participants’ stories, using their own words extensively, is valuable because it “reflect[s] the person’s consciousness” (Seidman, 2006, p. 120), providing a window into how each participant understood the role of Bridging Communities in their development of agency.

Arnold

Arnold has a warmth, a kindness, a charismatic quality about him that makes you want to be his friend. Of the seven participants in the study, I might chance it and say that Arnold was the most transformed by his years of involvement with Bridging Communities, particularly when it came to his sense of agency. During our four interviews, I was moved to tears several times, in awe of how this program impacted him – his confidence, his dedication, and his passion for social justice and education equity. As someone who grew up thirty minutes away from the U, the program seemed in
essence to be about students like Arnold – students who were from communities near the university and how they could build bridges between the U and those communities.

African-American and middle-class, Arnold grew up dividing his time between two homes. During the week, he lived at his grandmother’s house with his mom, uncle, and cousin. On the weekends, he would go to his dad’s place on the other side of town – what he called “the projects”. But he didn’t really think much about class growing up, and the differences in these two communities or the differences between him and some of his friends – “I never realized growing up – for instance, I had a game station and my friend didn’t have a game station. I didn’t know what that meant… I didn’t really see that.”

Arnold was a curious kid with a passion for science and for making things, and his mom worked hard to provide him with toys and tools to explore a range of activities. Arnold explained:

From a young age, I was a very curious kid…. This is embarrassing – I used to talk to myself when I was little. And I remember – I was in my backyard and I was talking to myself and my dog was there too…. I was walking around with my hands behind my back. And I remember being shorter than a bush – I wasn’t that old – and I’m just walking around talking to myself about why the sky is blue…. I was an ant-burning kid with a microscope – but I was one of the few who knew why it worked, because I was best at it…. If I go into my bins of my childhood, I don’t have the regular toys…. I had an electricity kit. And it was a board [with] different plugs and wires and clamps and circuit boards and all that stuff…. Probably why I didn’t have any friends in the neighborhood…. I had dinosaur charts and all kinds of robots and stuff like that. I remember I built a robot out of K’NEX when I was 14 or 15. That was just the kind of toys I had. I never knew that I was building my engineering skills…. Science is the why. And that’s what I used to ask myself as a kid, was why. I would never ask anybody else. I was stubborn. I was like, I don’t want you to tell me – I want to learn for myself. That’s why I probably was in the backyard talking to myself about why the sky was blue, because I just wanted to know why. Like, why were the dinosaurs there? Why did they die? Why are the stars so far away? What is a star? Why, why, why? That’s all that fueled me.
Arnold was curious, fascinated about the world – and when he wanted to figure things out, he would set to work, determined to do it himself. As he got older, though, he became very private about this “nerd” part of himself, for fear that it would make him stand out in a negative way, because “nerd” and “cool” just did not go together. Friends would give him a hard time about him doing well academically, like in math class when he wouldn’t give out answers to math problems.

Arnold recalled not feeling much of a sense of agency before college – he described his sense of agency as a solid zero on a scale from 1 to 10. On the other hand, he describes a determination he had that was inspired by one of his elementary school math teachers. Although Arnold didn’t see a connection to this and a sense of agency, there has to be some element of connection – because he is talking about persistence and perseverance when faced with challenge. Arnold shared:

When I was younger, I didn’t really see barriers. I guess that comes from when I was first taught something that stuck with me. And she’d be proud – this was my math teacher from third grade, fourth grade, she’d be proud… I remember the first time I told her, “It’s hard, this is hard, I don’t want to do this, this is hard.”

And she’s like, “It’s not hard – it’s challenging.”

I didn’t know what that meant, but I do now. And now it’s everything I saw as something that’s stopping me, I would just kind of say, you know: this essay is hard – no, it’s just challenging. This application is hard – no, it’s just challenging. Everything is a challenge, everything is a competition between you and it to get past it.…

I’ve never delved into this experience this much before, so there’s a lot of things that popped up as barriers to me that I kind of just, for me at least, I just said to myself, “I’ll get through it, I have to get through it.”

Arnold learned about perseverance at around age 8 or 9. About sticking things out. About staring into something and working hard to get past it. But for him, this wasn’t in and of itself agency. He didn’t really feel he had much of a sense of agency at that point in his life at all, particularly when thinking about agency as it connected to others, to an
awareness of identity, and especially around issues of social injustice. Up until he got to college, he saw people as “blank sheet[s] of paper … bland.” While he thought about the “why” when it came to objects and the universe, he didn’t think much about the why as to the people around him, including himself.

This began to shift slightly in his final year of high school as he began to consider his next steps. As an alum of a middle school summer college access program, he knew that college was an option for him. His mom and a few of his teachers were also pretty adamant that he pursue college as his next step. But as he approached his senior year, he began to notice the differences in his friends and the decisions they were making about post-high-school plans. Because of his closet nerd side, he was pretty quiet as he pursued his plans, but his friends were not:

[My city] is a very diverse place, but everyone is kind of about the same thing. When I was in high school, everybody just wanted a car or a girlfriend and money. That’s what you reached for, that’s what you pushed for.…

Looking back, [in late high school] I was starting to realize which friends were looking at [going to college] and which friends weren’t; which friends were going into the working force. You could tell the students who went to the working force, because they’re looking for money – that what it was, people need to find money.

I had a job, most of us had a job. If you didn’t have a job in high school by junior year, you were probably behind, because you weren’t working. You didn’t have money for a car, because everyone wants a car. You didn’t have money to take a girl out, because everyone wants to take their girl out. The money was the motive, and [going to college] just didn’t translate to everybody.

Arnold does remember a friend from high school who he really looked up to – someone who was college-bound and seemed to have it all. Arnold described him as his idol:

My friend K. was my idol – he was like, you know, charismatic, tall, cool. We used to make each other laugh all the time in class, in the back of the class, in honors class, just BSing. But he was just so intelligent, and he had a job, he had a car – he was the kid, you know what I mean? He was the kid that I looked up to. And he was the one that had the internship, he was the one who handed his papers in on time – he just made it seem okay to be intelligent and smart.
In his senior year, Arnold kept focused on his academics and his next steps, with frequent visits to his school’s career center and to an afterschool program that focused on academic support. He would eventually be accepted to the U with great relief, as he was rejected from the other schools he applied for. With a college acceptance in hand, Arnold spent his last few months of high school and the summer after graduation with many people from his senior class, across a range of cliques and social groups. At that moment in time, he remembered everyone coming to together, everyone uniting as a senior class. But still, Arnold wasn’t really thinking about his sense of agency, other than that he was going to college – things were just kind of happening around him and he was going with it.

Arnold’s journey through college can simply be described as epic. In his first few weeks at the U, Arnold was just blown away, so excited to be around so many people. His first semester, he dove headfirst into the social pool of the college, wanting to meet people, make friends, get phone numbers. He found his classes interesting, but not terribly exciting. He would go to class, information would get dumped into his brain, he’d take notes, take tests, write lab reports, go through the motions. He was interested, sure, but he wasn’t particularly riveted or inspired.

Then he discovered Student Government, and for the first time in what he felt was forever, he was wanted. People sought him out, offered him a range of opportunities, wanted his opinion, wanted his support, wanted his energy. That was it - they wanted his energy, his charisma. When Arnold got excited about something, it was inevitable that everyone around him would get excited. He started supporting the campaigns of other
fears, “dorm storming” (going door to door in residence halls to campaign). His confidence was building, growing.

Through student government, Arnold met undergraduate and graduate students who were involved in Bridging Communities. After learning more, and at the urging of some of his student government friends, he decided to enroll in the BC course his sophomore year. He wasn’t quite sure why he was going to take this course – he was a science major after all, and it didn’t really seem to compliment his studies or his career goals - but he thought, “Why not? This seems cool.”

**BC Experiences and Agency**

At this point in the narrative, I will shift to telling Arnold’s story by looking more closely at how his involvement in BC influenced his sense of agency. The four themes previously mentioned will be used to structure this part of Arnold’s narrative. These factors and their interplay caused a great evolution in Arnold’s sense of agency – or, as he described, from a zero to a “full-fledged” ten.

**Sense of Belonging**

Arnold’s sense of belonging in BC was a major factor in his choice to stay involved in the program and also in his sense that he was capable of taking action and working for social change. This feeling began when he was enrolled in the course, but continued to grow with each semester and with each experience and role that he took on. It wasn’t always smooth, but he persevered, and through that commitment would feel a strong sense of family and a strong support network.

The first night of the BC course was life-altering. First of all, he didn’t even know where the class was going to meet. Unlike his other classes, which listed the classroom in
his online schedule, this one was a big question mark. He finally learned the location, almost like a secret society. When Arnold walked into the room, he immediately knew this was something different. For maybe the first time since starting college, he didn’t feel like an anomaly as a black man walking into the classroom. He looked around the room and immediately felt a sense of relief: while most faces were not familiar, more than half of the people in the room were Black, Latinx, Asian, multiracial – people of color. Arnold was used to seeing this outside of the classroom – after all, his goal when he arrived to college was to get the number of every African-American female on campus. But to walk into a classroom and not be one of a token few Black students – this was something else:

It was really just a different world, like never in the same room had I seen so many people that looked like me, people of color, and also people who didn’t. But also, I remember it just had this kind of mature air. It was kind of just amazing to just be in the classroom … everyone seemed like they had a little bit more pep in their step, everyone had a little bit more purpose. And every time I went to class, I felt the same thing…. It was just completely outside of the realm of what college felt like before. And I can say that I started to feel a little bit of individuality, but also being connected to something that was bigger than me at the same time, which is a very weird feeling.

Arnold found inspiration not only from the students in the course, but from the instructor as well. A graduate student of color himself, the instructor was passionate and engaging, striving to get students to dig in, dive in, and share of themselves with the class. This experience would plant a seed in Arnold, that perhaps one day he would become a teacher himself.

Arnold was also deeply influenced by staff members participating in the class. They would lead by example, teaching others and sharing what they had learned, both in the course the year before and through their work in the community. Arnold was amazed
at the depth of commitment and care people had for both the course and the program, and this made him want to contribute more:

Mind you, I have a heavy course load, like physics and calculus. Those classes, you go in, you listen you take notes, and then you leave…. But BC was just different, like altogether – whether it was the dialogue aspect, whether it was the fact that we sat in a room and had a facilitator that wasn’t a professor doing their research project and didn’t really care…. The conversations were just thriving…. Even if I hadn’t done the readings, I would still raise my hand, and I would still contribute to the conversation, even though I didn’t have all the knowledge that people had in the class.

I felt really behind in that aspect, because I’m a science major. All my other classes required me to just think, not connect or critically think or read into my own stuff. That’s my first time doing a social identity paper, learning about my social identity, and how it’s affected in education. I just remember the class being extremely interesting, and that drew me because I was comfortable there.

Arnold found his confidence as a student and community member increasing as the year progressed. He began to feel important, and this feeling increased two-fold as the course continued into the spring semester.

In the second semester of the BC course, Arnold and his classmates were charged with completing a participatory action research project in groups. For their project, Arnold and a fellow classmate would partner with the U’s public health department to implement a digital storytelling project with a class at his old high school. The project would be life-changing for him:

I went to speak with [someone in Public Health], and she was already doing a digital storytelling venture in [my home city]. I hear [city name] and I’m like – No way! … Our [project] blew up from that. It went from just being a “let’s do this with youth” to – I really built a curriculum…. I had a fever about it, I was so excited…. We put together a [six-session] curriculum called “Barriers and Gateways” … and [the students] took pictures of college barriers and college access issues…. One of the students I remember took a picture of his uncle’s liquor store and all the liquor items, stuff like that. And [when he talked about the picture] I’m expecting a regular answer from him … like, “liquor, you know, it’s a bad thing for you, it gets you into bad situations,” things like that.

He came at me with an entirely different notion. He really delved into the alcohol aspect and he was like, “My uncle works here. He’s part of my family,
and there’s an alcohol problem in my family.” It’s like he’s … tying all these things together, and he’s just, he’s going through it, and I can just generally see that these students are thinking about college now.…

Looking back, I don’t know how I did that my sophomore year – it seems amazing. Because we didn’t really have any help from the staff…. We just took it by the reigns and went in.

This project taught Arnold a great deal, but more than anything it gave him a sense of confidence and a sense of belonging – through being able to connect his work with BC back to his home community. After this project, Arnold’s commitment to BC was sealed:

So thinking about a couch, right? When you first buy a couch, it’s brand new and stiff, and everyone is sitting on it awkwardly, you know? No one really gets their place in it. But you have to like, with anything, you have to get into it, you have to stick around. BC became that comfort zone for me because it was a place where I felt like my dent was there. It was starting …. there people would recognize me.

[Before then] I was never really recognized…. In gym class, I was second-last pick, you know what I mean? But BC made me feel like I was the star athlete, you know what I mean? Because … after that first year and my project was finished – that was something else …. we’re doing this with these youth, and we’re affecting more people, and we’re just affecting, affecting, affecting. It’s just growing, right? So I was seeing my dent, I was seeing that I was making this my own place. And I was thinking that other people were as well. So … why not make this a home plate for me? And I say comfy couch because it took me getting out of that stiffness, actually wanting to make something my own, like that was my year of making things my own.

Through his experience in the course and his project in particular, Arnold felt proud of his contributions and his success. This feeling made him want to really dig in and make a long-term commitment to Bridging Communities – to make it his “home plate.”

This “comfy couch” feeling would empower Arnold to take risks and take on greater responsibility once he became a staff member for two years with BC, first as a site coordinator and then as the program coordinator. For example, at the start of his fourth year at the U, he became a site coordinator and was tasked with initiating a new partner site. He didn’t have the full skill set he needed for the role, but he felt comfortable with the responsibility because of the “comfy couch,” and the resources and support he
had within the BC organization. The comfy couch feeling also lasted well beyond his years of working with the program, because it became more than an organization – it became a movement. He explained:

Bridging Communities [will always be] somewhere I can go where there’s resources and people and support. And that makes me feel like a family, like I have a family somewhere. When I came out of high school, I didn’t see people or things like that. I just thought, you know, I’m on my own – rogue spirit. My parents are there to help out with money – one of my parents is – and my friends are there to help out with the laughs. But I have to do everything else on my own.

I didn’t feel like I was part of a team, I didn’t feel like I was part of, I don’t know, an army – because looking at education, it really is an army, like there’s an army of educators out there. And this small program, BC, was like my initiation into the army. It took a long time … but literally I don’t know how, if I would’ve never worked for BC, I would’ve ever thought about being a teacher, I would’ve never thought about education as an important topic in people’s lives.

Arnold was inspired by his work and involvement in BC, and his sense of belonging empowered him to feel a part of something larger – a movement for education equity. This was also enhanced by a deepening awareness of a range of issues pertaining to himself and the world around him.

**Awareness**

Arnold was always fascinated with questions about “why,” but up until BC, those questions were limited to objects, such as robots, dinosaurs, fossils, planets, and stars. As the weeks ticked by in the BC course, though, Arnold began to ask different kinds of “why” questions: Why was he in college when others from his home community were not? Why was the BC course the only class in his U experience where he was not a token person of color? Why, why, why? His years in BC would mark the beginning of his journey into thinking about issues related to identity, education, and equity. He would learn more about himself, as well as the lived experiences of the people around him.
People were no longer “blank sheets of paper,” but complex beings embedded within institutions and systems that would have vast implications for their lives.

For Arnold, the BC course was not only “an academic setting – it was an identity setting”:

[M]y identity was just being opened, and I felt like I had a whole book to read about Arnold, and a whole book to share. And the people who I talked to actually cared. If I told a story about what it was like for me in high school, if I told a story about being African American and what I thought about success – that was [in] some of my papers – then people listened, and I had never felt that before, even in a group of friends.

The sense of belonging he felt allowed Arnold to open up about himself – to study himself – and to learn more about the world in the process. Much of this learning centered around what it meant to be a Black male in the US, and how his identity as a Black man influences almost everything. He explained:

In this class, you had to go around and around and around and around for me to understand that my social identity as a Black male has something to do with the way I vote, what I see of success, how I see school and college currently, and what it has for my future goals. Pretty much like – why am I in college? That’s the first thing I started thinking about – what am I doing here? …

Because you know, just as a black male, I saw in a room full of people that there were only three of me, you know what I mean? That’s when I started looking at this, like – how many people are of me, are like me in the room that I’m in, at any given time? And I’m starting to see slowly that it’s usually one in my classes and in my work, in my job – like one or two or three. Even in BC\textsuperscript{14} and Student Government, like one, two, or three, or four, that I could see readily. However, at a party or in my dorm or at home in [my city] where I work, or my family, that number increases. Yet in the people that I’m counting there’s different qualities, you know what I mean? In BC, the couple of black men in the room are educated – they’re the facilitator or one of my friends who was … very far in their process.

\textsuperscript{14} It is important to note that Arnold’s names BC as one of the spaces where black men are in the minority still. So even though BC had a critical mass of students of color – which Arnold noticed and appreciated the minute he walked into the BC course for the first time – there wasn’t necessarily a critical mass of Black men, and this was something that Arnold began to notice and think about more intensely as his involvement in the BC course went along.
Arnold’s awareness expanded greatly, and he began seeing himself in relationship to what was around him.

The things Arnold learned led to what he considers a “click” – like a switch flipping, where he goes from seeing the idea of social justice as “soft” to seeing it as something of great importance. This click impacted not only how Arnold saw himself but how he saw and analyzed the experiences of other people. He became more analytical about other people, thinking about the stories behind their lives. In particular, he started to think about people’s educational paths, and the implications of these paths:

If you’re [an] anthropology major, if you’re a physics major, you’ve got a different way of looking at things. I saw my way of looking at things and realized that it was just, it was based upon nothing, it was based upon just judgments and just concepts that I got from other people…. Learning how people are judged and how people are seen has helped me shape ways in which I am going to see youth, I’m going to see my own family members, my own friends – that’s all in a positive way…. Like when I was driving [by my old high school with another BC staff member] and I’m looking at kids from my old high school outside smoking weed. If I had never [gone] to college or never learned about the educational process and how that was important, I would’ve just seen them as people. But now I see them as so much more than that. I look into their eyes and I see like, you’re out here for a reason – you’re not in there for a reason, may I say. I interpret that so much differently.

Ultimately, Arnold shifted from being more of a neutral observer moving about the world to seeing everyone within the context of their social identities and what their social identities meant for them. In addition, the BC course became a gateway to his involvement in additional educational experiences, such as dialogue courses and social justice workshops.

In addition to Arnold’s growing awareness of his own and others’ experiences, he developed a deeper understanding and awareness of place – of the city where his work was based in his first year, as well as his awareness of his home city. This learning began
at CityBound, an event designed to orient students from the college to the city they were working. There he learned that some of his assumptions about this city, one that was right next door to his home city, were incorrect. He explained:

I had been there, because that’s where the mall is, so that’s what I had seen…. And even as a young teen, … I’m hearing about [the city] from my friends, you know – like the fight they got into or the drug bust [there], or you know, [that] it was a community that was just like the hood – I never knew anything else about it than that…. [I learned about the concentration of the] Puerto Rican population in the middle of the city, yet the broad span of the entire city [not necessarily being Puerto Rican] … which is at the time what informed educational systems, bad practices in the schools, and bad practices in the communities…. And learning that I didn’t know anything about this kind of thing about [my home city] was also very interesting to me. And that kind of roped me in – it was that.

Learning about the city the BC course partnered with, about the history of the city and the way policies there shaped the city was mind-blowing to Arnold. Prior to this experience, he had very limited knowledge of the city – mostly based around him going to the mall there as a teen. But now he was looking at things from a history and policy perspective. This helped provide him a context for the work he was involved in at the school there as well – “I connected it immediately – this wasn’t like me just tutoring some random kids… this program is there for a reason.” Learning about the dynamics of the city also piqued his interest in his home city – what was the story of his home city? What was happening within the educational system there? How were race, class, and other dynamics impacting that system?

Arnold also began to analyze “place” in terms of agency. He started to think about what it would mean to take action from an asset-based perspective rather than focusing on a community’s deficits. Ultimately, he started to see himself as an agent, an actor, as someone who can work for change. He explained:
[In the BC course], we’re looking at the community of [this one city], and we’re seeing the problems through the research and the theories and stuff like that. But then you see them on the ground when you go into the schools: you see the students giving up on their work, you see them not caring about college. You see all this stuff, but you don’t see – you’re weighted down by the deficit, but you don’t see the assets.

For just as much as someone has been pushed down, they have just as much power to push back – I literally believe that. So now I’m looking at things from this perspective. I’m not looking at my hometown as like – yeah, we’re twelfth highest in violence in the entire country. I’m looking at it as – we have the ability to do this now….

It taught me that there’s something that can be done. You don’t have to do it alone. You can – it’s been done before. And I didn’t get that from like learning about the civil rights movements. I just learned that they came together and shouted about it. I didn’t realize that they had inside each and every one of them, a power that said like, you know, it’s above me. I’m doing this for a whole different, a whole strata of people. And just looking at education in general, like when BC, when we send a team out there of tutor mentors and site coordinator to a site, that’s power right there, you know what I mean? So I guess it’s the power behind people.

Arnold began to see that he could take action and that he wasn’t alone – that there were people standing behind him and next to him as he did the work.

Ultimately, Arnold became politicized and empowered. Through his shifting awareness about himself and the people and places around him, he shifted his level of analysis, to look outside of himself and starts to see things systemically. He shared:

I used to just let things pass. It was all about what you got mad about. Like, am I mad that this guy cut me off in traffic? Am I mad that I didn’t get this loan? Am I mad about this? And the things that I was becoming angry about were becoming less and less about me, and more and more about people who are like me. And that’s when, I think, how I viewed people started to change.

This not only impacted his view of the world – it also drastically impacted his career goals. At the start of college, he wanted to be an astronomer; he ultimately chose to pursue a career in teaching science. This would never have happened without his participation in BC.
Skill Development

As Arnold’s awareness expanded during his time in Bridging Communities, the skill set he acquired became another factor in his sense of agency. During his years as a staff member – one year as a site coordinator for a new site, and one year as the program coordinator – Arnold developed a litany of new skills, including teaching and facilitation, curriculum development, and administrative skills. Through the development of these new skills, which didn’t always come easily, he felt empowered and developed a greater sense of agency.

Arnold took the BC course in his sophomore year, but then stepped away from the organization for a short time. The following fall, Arnold’s fourth year at the U, he returned to the organization in a staff position. BC was forming new partnerships in his home city, and he was excited to be part of a pilot partnership with a community center right down the street from his former high school. As site coordinator for this pilot program, Arnold would be called on to do more than just show up with a group of college student tutor-mentors – he would be tasked with designing a STEM curriculum as well. After developing a curriculum for his participatory action research project his sophomore year, Arnold was eager to continue honing this skill and to bridge his love of science with his passion for working with youth. In the process, Arnold would learn a great deal about himself, all within the context of the “comfy couch” of BC.

The experience had both highs and lows, but Arnold learned a great deal about program coordination, including liaising with a community partner, designing curriculum, and supervising college student volunteers. He shared:

With the [new] grant in place, we are now beginning to have two new sites [in my home city]. And working with [another department at the U], we’re building a
new community partnership – difficult…. Because it’s a whole different set of things – now it’s like I’m [a professional staff member], you know? No one in this building knows what Bridging Communities is, so we have to bring it here. And we have to also learn about what [the BC instructor] imbedded into our minds about reciprocity. We have to make sure that they’re taking something out of the relationships just like we are, even if neither of us see it.…

One of our first challenges was doing that community partnership stuff, going back and forth, making sure everything was set up. And then on the side I had to do my curriculum and pretty much plan an after-school program for the entire year. I didn’t see it as a weight. I was like, What? That’s nothing, I can do that.  

Next thing you know… I’m realizing … I definitely was a little too intense on the science part of it, you know what I mean? [And] I had to do a lot of duties in the community… And [the community center] isn’t an academic environment mostly…. Most of the kids that stay later, they stay for boxing or basketball or soccer…. These kids are coming and going.

Arnold started his year off with a bang, not intimidated at all by the prospect of starting up a new program and implementing a STEM curriculum. But as the logistics of project coordination came into play, he saw the complexity of all. This was also challenged by a moment when the comfy couch wasn’t so comfy anymore, and Arnold no longer felt like the “star athlete.” He shared:

My tutor-mentors got negative, people in the office got negative about things because, though we’re starting up a new site, and were trying our hardest to do everything we have to do, and I’m trying my hardest, and I’m still growing as a leader. But being a staff member, I’m just like – this is tough, this is not something that’s readily made for us to go into…. So, I felt the weight on my shoulders. I didn’t handle it the best possible. I definitely tried to reach out when I thought I could, but I’m not a good reach-outer, so I was putting myself into a lot of corners as a staff member.

It was the first time I was also engaging and working with peers. I never understood how hard a site coordinator’s job was before this…. I had six tutor-mentors [that I had to supervise]. And imagine just the issues that come from the class about social identity, the issues that come up … and having that be people you’re dealing with at your site. It was like, I’m teaching two different groups of people, and [teaching] myself how to deal with two different groups of people.

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15 This feels reminiscent of what Arnold learned from his elementary school math teacher: it’s not hard, it’s challenging. While not necessarily agency in itself, this sense of persistence is significant.
With all of the different responsibilities Arnold had to shoulder as a site coordinator, the experience presented him with “challenges upon challenges upon challenges.” This was compounded by the placement of this partnership – his own community: “I felt the burden was on my shoulders – I’m in my own community. Though it’s not people I grew up with, it’s still [my] community.” Often, he would think back to his successful research project in comparison and would be mad at himself – “I felt like I had a win when I did the PAR … and two years later I’m coming back in my community, and I really felt like I was failing most of the time.”

Nonetheless, Arnold looked back on the experience as contributing to his growth and his sense of agency. He was working directly with youth and in the community. He built relationships and he came out of the experience feeling proud – proud of all the tears, all the frustrations, and all of the successes. He spoke about a relationship with one student in particular as an example:

I remember the last day of site … the last day was like, you know, cupcakes, cookies, and happiness and smiles and juice and all this stuff. And then I remember, we’re leaving, and the kids are hugging each other and hugging the other tutor mentors and hugging me. These young boys who literally I feel are just groomed to just be hard, like “don’t touch me.”

Like D., the one that I still have a relationship with now, he came to me and was like, he gave me a big squeeze hug. And I’m just like … I saw what he wrote in my card afterwards – it made me cry at site. He said, “You’re like a big brother to me.” And I saw that I was just like, yo, like – this is crazy.…

This kid D. once threw a desk at a teacher, you know what I mean? That’s how bad his anger had stemmed out one day. Was he talked to? Did someone pull him aside and wonder – why’s he doing this, what’s happening at home? No. He’s put in suspension.… He was in fifth grade, so elementary school suspensions, that’s what this kid was going through.…

Now I see D. – I saw D. last month [about a year after I got the card from him] – he came [to the U] for a tour. You know how polite he was? How literally he emanated being nice? … And I’m seeing him, and he made me an ice cream sundae. He came when we were down at [the dining hall] – I might cry – he came and he had a big bowl. He had taken two bananas, put them there, he put like mad ice cream, sprinkles, all kinds of stuff. And he brought it to me. And I’m just like,
“Yo, I remember you. I remember the day you got suspended and you came and you didn’t want to talk to anybody. I remember all that stuff, yo.”

For Arnold, it was working as a site coordinator at a new site where he was tasked with building it up that made all the difference. He added:

Amazing kids. And being a site coordinator helped me, being a site coordinator at a building site, that was the contrasting, the biggest thing. [At other sites] you can’t get the same connections through tears that I had gotten, or that [other BC staff] had gotten. I don’t think that’s possible. And that’s why I’m proud of Bridging Communities holding on. Because I remember people telling me – maybe this site isn’t working, maybe we should find somewhere else to go, a different community center. People were telling me that, and in my mind I’m like, I’m getting angry, it triggers me, because I’m like, “That’s my job!” You’re telling me that my job isn’t working. People were telling me the effect isn’t there, the kids aren’t the right age group, blah blah blah.

We’re talking to [center director] at the end of the year and he’s pretty much admitting to us that the kids [we worked with] literally would run amuck and were the latchkey kids of the group…. [T]hey were just bad kids in the center… But [because of our program] for 2 hours, they’re not on the street, they’re not running amuck, and they’re not causing trouble. And they can actually vent about what happened at school that day. And learn science, and talk to college students at the same time. Everything just flows, and I just love how that works in the program.

Ultimately, Arnold was deeply impacted by his role as site coordinator because he was “on the frontlines”. Looking back on that experience, Arnold explained:

As a site coordinator, every day I was on the frontlines. Every day you couldn’t tell me anything about what we were about to do. I was anxious every day, I was nervous, I was sweating about the projects we had to do. But you know, every day I still had to get there, I still had to fight. Every single day that felt good. After I left site, I had a headache, I was dizzy… but it felt amazing every single day. I didn’t have a sense of hopelessness, I didn’t have a sense of [powerlessness]. I didn’t feel powerless at all when I was site coordinator.

Through the trials and tribulations, the ups and downs, Arnold came out stronger, more confident in himself and his ability to act, much due to the skills he developed in his role as site coordinator.

The following year, Arnold agreed to take on a different role within the organization – program coordinator. The program coordinator’s role is to support the
entirety of Bridging Communities, including supervising student staff, liaising with university officials and other campus organizations, and managing the budget process.  

This role would call on a totally different skill set – rather than being “on the frontlines,” he would be behind the scenes. As program coordinator, Arnold was called upon to work with a small team of students to provide oversight for the organization, including long-term planning, staff supervision, and representing BC to various groups. He worked hard to develop the skills necessary to accomplish these tasks that. For example, he spent a great deal of time building relationships with staff and providing constructive feedback when needed. He shared:

I didn’t know how to call people out. And that’s what [being program coordinator] required – it required me to call out people, not calling out in a bad way, but calling out as as a building way. But all those things that I learned were big aspects of agency, … this staff member, they’re not just a person – they’re a potential missile in the fight against education. And they could be themselves [the next] undergraduate coordinator. I had to look at each and every staff member that way, even down to certain people who didn’t possess the rapport with the organization.

What Arnold is talking about here really is developing the ability to look at every individual staff member (that’s no small feat, either, with a staff of almost 30 people!) as a representative of the organization and as an important contributor to the program and the movement. But more than that, it is looking at each staff member as having the potential to one day be the program coordinator and ultimately the face of the organization to the broader campus and community.

There were other skills Arnold developed in his year as program coordinator, including how to navigate the complex budgetary renewal process. This for Arnold – and

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16 Of the participants in the study, three – Theo, Arnold, and Francesca – served as program coordinators at some point in their BC tenure.
for other program coordinators in the study, including Theo and Francesca – was probably the most stressful aspect of the position. He described that part of the year as a big “worryfest,” and he often wished that rather than having to go through the budget renewal process, there could be a way that the organization’s budget could be a little bit more protected within the institution. For him, it was “crazy… that an organization that does so much good with so many people” would have to experience the stress of the budget renewal process on an annual basis.\footnote{The budget renewal process occurred as it did because of the structure of the organization and the fact that it received much of its money via student fees, which were allocated through the student government. This is a crucial aspect of the organization being student-run – if the budget process happened in any other way, it would likely have been managed by administrators at the U. This would have likely changed a great deal of the structure of BC. As such, there was certainly some good and some bad that came from this structure and the budgetary process.}

Ultimately, the administrative aspects of the program coordinator role were a struggle for Arnold. He never felt the same satisfaction and sense of accomplishment as when he was a site coordinator. Instead, he was tasked with seeing the big picture, and often felt overwhelmed, dissatisfied, and powerless. He shared:

> When I was a [program coordinator], when you are not in the fight any longer … you’re looking at the bigger picture. As a [program coordinator], I really got a chance to see the bigger picture of the organization, of the organization’s place in the U, and a bigger depiction of the entire world of education, and change, and pretty much what our mission statement was about. I feel like the mission statement was flowing through my veins, and that’s the only thing that kept me sane.…

> I had the sense of extreme powerlessness at times … that some of our goals just won’t happen this year, won’t happen at the university, some of our goals won’t happen with this staff currently. And that’s a very large weight…. I know [past program coordinators] felt that – I wish I could talk with them today about it. I know they saw that same plateau that probably just wouldn’t be reached in their time there…. I had to work with it – I had to roll with it….

> [W]hen you realize your ability to enact change, you also realize some of your abilities, and it’s a reality check. That’s very tough – it’s realizing that there’s so much that I can do, but there’s also things that I just can’t. And that’s a hard pill to swallow because you still have that fighter’s mentality, and that’s what keeps you going. That’s what keeps you trying to enact change. But … you can’t do it
all by yourself, and sometimes you can’t do it all even with the world behind your back. Because you have opponents to social change, which was crazy to me as well. You have people who either subconsciously, unconsciously, don’t want the same thing as you, and it’s terribly frustrating.

And I just guess like the main purpose of learning your abilities, it wasn’t conveyed – I guess no one can talk to you about this kind of stuff, not even a mentor. If you had told me, “You’re about to get every single tool that you ever dreamed of, but you’re also about to realize that every tool that you have is only small enough to fit in your hand, and you can’t change the big issues. Not your tools, not your tools now.” And that’s something I wasn’t prepared for.

It taught him an important lesson about agency – that you may not be able to accomplish everything you set out to accomplish.

Arnold’s journey through his two years on staff and his acquisition of the skills necessary for those positions was complex. Through it all, though, he grew a lot: in his words, “right now, I’m looking back at my experiences, and I’m just like I’ve grown, I’ve grown, I’ve grown, and hopefully I can keep growing.” Through the process, he estimated that his sense of agency went from a zero – “an absolute zero” – to a ten, a “full-fledged ten.” For him, this growth was a “very steep incline,” but that was important, because if I had time to think about all the doubts and fears I had, I wouldn’t be at a 10 right now…. Four years seems like a long time, but that’s a very short time to learn everything about yourself and learn about your position in the world.

**Structure**

The structure of Bridging Communities significantly impacted Arnold and his sense of agency. For Arnold, the most significant aspect of the structure of BC was its reliance and rootedness in its mission of education access. He shared:

Bridging Communities is flooded with people who all believe the same thing…I feel like a lot of other groups on campus struggle with that…. BC planted me in just pretty much the notion that education was more than important… Everyone in the organization shares that. And when you work towards it, when it’s a job, you link it to your own abilities…. I feel like my skills wouldn’t show up as much in [other places I’m involved in on campus] as much as they have in BC…. [Even
with the growth in the organization … the structure is still the same; the basic underlying principles of why we do this are still the same.

In his conception of agency – specifically agency directed towards social change – the mission-driven aspect is crucial. He described it as “understanding that you’re a part of something larger” and that “the work is never done.”

He first sensed the importance of the mission when he met staff members while a student in the course. Those students sat alongside him, teaching him about the mission and how it tied everything together. A couple of years later, he would then do the same thing as a staff member – imprint on students in the course the importance of the mission of BC. It was as if students were passing this on year after year. Ultimately, the mission-driven aspect of the organization kept Arnold focused and committed for the long-term, particularly in his final year when he was program coordinator – “I feel like the mission statement was flowing through my veins, and that’s the only thing that kept me sane.”

And it was the mission of BC that Arnold would carry with him years later, when he went on to get a Masters degree and a teaching certificate in order to teach high school physics.

**On Taking the Long Road to Graduation**

Before wrapping up Arnold’s narrative, I need to bring up an important aspect of his story – the somewhat winding path he took to complete his Bachelors degree. He is not the only participant in the study who did not complete his Bachelors in a four-year period, and in a program so focused on college access, this is an important part of the story to explore. Ultimately, it would take Arnold over five years to graduate. What happened during Arnold’s years at the U that led to him taking longer than he anticipated to finish? Arnold didn’t point the finger at BC as the cause of his delay, but certainly his
shifting academic trajectory contributed, and part of that shift was due to his involvement in BC.

Arnold explained that his involvement in BC gave him a great sense of agency, but at the same time there were negative sides. Part of his eyes opening and that “click” he experienced was also seeing that he wasn’t that different than the youth he served, some of whom would never make it to college. He shared:

I think about that every day [i.e., the fact that he took longer to graduate]…. There’s also negative things about this program, like there is about anything…. My educational process, just learning about… my educational history. And seeing the kids we worked with, and seeing how we look at them. I’ve never felt different from them. I’ve always felt in the same exact boat, just a little farther out in the sea, a little more lost, you know what I mean? Education, my education, in my perspective is literally like sailing out to the ocean. You’re leaving somewhere that you’re comfortable with to try to find something else new. And it doesn’t turn out well all the time. But I appreciate the journey. That’s why when I found out I was going to be here another semester, I got mad, I got upset, I got depressed, and then I got over it. Because it’s all part of the journey…. The people in BC have helped me and supported me, but as an organization itself, I guess it kind of hasn’t helped me because it showed me how much more people out there are struggling more than me. So while I do care about me spending more money in college, I know kids who probably never get the chance to go. And I’m here. I feel like I’m here going for them sometimes…. And that’s kind of a hindrance, when I care about that stuff so much and not about my own – it just doesn’t help. But literally at the same time they are who keeps me going, because if I don’t graduate, I can’t be a teacher and teach them.

That was just it – if he didn’t join BC, if he didn’t work closely with youth, if he didn’t become passionate about the mission, he would never have been turned on to the thought of teaching. He went on to say:

I guess it’s just BC, it also came at a time when it mixed up my priorities a little bit. Because if I never had BC, I probably would’ve graduated on time. But then again, I probably wouldn’t have known what the hell I was going to do after college. That part of it that made me want to be a teacher literally came deep, deep within my time here…. If I had never joined this program, I would’ve been part of the 9/10ths, I would have been partying on the weekends, going to class on the weekdays,
probably have a student job in the campus center. I really believe that. And when I look at my mother and I realize that I can’t bring her a degree yet, do I say to myself, I should’ve done that? No, I can’t. No.

So yes, his involvement in BC made him shift course a little bit. Arnold did end up taking the longer road to receiving his Bachelors. He did follow a course he would never have predicted when he was a senior in high school and looking only at undergraduate programs in astronomy. But the more important thing is that he found himself – he found his ambition, he found his calling, and it was all because of BC.

**Jessica**

A white woman, Jessica grew up in a predominantly white working-class community in a small New England city. She was raised by her mom and dad, and with an older brother. Her parents grew up in working-class families and did not complete college. Once they had children, Jessica’s parents had one primary goal – “they wanted nothing but what a lot of parents [want] – to give [their children] more than what they had.”

Her father instilled in her the meaning of hard work. After graduating from the police academy when Jessica was 5, her dad would work long hours and extra shifts. This would allow him to provide for their family. Her father wasn’t around much in her childhood, and when he was, was somewhat emotionally absent. This seemed to be in line with the family in which he was raised. Jessica described her dad’s side of the family as “very big people, they can be very intimidating.” She explained:

> My dad’s family is so focused on themselves, and I think that’s how it came into me with how I was raised…. Because if you have a conversation with my dad, if he’s not interested in what you’re saying, he’ll respond. But’s it not a response

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Theo made a very similar comment: that if he had not been involved in BC, he would have had a very different path through the university, a “mainstream student… never really think[ing] about the university sort of as a machine, never think[ing] about why you’re here and someone else isn’t.”
that continues the conversation – it’s a conversation ender. But if he has
something to say, it’s very important…. [His side of the family] were totally
focused on themselves, would never had done service on any level.

Jessica’s mom also worked outside the home, in jobs that at times required her to
do strenuous physical work. Her mother shared stories of working on a production line
while pregnant with Jessica, having to test the pressure of bottles with steam, “constantly
having to get up from the line and stop it” for fear of passing out. She persevered because
she was determined to provide for her children. When she was home she “tried really
hard to be the loving and emotional connection, since my dad was never there.”

When thinking back on her childhood, Jessica did not feel much of a sense of
agency and was directed by her parents to do what was asked of her:

I was fairly directed and sheltered in my upbringing. I’m trying to think of [easy
examples where I might have exercised agency] – like if I wanted to quit a sports
team, if I was allowed to, and I never was…. I did baseball one year, it was a
horrible decision …. , every time I got to a game I had to pee and there’s never a
bathroom near the field, so my mom was like, “You're not going to quit, you
signed up for it.”

She was involved with dance for much of her childhood, and remembered this as one of
the few places where she felt she had some say in what she got to do. Still here there was
some parental sway:

I think my mom gave me more agency than my dad did. But what was given to
me from my mom was the sort where it was, “Here are your options, but I would
love if you chose this one…. Feel free to do this for yourself, but this would make
me really happy.” There was agency there, but it was sort of directed.

Jessica’s first job in high school became a moment where she began to feel
independent and some sense of agency. This was partly due to her parents’ insistence that
if she wanted a car, she would be expected to pay for it on her own. So as soon as she
was old enough, she took a job at her local grocer:
The second I got into high school and I knew I could work, I got hired. My parents drove me to work after school or I went with another friend, and I worked until college started. I worked the register forever, and I always took on people’s shifts…. I was totally that person that was never going to call out, I was never going to do any of that…. I worked a lot and I liked working – I liked cashing my check – loved it, it was just an amazing feeling. I liked having to pay for my gas. I liked having my insurance come out so I had to have a certain amount of money. I enjoyed that responsibility and I still do now.

This independence was an empowering and satisfying feeling for Jessica. And interestingly, although she felt that her parents didn’t work to instill agency in her, their insistence that she work to pay for her own car might indicate otherwise; perhaps that wasn’t “agency,” per se, but it certainly could be considered self-reliance.

Jessica did not remember feeling a strong sense of “the other” in her childhood, in terms of getting outside herself and really thinking about the welfare of others. This was challenged significantly when her mom had a health scare and had to be hospitalized:

I was so totally focused on myself, on all the issues that were going on in my life, and I never considered other people to have their deals. That’s just how I was brought up. [Then in my junior or senior year] I’m at baton, my mom dropped me off. And my parents were notorious for showing up late – two working-class parents. My mom had two jobs, my dad worked like 80 hours a week at least…. So I’m used to them being late. But my mom was really late. And I remember being so mad at her for leaving me there, because I usually ended up being the last one there with the lady that worked at the desk…. And I remember finding out the reason why she couldn’t pick me up was because she had a seizure while driving on the highway, so she was in the hospital…

That totally flipped my world around. I didn’t go to school for a few days after that…. I realized how much I rely on other people and parents, how hard they worked for me, and [that] totally made me realize that I can’t be so focused on myself.

This was a huge wake-up call for Jessica, getting her out of her own head and beginning what she called the “[slow] process of seeing myself as not the focus of the universe and looking more outward instead of inwards.”
This spurred Jessica to think about ways to engage in service to others in her final year of high school. She started by joining a peer mentoring program. At the time the role felt quite significant to Jessica – she would support younger students at the high school, including students who were new arrivals to the school. This program shaped her initial understanding of community service as helping others and “coming down to [their] level.” Years later though, Jessica laughed at this attempt at community engagement:

That’s where I really got the idea of community service, and I was totally on that level where it was about serving somebody and how much I could help them. [*Said with sarcasm:*] I’ve had so many experiences in high school, I can totally shape your world and change your experience in high school. And I did, I had ice cream with them a couple of times…. That was actually kind of a big joke program at [my school].

Although she looked back on this program with some amusement, it served an important purpose for her: it would open the door to her interest in community engagement and, once she arrived at the U, would lead her to look for opportunities to engage in the larger community.

**BC Experiences and Agency**

As a student at the U, Jessica continued her journey in moving from her focus on herself to a focus on others and participated in multiple community engagement programs, including BC and a service immersion program. Her involvement in both of these programs significantly impacted her understanding of the world, her professional path, her understanding of herself, and her sense of agency. She was able to suspend her “past agency” – that is, the patterns she developed of essentially doing what was expected of her – and listen, really listen. She learned a great deal about others and in the process learned about herself. Her future orientation was almost reshaped - she started to realize
what was possible, and that she could direct her own life, and in the process became deeply dedicated to youth and to their empowerment.

As with the previous narrative, the nature of Jessica’s BC experience and its impacts on her sense of agency will be explored through themes: awareness, sense of belonging, and skill development. Because the structure of BC was not emphasized in her story, it will not be explored here.

**Awareness**

In reflecting on her experience in college and in BC specifically, Jessica focused a great deal on her own racial identity development and her relationships within and across race. Prior to coming to college she almost exclusively spent time with white people. The BC course presented her with the first opportunity where she was one of only a few white people in a roomful of people of color.

Imagine the scene: It is the first day of the fall semester of her sophomore year, and Jessica excitedly prepares for her classes. She buys her books, notebooks, folders. She organizes everything methodically and carefully. The BC class meets at night, in the lower level of the Student Union, so Jessica walks to the building, rides the escalator down one level. She likes to be early, to make sure she can show the professor she is prompt, and also so she can choose her seat. She arrives to the meeting space, which is mostly empty (again, she is early, by almost fifteen minutes on this first day of class). Gradually, the room starts to fill up. Fellow students arrive alone, in pairs, and in small groups. Almost everyone seems to know each other. Laughing, talking, smiling, hugging, giving high fives – it’s almost like she is at a meeting for a student group that she is not a part of. As her eyes look around the room, she notices that everyone is the room is brown
or black – Latinxs, African-Americans, bi- and multi-racial students. There are other white folks in the room, but not many. She kind of shrinks back into herself, starts to feel smaller: “I remember being very intimidated, because I had never [been in] a space like that…. I knew it was a space where we’re supposed to be talking about these things, but I didn’t know if it was a safe space.”

She doesn’t say much in class that first day, or really any day that first semester. While her default mode in most of her classes is to talk, to talk a lot (mostly for the professor’s approval and so she can get a good participation grade), in this class she finds her lips almost glued shut. She’s afraid to say the wrong thing. She wants to be liked, to be respected.

As Jessica moved primarily into a listening role that semester, she learned a great deal. She listened, deeply, to stories about oppression, stories of injustice. As someone who never really found school as anything but welcoming, she learned a lot from the anger and frustration of her peers:

A lot of what we talked about was new to me – [for example,] the idea of segregation and people [of color] actually wanting to segregate again…. I had totally just [thought of it] from the white perspective – “We let you in, you don’t want to stay here with us? You’re not happy you’re with white people?” Very, just very intense for me…. Oftentimes I find it hard in general to put myself out there, but even more so being the minority, and now knowing how that feels. Because I had never experienced many things, for being a girl or a woman now, so it was different to be a minority in a different way. And coming from a family that was so focused on the individual and who you are – [but] it wasn’t about me anymore, and it was like, shit, what does this mean now?… It’s not just about my experiences, and it’s not about the dominant white experience – it’s about everybody’s experience.

Jessica set aside her own story, her own frame of thinking, and started to recognize how others think – and not just any others, but people of color who she didn’t fully realize were subject to oppression in the larger society.
Part of this learning included looking at concepts of whiteness and white privilege for the first time. She also began to dissect the stereotypes and assumptions she had about people of color:

I [came to see that] the majority of [people] in [the] class are here to help me learn, and they’re not here to tell me I’m wrong, which is what I was afraid of because I knew a lot of what I thought at the time was probably wrong…. I had my own perceptions of what it meant to be a person of color….

That’s the first time I read Macintosh’s Backpack of Privilege. And I read those things, and I was like, [I’d] never thought about that. I had thoughts that were more closely connected to my father. I never thought that anybody was inferior due to their background, but I kind of just thought, well, if most of the people in my community or classrooms are white, then maybe there’s a reason for that? Maybe that you’re supposed to – the idea of biology or mating or whatever is, you go with who you think is going to be the best for your children…. I got so caught up [with the idea] of sticking with your kind because that’s what my … dad’s side of the family was always focused on.

And then ideas, like I said, like “really, you’re not happy that you have this now?” – [and] the very top-down, “but white people gave this to you.” Because I had read just the history part of it that’s presented in your history books, and the whole perspective on slavery and wars. You know, they don’t put the bad stuff in there of what the U.S. did wrong. They focus on the things we did right or mostly right, and how we won things, and other people were wrong.

And I just totally believed those things – I never questioned anything. And so that’s what I mean when I say a lot of things that may have been wrong, because I tried to just spit out what I had learned, and what people in my background were saying, which is what I did when I was little – I just repeated what I heard. So [students in the class] gave me perspectives back [and] helped me realize - “Is that really what you think? If that’s what you think, that’s fine, that’s who you are. But did you consider something else?” So it was definitely interesting to see how much I relied on what [I was taught as a kid].

That first semester Jessica began question what she had been told prior to coming to college about history, about identity, about race relations in the US. She began to question some of the overt and covert messages her family taught her about others.

As the year went on, Jessica came out of her shell and began to speak up. She began to worry less and less about offending others, and began to see that the other BC students were there to teach each other and learn together. She described:
When we got to the second semester, I realized that one of the students that was talking about segregation, he got very into it, very emotionally involved. But he was not aggressive or mean about it. And I realized that it was a safe space, and that the people that were there, no matter their backgrounds, everybody was doing some sort of learning, and everybody was doing some sort of teaching. And so I think that [that] student was a big teacher for me …, [the people in the class] definitely had a lot of influence on me. They were the people that – I would say something, and they would comment back, not saying I was wrong, and they wouldn’t say I was being too negative or I was being white-focused or whatever. They literally just presented another side of it, and they didn’t make it about me, so I didn’t feel attacked which was good.

This feeling was crucial to Jessica – she felt like she could engage in dialogue. She could listen and be listened to. She began to develop a sense of trust with her peers.

This sense of trust was important for paving the way to her involvement in the spring semester group participatory action research project. Jessica always hated group projects, for they bound her academic performance up with others. This time, though, it felt different:

I think originally, before BC, I would’ve been so mad at people for not being able to meet… like, “Why can’t you meet then? Why can’t you put whatever else aside?” … I always assumed before BC that people were lazy and that they just didn’t want to do the work…. That’s one of the things that I try not to do now, is consider what could be going on that you just don’t know, so there could be a legit reason…. And we were really good at working with each other … it was very supportive. And like, we need to bring this whole thing together out of makeshift parts and make it a working machine that gets us a good grade. I don’t like getting bad grades.

The group project served as a positive experience and shifted her previous notions about working with others.

One lasting message from the course was about her role as a white person in the conversation. She spent a lot of time thinking about what it meant for her to be a part of this program and to be working for education access and equity. She shared:

I was just so new to everything that I just wasn’t even ready to think that I should be doing anything, not that I could, but that I should be. Because I remember … a
conversation we had where, you know… if you want to be an ally, don’t come and stand up here with us. Go back to your family, your friends, to other people and educate them and talk to them. And so I was still sort of in that, you know, step back phase, learning what agency was, learning what my agency was, learning what my role would be if I were to make some sort of difference with BC, with the kids that we worked with, with biases and different things like that…. I [think] that I learned that I had agency when I was a student [in the BC course my sophomore year, but] I don’t think I really acted on it [then].

She found the experience of listening crucial in her development, and she believes that listening “is a form of agency in itself: make a change and have the one white individual in the room not be talking and not trying to lead the conversation.” Jessica would think about this a great deal over the course of her three years of involvement with BC. Interestingly, though, Jessica at times stepped so far back that she made herself small and struggled with feeling a true sense of belonging as a result.

**Sense of Belonging**

Jessica’s sense of belonging was complicated, a mixture of feeling like she belonged but at the same time feeling like the “white outsider.” She always wanted to feel a part of this group of folks who all seemed so close to one another, and who were all extremely passionate about the organization and its mission – but she never felt like she totally fit in. Her sense of belonging vacillated, sensitive to several factors including her job responsibilities and her relationships with other staff.

Jessica began to work for BC before the BC course ended: she was recruited in the spring semester to be the site coordinator of her own site. In the middle of the year, she went from being a peer to being in a power position. She was pretty uncomfortable with this move, unsure of her relationships with her peers. People would run late, but she was hesitant to reprimand them. People would be absent without contacting her, and again she wasn’t sure how to handle that. What did it mean, not only to be a peer with
power in this context, but to be younger than the other students and to be a white woman in a power position in BC? She wasn’t quite sure how to answer these questions, and at the same time didn’t feel like she could turn to other staff members to get support around this. Jessica explained,

[W]e were late often the first semester – I hated that. I liked the idea of accountability, and the idea of not working for somebody but working with them – and how can you work with them if you’re going to constantly be late? And that just makes it seem like it’s not important…. I asked the site people [i.e., students from the course] if they could meet five minutes earlier, which would make [us] arrive on time…. And then they could go get a coffee, which is often what they did. And that’s when the age thing came in, because I was like, am I allowed to ask them now?… And I think what made that harder was because I was sick [and had to miss site on several occasions]….

I felt very uncomfortable asking for support, in the fact that I was struggling with the idea of what it means to be white. And should I ask for support? Are they going to want to support me? And then, I don’t know any of these people, and they don’t seem like they even want to get to know me. … Especially when being sick – I didn’t want to look like, again, thinking about it as being a white person, [that] I step[ped] into this position … and I’m not doing my job…. I don’t want them to think I’m not pulling my weight or that I’m being lazy because I’m white…. 19

I had trouble putting myself out there … and I realized after a little while that … it wasn’t that they didn’t want to get to know me, they just had their own stuff going on…. And when somebody comes on to staff in the middle of the year, it’s hard to know they came on staff when you have so many things going on…. So I realized I was being overly sensitive about it.

Jessica became focused on both her age and her racial identity. She felt her whiteness made her unwanted. She also wondered if other staff were just too busy to get to know her.

Things began looking up her second year. She continued in the site coordinator role and developed strong relationships with the BC students who attended her site:

19 There’s an interesting reversal of privilege and stereotypes to unpack here, particularly the idea that Jessica would be seen as a representative of her race and that if she were to miss work, it could be seen as a tribute to her race. This is exactly what Macintosh (1990) points to as something that white people don’t really have to deal with. But in Jessica’s experience as one of the only white people in BC, she becomes keenly aware of her whiteness and the weight it holds in the space.
Since I was the site coordinator from the beginning, they were much more open to talking about things…. It was a much closer-knit group too…. They looked to me more as somebody they could ask things of. I wrote so many recommendations for [them]…. That was really interesting, because that flipped my world again – I was like, “So you’re asking me to write you a recommendation letter to get into Teach for America or a graduate program?” I’m a junior, and … [I felt like], “This is awesome! You guys love me!” It’s just great be trusted in that way with something so big…. And they never thought about the fact that I was younger, because I had the experience too. But the year before that, I didn’t have the experience before them – I was experiencing at the same time. So that helps. It definitely worked a lot better being site coordinator then.

Unlike in her first semester as a site coordinator, where she had to navigate a power shift in the middle of the year, this time she felt respected, trusted, and cared about by the students attending the site.

She felt more connected with several people on staff that year as well, particularly Arnold (at the time another site coordinator) and one of the program coordinators, a graduate student. Arnold reached out to Jessica and “made an attempt to create a real friendship” – this was noticed and had an impact. In addition, the graduate student program coordinator was incredibly supportive and made herself very available. Jessica relied on her quite a bit, particularly because she looked up to her. For the first time in her life, she started contemplating attending graduate school, with her eyes set on teaching:

I had never really talked to graduate students, doctoral students, or anything before BC, before I met you [the interviewer] and [the program coordinator who was a graduate student] and a bunch of other people, and saw that they were further in their education and that people were doing it. I told you before how college was a whole new thing to me. Grad school was – I didn’t know about that really…. And so in [BC], just listening to other people talk about what they were doing, and then asking questions about how their process was going. Or just checking in with them, not even specifically asking about what they were doing to find out for myself. I just explored these different options and so the connections that I made with people also open up that aspect of it.

I don’t remember who it was that told me about [the U’s teacher certification program] – it may have been [a graduate student on staff] – but they talked about these different education things you can get into. And when I talked to the advisor about an Ed minor, she brought it up, and I probably wouldn’t have continued the
conversation if I hadn’t really already heard about it from somebody else and seen other people doing it. It definitely helped in that way too. And hearing about Theo’s future aspirations and just seeing that grad school was a thing that was something people did, and people are capable of doing. So that was good too.

Both undergraduate and graduate students around Jessica were considering careers in education or teaching, and this inspired her to pursue that same path, realizing that she could and would enroll in graduate school herself. As a first-generation college student, the way that her BC colleagues influenced her was crucial.

Even though in her second year Jessica felt more connected to the staff in BC, she still had this nagging feeling that she didn’t quite fit in. She didn’t feel funny enough, she didn’t feel like she understood conversations and the humor around her, and she didn’t ask questions for fear of standing out. She shared:

I [felt] like an outsider in that way more due to my skin color…. [T]here’s a different vocabulary that I don’t know. I remember when I worked at [the grocery store at home], and I hung out with some people, I got made fun of for not knowing certain terms or slang. And I had no idea how you were even supposed to learn those and everything. So when I got to BC, I still don’t know a lot of these things, and sometimes people will say things and I have no idea what they said. So I often felt like an outsider in that way. I could also just ask, but I don’t because I don’t want to look stupid. Because I have been made fun of in the past for it.

Jessica felt like a white outsider. It wasn’t just about language – the difference was felt in other ways, including her background as a dancer, and her inability to speak Spanish. She shared:

Just like when they talk about dancing, because I’m a dancer but I can’t dance hip hop – I’ve tried. Just like – I can’t learn Spanish. It’s like, Spanish, hip hop, it’s that culture… I can’t get into it, and I really want to. I really want to learn about the language. I really want to speak Spanish…. And I enjoy learning new types of dance, but it’s just so hard for me, my body just doesn’t move in that way. I’ve been trained in ballet, tap, and jazz for about 19 years of my life.

So when they talk about dancing or when they talk about other things, it’s not something I necessarily know how to do, and that I don’t feel comfortable doing, because I’m so easily embarrassed. Again, I don’t want to put myself in that
position where I’m the spectacle … which is why I usually stay back and just kind of watch and laugh in the background at other people that want to be laughed at – you know, in a good way.

One thing that’s totally funny is, I heard people talking about Harry Potter the other day …: it surprised me. I totally made an assumption about that being more of a white culture thing…. And so that was part of my own assumptions. And then I was like, well damn it, I’m white, I should know about this, and this is maybe my way to make a connection with them, but I never read the books, never had an interest in it.

So that’s just one way it was kind of flipped. Culture could be anything and, you know, you’re interested in what you’re interested in, but you can still have conversations with these people about it. You know, they’re friends of yours, they’re people you work with. They’re not just people, they’re not “those people.” They’re coworkers and fellow students.

I don’t know. I just have trouble getting past that…. I think it’s an issue of forcing myself into a culture that I don’t necessarily think I fit into, or trying to force that connection. Or if I think people will push back on me trying to be a part of it. Or if I say some of those terms that don’t necessarily sound comfortable coming out of my mouth, because it’s not something I would say on a day-to-day basis.

Ultimately, Jessica struggled with navigating the differences she perceived between herself and those around her. At certain points, though, she felt close to bridging that distance. There was a point in her Junior year where she felt connected with staff, like she could be in on the jokes. By her junior year, she explained:

I was really getting to know people…. I was starting to feel more comfortable, and I could act like myself…. I was totally comfortable making jokes … and talking about things and making myself look stupid and it wasn’t a big deal.

Her feelings of connection were short-lived, shifting again in her senior year:

“there were so many new people … and I’m on that whole new playing field again … where I [had to] make my way back in.” Two main elements contributed to this challenge in her senior year: a new graduate stepping into a program coordinator position, and a new staff position for Jessica. The new graduate program coordinator had very different communication and leadership styles than the person before him.
Jessica also reluctantly took on the role of office manager and tasked with administrative projects that felt mundane; the role offered no real opportunity to connect with youth in the community or with students in the BC course. Her experiences that year seemed to have had the inverse effect on her sense of agency – she felt relatively powerless and disconnected:

I should probably start at the beginning. I hate it. I absolutely hate it. The reason why I stepped into this role is because we didn’t have anybody at the end of last year. I said I’ll step into this, I’ll just cover this position, and that’s how I’ll get paid, but I’ll be doing [other projects with BC that keep me connected to the community]. But then [those projects] fell through….

And oh my god, I hate it so much. I’m not in the classroom, I’m not with any students [at the middle school], I’m never in [the community]. I didn’t have a car … so even if I wanted to go some places, I couldn’t get to those meetings.

And then one thing that I really hated was, I was in the committee with core staff. And then they asked me to not be a part of it, and I struggled with that heavily…. I felt very shot down, very disrespected, when they did it. I was like, you are all new, you’re all new. And I know the office manager hasn’t in the past been in the site coordinator position, but everybody in core staff besides Arnold was new. And they said that I wasn’t participating in the conversation…. I don’t understand why I couldn’t still be a part of it, and … it was really hard. I cried. I was very, very mad at [the new graduate student on staff]. I felt like he was overstepping his bounds, because I think it was his idea. I felt like their backs had been turned on me….

It became for me that BC, like, now I have a boss …; he presented it like, “If you think that you should stay, you can present the argument.” But basically, I didn’t feel that I even could do that. I was just so pushed aside that I was like – I don’t even want to, you know?

Bridging Communities is student-run – it’s not about hierarchy. There are different positions where people have more experience and different responsibilities. But it was never like [just one person] made a decision. And they had talked about it when I wasn’t at a meeting. It was just so not Bridging Communities.

The challenges to her sense of belonging became magnified by being kicked off the core staff committee, and in a way that Jessica felt was not transparent or inclusive. It was this specific incident that signaled her withdrawal from the emotional withdrawal organization. This experience in some ways seemed to deplete Jessica’s sense of agency,
making her feel that maybe she couldn’t always take action and could be overpowered by the actions of others.

In her junior and senior years, Jessica was also involved in another program at the U. This program, which focused on one-week service immersion experiences that were embedded in a student-facilitated semester-long course, had some similarities to BC – elements of student leadership and a focus on themes of justice and reciprocity. There was an important difference for Jessica, though – in that space, she was part of the racial majority. There she was able to be more herself and didn’t wrestle with the same self-consciousness. She recalled:

I think maybe I was more honest or I spoke more in that class than I did in BC. I put myself out there a lot more … where I was like – okay, fine, this is what I think. And whether it’s wrong or not, that’s what I need perspective on. And so I think that’s why it was different, because they saw me for who I really was. I also told them [some very personal things] because that was a very safe space [and I] entirely trust[ed] them.

She could be more vulnerable with that group, sharing parts of her identities that she shared nowhere else in her life.

While she felt at home in that program socially and relationally, she later questioned their mission and the way they framed their approached to community engagement work. Could the one-week immersion model truly be reciprocal engagement? Could that model facilitate justice? A couple of years after her experience, she recalls that it was “very preachy. They just talked about it a lot. But then you go into a community and it was just different conversations, it was just not really action-focused.” In BC, she could see the consistent, incremental action steps she and her peers were taking. So, no she didn’t have the social connections she wanted necessarily, nowhere near the comfort levels she felt in the other program, but she did feel satisfied
that she and other staff were making an impact. She also wondered if her year in the BC course led to her feeling more open and more willing to take risks in the other community engagement program. In other words, she grew in her self-awareness in BC and then could use that as a foundation to take greater risks in the other service-learning program.

Near the end of the interviews, Jessica looked critically at her feelings of being an outsider and wondered if she could have changed the experience for herself. She remembered her process in the course positively, and wished she had allowed herself the same process of opening up when she was on staff:

I think that’s the main thing, because I think if I had put myself out there more, I would’ve had different conversations that would’ve led to different things. I think that’s the underlying factor. [When] I went through the course, the BC class itself, … I liked that I sat back and listened for a little bit and created a space where I could actually provide something and feel comfortable in what I was saying too, and then be a part of the conversation. I liked that. And I had good relationships with the students in the course at the end…. I just think with staff, working on staff …, I could’ve done better.

She also added that her sense of discomfort and outsider-ness directly impacted her sense of agency and what she could actually accomplish in BC:

I think it always had to do with how comfortable I felt around everybody there. I think if you’re going to have agency, and act on it, and do it, you need to feel confident in yourself and what you want to do. I don’t know that I necessarily always did in BC – which wasn’t necessarily BC, I think it was more just me as an individual.

She never really felt like she was confident or could be herself in BC. This held her back from realizing her full potential and from feeling like she truly belonged in the organization.

**Skill Development**

During the time Jessica was involved with BC, she learned several skills that supported her sense of agency and her ability to take action. Included in these skills were
self-awareness of her identities and deep listening, as discussed earlier, but there were other skills as well. As a student in the course and then the following year as a site coordinator, Jessica became more comfortable and confident working in schools and working with youth. She described:

That’s where I had the chance to be in a classroom…. I actually worked in a math class, and [the teacher] let me teach segments of it. She knew I had no training, she knew I was a legal studies major, but she knew I was interested in it, and she was very supportive, so that was really good. That’s where I got my sense for – I can stand up in front of a group of middle school or elementary school students and not feel an intense amount of worry or judgement. I just felt very comfortable with them – not even up there in front of them, but just with them in general. I felt comfortable sitting next to them at a desk.

She also networked in the school with staff and administrators, and gained confidence in her ability to build relationships at that level. These experiences ultimately led Jessica to shift her entire academic and professional path. As a result of her in-school experiences, coupled with the inspiration she felt from meeting graduate students, she would go on to pursue a Masters degree and two teacher licensures. Jessica credited BC with leading her on that path: “I wouldn’t have [pursued teaching or education courses] … if I didn’t have BC… [A]t the end of my junior year, I decided to do the pre-requisites for [a graduate program in teaching].”

Another major theme within Jessica’s skill development was her identification as a person in position of power within her staff role. This surfaced in two major places: her role as a supervisor of other students at their site when she was a site coordinator, and when she chaired the search committee for a program coordinator. As a site coordinator, she had a complex relationship with the power she held over students, and, as noted

Interestingly, when Jessica and I last spoke – about four years after the interviews and five years after she graduated from the U, she was on the cusp of a new professional path again, this time supporting pregnant women as a doula. She shared that she was “making less money but enjoying life a lot more.”
earlier, sometimes felt extremely uncomfortable with it. One aspect of that role that was particularly challenging was evaluating students at the end of the semester, as these evaluations were taken into account when the graduate instructor assigned students grades in the BC course. She described a relationship with a particular student as an example of the challenge this presented her:

One student that year … had something going on and so she wasn’t showing up to the class and she wasn’t showing up to site. And what made it worse, she wasn’t calling me and telling me the night before…. She would call one of the other tutor-mentors, “Can you tell Jessica I’m not coming?” Or she just wouldn’t call at all…. I just didn’t know what to do because I had never … to be an administrator, not like a boss, but to grade that person who was never there…. I had to talk to [the instructor] about it…. Towards the end of the semester, she told me she had something going on, and that’s where I was stuck.

She felt challenged by the power she held in supervising and evaluating other undergraduate students, particularly in her first semester in the role. By her second year, though, this aspect of her job became much easier and Jessica developed strong relationships with the students, even going on later to write job and graduate school recommendations for the students who went to her site.

Chairing a search committee was a huge exercise for Jessica. She was hesitant to take this on, but it taught her a great deal about her ability to manage the process, the power she had in terms of moving the process along, and what it meant to use – or not use – her voice to advance the process. She shared:

I had so much agency [looking at each] application and [saying], “No, no.” I could just throw people right out of the search. That was fairly intense to think about. I think I did it, and then I would go home and be like, I have to call that person tomorrow and just tell them no, because they didn’t have enough circles on this paper of requirements. Just throw them to the side so easily, which is a scary amount of agency…. [As a committee,] we all had agency together to figure out who could be good for BC…. [A]t one point, we had a phone conference conversation, and we were
deciding…. [Some members of the committee were] very vocal about [who they wanted to hire]. And I just remember, I don’t think my voice came up, even for a “yeah” or [to] get my voice in the conversation…. I remember being very overwhelmed at that point because that was such a hard conversation.

Being a part of this process held a lot of lessons for Jessica – about what it means to hold power and determine whether or not someone might get a job, but also about group decision-making, and trying to come to consensus around hiring decisions. This experience had a lasting impact and made her think about her own power in this kind of process.

Another skill Jessica learned in her time in BC was the ability to use her voice and to advocate for youth. When speaking with Jessica about a year after she graduated, she credited her confidence in standing up to “the man” to her years in BC:

Before BC I feared “the man” way too much to put a child[‘s needs] before that…. BC has always been that empowering force for me, and also the force that really made me look at myself and where I am in the world. I have stopped putting myself in front of certain things, but I’ve also stopped letting people put themselves in front of me.

Her time with BC gave her an important skill: the ability to use her voice and stand up for something she believed in, even if it meant some personal risk for her.

**Afterward**

In our final interview, conducted about a year after Jessica graduated from the U and left BC, she looked back on her three years with BC with some degree of sadness. What had she missed out by being so quiet and by not putting herself out there more? She was so afraid to be the butt of a joke that she made herself invisible. But by making herself invisible, she felt invisible, especially in the end. Regardless of all of this, she still looked back on the experience as life-changing and incredibly significant. She cited the three years of involvement as a major factor in her understanding of identity, in her
shifting sense of herself in a range of contexts, and in her personal sense of agency. Prior to coming to college she just kind of went along with things, went along with what her parents and family members told her to do. But by her junior year, she began thinking about a new path. She started to consider teaching. She began thinking about her positioning as a white woman and what it meant – and her experiences in other programs at the U allowed her to further process this. When she specifically reflected on her development of agency, she credited BC with being an important contributor. Ultimately, while her conflicted sense of belonging was hard at the time, in the long run she felt empowered in herself and her ability to advocate for youth. While other aspects of her experience at the U were significant, BC would ultimately be the biggest contributor to her sense of agency. In her words, “going to the U alone would’ve opened up my eyes to the idea of agency, but I don’t think it’s anything I ever really would’ve thought about in any great capacity or acted on if I didn’t become a part of BC.”

**Nia**

A Haitian American woman, Nia grew up in a large New England city. She described her family as from a lower working-class background – the “struggling class.” Nia had a lonely childhood – her family dynamic was complicated and she moved around a lot:

> I just always had something inside me where I just felt really left out of my family, no matter where I was, because, you know, I wasn’t raised by my mom, so I felt that I was kind of like nobody’s child. I’d be with my stepmom and it’d kind be like, “Well, you’re not my kid. I mean, at the end of the day, I still raise you as my own, but you’re not my kid at the end of the day.”

Nia remembered getting left at school more than once and feeling forgotten. She coped with this by “bott[l]ing a lot,” and not really addressing her emotions and pain. She was
quite resilient during her childhood though, and managed changing schools as well as at

times living on her own.

She became focused on going to college at a young age, because she knew she
could not depend on her family for help. Prior to college, though, she considered herself
to be a “pretty terrible student.” Nia felt insecure about her academic abilities even
though on her off time she was an avid reader. The climate of her high school was
extremely competitive, and she was side-by-side with “your typical A++ geniuses,
students that could hack into computers, students who, their whole life, they’ve been
prepping themselves to go to Harvard.” As a racial minority at her high school, she also
felt self-conscious about being Haitian – at that time, she shared, “being Haitian was not
cool.”

While high school was a conflicted experience for her, Nia recalled one course – a
history course she took in her 11th grade year – as extremely significant in developing an
early awareness about identity and oppression. She explained:

The most, I remember though, out-of-the-ordinary class that we did used to have
was a class called “Facing History and Ourselves.” That had to be my favorite class
in school because it was a class that looked at marginalization, oppression, at all
different races, not just a specific race. My teacher was actually Jewish, and her
parents were in the Holocaust. So a lot of people thought she was going to be

teaching from that lens frame. But it really wasn’t – she taught from every

perspective possible. That was a class that was kind of radical at my school.
Everybody wanted to take it. Because we weren’t being taught real history in our
U.S. World History class. … Definitely a class that changed my life and changed
the way I looked at the world.

Nia’s experience in this course was significant, her most prominent memory of her high
school studies. The course stuck out as one of the few positive experiences she
remembered from her in-school experiences in her high school years.  

Out-of-school, things were very different. At the age of fourteen, Nia began interning as part of the teen program at her City Aquarium. For the rest of her high school existence, this program would serve as an extreme contrast to her high school. The aquarium provided her a respite, a place where she felt confident in herself as a learner, a teacher, and a worker:

I kind had a hot and cold experience with my education. I’d be in school from 7am to 2pm, and I’d be like, “ugh,” just really stressing because I feel like I wasn’t getting it, things weren’t clicking. I felt like I was a below-average student…. I beat myself up a lot about that at school. But then I would go to work right after at the aquarium and I’d be teaching people, crowds of people, about marine biology and ecosystems and things like that. But then I’d go back to school the next morning, and I’d go back to feeling really subpar when it came to education in the classroom.

At the aquarium, Nia felt smart, valued, and useful.

The intern program provided Nia with a range of opportunities, including a position where she facilitated college awareness workshops for other high school students. As a junior and senior in high school, Nia taught other high school students how to consider and prepare for college, including workshops on college applications and applying for financial aid; she would draw on this experience years later as a staff member at Bridging Communities.

Ultimately, Nia developed strong, familial-like relationships during her years at the aquarium –”it was a family, honestly, and the family that I really, really needed.” Nia was also deeply impacted by the relationships she had with her two white female supervisors at the aquarium - “[it] really shaped me into the work ethic that I have, the way that I see

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21 Nia was excited to share that years later, the teacher for this course developed a companion fellowship program where students would partner on a project with a human rights organization in the city. Nia was inspired by this development, saying, “The cool thing about that class is that now they are thinking more so about how can our students take what they’re learning in this history class and become agents of change.”
the world, especially race-wise. Both my bosses were white, but that didn’t stop them from really seeing people of color.” This perspective on race, particularly the potential of white people being in allyship with people of color, would come up again for Nia when she worked in Bridging Communities years later. When it was time to leave her home city and head to the U for college, Nia’s aquarium family drove her to the university and dropped her off.

**BC Experiences and Agency**

As with the other narratives, Nia’s BC experience will be explored through the major themes that surfaced as influential to her sense of agency: sense of belonging; awareness, and her description of her BC experience as playing the “challenger role” in her education; skill development; and the non-hierarchical structure of BC.

**Sense of Belonging**

Nia waited until her sophomore year to sign up for the Bridging Communities course. She was drawn to the program due to the recommendation of her sorority sisters, but it was the consistent urging from a respected high school friend that really convinced her to sign up. Walking into the room the first night of the BC course, she instantly felt she belonged there. About half of the folks in the room were people of color, and the other half white; she saw a sea of familiar faces as well as folks she didn’t know. But it was the moment when the instructor walked in that had a major impact on her. Her instructor, a man of color, strode into the room with confidence and energy - “I guess not to really be cliché, but [he] was so urban and I was like, whoa. He’d go up there and bebop, and he had his sneakers on with his fitted hats. And I was kind of like, ‘He’s not wearing a bowtie and a button-up shirt!’” The contrast between the BC classroom
environment and her predominantly white high school was striking:

Being able to see a person of color teaching on a collegiate level was mind-blowing to me - and really teaching with the kind of wide range of spectrum, not just teaching a bias type of lecture but really teaching a wide range spectrum that can be applied to many different people ... and to then be able to get connected through BC learning more about people of color in the collegiate level getting PhDs and getting masters and excelling and still educating within the classroom.... That was really phenomenal to me. Because my whole education was predominantly white.

Nia was surprised that this dynamic could be possible at a predominantly white institution. Before, she thought this was only possible at a historically black college or university. While Nia initially only intended to earn her Bachelor’s degree (“Just really thinking Bachelor’s should be enough for me, thank you very much”), her experience with graduate instructors and other graduate students shifted her goals. She would go on to earn a Master’s degree: “I don’t think I would’ve wanted to go to grad school if, through BC, I didn’t see people of color in grad school doing excellent work, and ... really pushing through that and getting to where they want to go.”

Beyond feeling inspired by the graduate students in BC, Nia spoke about the powerful and influential relationships she had with her peers and the same family-like environment she experienced at the aquarium – “I had a sense of community in BC, a sense of family – someone could possibly think we were all siblings – ‘look at the huge, big multicultural family!’” She was inspired by friendships that turned into important professional relationships, because it was “inherent in the BC family that we talk through things.”

One example of talking through things was when she was able to talk through a challenging year with another staff member. In her first year as a staff member, Nia was charged with launching a new program of college awareness workshops at an area high
school. This new program was meant to take place in the afterschool hours and resemble the sessions she facilitated when she worked at the City Aquarium. She and two students from the BC class jumped into the project, excited to make an impact. Youth at the afterschool though weren’t particularly interested in the college awareness workshops as designed, yet her colleagues in BC pushed Nia to stick to the original curriculum. The situation became deeply frustrating, and Nia often felt like a failure. But finally, near the end of the year, she was able to talk things through with a BC staff member:

Toward the end of the year … we had a conversation. I really just saw it as a very loving relationship, so someone really seeing your dream and your vision, and kind of pushing you. I mean because we all have ways that we encourage people or push people…. But really seeing that they saw the same vision and they were just really pushing for that to be, you know, something that I can fulfill. And them not really understanding the full spectrum of the unstructuredness of [the high school where we were] until [he] actually went to site with us and was like, “oh, I get it.”

Through the frustrating elements of this experience, Nia could see that her co-workers were pushing her not out of disappointment but out of love. This dynamic really cemented her sense of belonging in the program and was the launching point of her continued engagement in the program – for an additional two years, including a post-graduate year as a full-time AmeriCorps VISTA.

The sense of belonging that Nia felt was not limited to her relationships with other staff members from BC, but extended to the staff and youth she worked with in the community. She recalled her relationship with a classroom teacher she worked with in her first year as very positive and supportive, saying that the teacher “was really cool, she allowed me to figure out what I wanted to do, and just let me do it.” She also described having strong relationships with the youth she worked with over the years, and her own ability to relate to them, both through her personal experiences and by relating things she
was reading and studying about. Her relationships with you would continue well beyond her time working in the schools:

I just really think about the relationships that I’ve formed with my students, and … how I’m still pretty proactive in most of their lives…. I’ll go to personal things that they’re having, even though they’re not my college workshop students anymore. But I’m invested in still being that role model or that mentor in their life, that I still communicate with them personally and check on them and still really make an effort to be still present in their life. You know, compared to just like coming in, doing work – well, if it was community service, coming in and doing my community service and then completely erasing myself from their life.

Her connection and sense of belonging was about a give-and-take, about her staying connected and committed to the young people she worked with long after the “work” ended. This feels reminiscent to the relationships she built when she was involved in the City Aquarium – creating that family feeling, that loving and supportive connection, which comes through long-term relationship building.

One final element of Nia’s testimony related to her sense of belonging was the way her relationships with white people were deeply impacted during her BC years. This aspect of her work would have a significant impact on her sense of agency. She didn’t feel as alone in the work or as conflicted about the motivations of white people. During her high school years, Nia felt skeptical of the motivations of white people:

Those were some of the thoughts that I really had in my head – not that I hated white people or anything like that. But just that, you know, “Oh, they don’t care about us,” you know? They might work with students of color, but they really don’t care – it’s just a job for them…. At [my high school] there were 385 of us that graduated, and probably 40 of us were students of color…. I just always felt that our teachers didn’t care, they didn’t care about us, you know? They act like, you know, “Oh, yeah, we love our students.” But really they just could care less about students of color. And so I just really always had thoughts that people just acted like they cared about students of color and the issues that are going on in the community, but really they don’t.

While Nia developed close relationships with her white supervisors at the aquarium, her
high-school-self never connected those relationships along the lines of race and authentic relating across racial lines.

Her work with BC, beginning with her experience in the course, changed that a great deal. She was suddenly in a context where she perceived the white people in the room as authentically caring, authentically committed to interrogating themselves and to working for education equity. Nia shared:

Being able to work in collaboration with all the different people in BC, and being able to see the different faces in the class. Because when I took the class, the class was really diverse…. It was half people of color, half non-people-of-color…. [I]t really became a chance for me to see that people who were doing this work are actually genuine about the reasons why they’re doing the work, and genuine about why they’re in the community and why they’re immersing themselves in this culture that’s not theirs, but willing to learn about the culture and willing to learn about the people.

Nia began to question her own views, and started to rethink her assumptions:

BC really dismantled a lot of those thoughts that had in my head, especially because of the high school that I came from…. BC was really that kind of “oh, okay, maybe I need to step back with my own biases.” Maybe I just need to take a step back and really evaluate a lot of the thoughts that I had because of some of the experiences that I had, and really take a look at the new situation I’m in, and really looking at people who do actually mean what they say.

Nia then began to think differently about the white people she was working alongside, as well as white people that had been in her life previously:

[T]he funny thing is, is that I guess I saw that, or I was immersed in that when I worked at the aquarium, being that my boss was a young white woman who was completely devoted to changing what people saw [urban youth of color] as. [But at that time] I didn’t see that as that – I didn’t look that critically and see that, as that’s what was happening. I just thought she’s white, and she likes working with teens. I didn’t really see it as her being an ally to the community. And so that’s something that BC definitely has opened my eyes to and played the role in.
This redefining of how she saw white people was a major take away for Nia. She could imagine white people as “allies” – a term she uses to symbolize a white person who is invested in justice for people of color.

**Awareness**

Within the theme of awareness, Nia was deeply impacted by her involvement with BC, starting with the course but continuing through all four years of her participation. She spoke about BC as her “core learning factor” in college, playing a major “challenger role” and “disrupt[ing] a lot of the foundational education” she had previously. During her years, she was challenged to think about different elements within the educational system that privilege certain students and disadvantage others. She began to look at things very differently, in a way that forever changed how she moved about the world.

A few moments in Nia’s story mark this awareness and the disruption of her previous views of education. In her first semester of involvement with the course, she went to her site, an elementary school, during the school day, expecting to learn about the school and get oriented into her role as a tutor-mentor. Instead she was asked to be a substitute teacher! As the year went on, she noticed this as a trend at the school, which was a marked difference from her own high school experience:

I do remember, though, a higher rise of substitute teachers, because it was like every other week another teacher…. The teacher that I was with actually was always doing dual classroom management … not only would she be in charge of her classroom, but the classroom next door to her, because the teacher wasn’t there that day, and there was no substitute. And that really just spark[ed my interest] … because … one, at my high school, it’s very rare that a substitute would be there. And two, if your teacher was sick or needed the time off, there would be a substitute that would come in. I never really realized that there’s schools where substitutes aren’t available or that there’s no one to sit in the classroom with the students.
Not only did she see this inconsistency about staffing, but she also noticed some patterns about in-school suspension that were new to her:

It was just really a struggle, just really looking at the education system, and really just being really disappointed because I’m like, no one is trying to do anything to keep these students in school! Like even, I used to get frustrated [because] in-school suspension – for the students it was a joke, you know. It’s like, “Alright, cool, so I don’t get to go to a class all day, that’s fine with me.” My reading students – it was just very inconsistent with them. It’d be – one day, they were there, the next day, they’re not. The young girls were always there though. But the boys were always in and out of trouble.

Nia was surprised by this trend – it wasn’t at all in line with the schooling experiences she had growing up.

The Bridging Communities course further amplified her understanding of the educational system, and the inequalities embedded in this system. Nia explained:

In BC I feel that I’ve been challenged mentally with a lot of the thoughts that I’ve had previously. And it’s really disrupted a lot of the foundational education that I had, in just the way that it was being taught, who it was being taught by, things like that…. BC has really challenged me to look at the world around me and the [area where our university is located], and really look at what’s going on educationally. That’s really what BC has been for me. Especially for me, just really looking at the school system. Before I used to be like, “oh, the school system – terrible.” But not really looking at why there’s issues with the school system. And through BC, you know, with the class, really learning about that. And then working in different communities and seeing different issues in the school system.

Nia’s experiences in the BC course, including her experiences at her school site, flowed into one another and led to an increased awareness around education equity, as well as an awareness of herself and her ability to take action and work for change.

Throughout the interviews, Nia shared how her time in BC evolved her, disrupting her foundation and causing her to rethink what she was seeing around her. She
shared an example about a reaction she had to a billboard she saw in New York City, early in her college career:

[I]t was the first thing I saw on the bus riding to New York …: a billboard that talked about NYU invading the local Bronx community…. And I was kind of like – what’s the issue? It’s a school in a city – of course it’s going to be in neighborhoods and kind of invade a personal neighborhood space – what’s the problem?… Being someone that was, at that time, not as involved in getting, being proactive about school systems changing, and really being invested in changing the way education is happening, I thought nothing of it.

Nia’s younger self was somewhat confused by the statement the billboard was making. Reflecting back on this moment, though, Nia analyzes the billboard – and her initial reaction to it:

And then I thought, then that just really brought me back to [my university] and really thinking about schools, large schools, that are in communities that are kind of invading personal community space, but not giving back to the community while invading that space…. [L]ooking at the U and kind of really seeing that they do have the power to give back to communities, and they choose not to, and really realizing and not knowing that they chose not to until I started working with BC, and seeing the pushback that BC would get when demanding of the university to do certain things for the community. And so now really looking at my U school system and seeing, you know, really understanding – okay, so when the university does have XYZ power but they choose not to use those powers when it comes to certain communities.

Nia used this memory as a chance to reflect on where she was before and after her experiences with BC. The older version of Nia didn’t really understand the complexity of university-community relations; post-BC, Nia looked at university-community relationships with a critical eye. She questioned why universities wouldn’t leverage their resources to give back to the communities in which they are located.

This awareness has an important relationship to Nia’s sense of agency. Nia explained how she came understand the concept of agency while in the BC course:

It was in BC and especially in the class time that I started actually using the word “agency” in my vocabulary, and to actually start thinking of myself as an agent of
change. Because it’s one thing to just learn about stuff in class and learn the terms and, say, on your own free time, go and try and do this. Whereas in the class … you just kind of flow that into it, and students can easily connect terms and terminology to the actual actions that they’re doing.

As Nia began to unpack the educational injustices she witnessed in schools and she read about and discussed in the course, she also began to understand that she could *do* something about it. She didn’t have to just sit in a classroom, but she could exercise agency herself, much of which she was able to do as a staff member in BC.

**Skill Development**

As a site coordinator for two years, and a full-time AmeriCorps VISTA for one, Nia found that her job constantly called on her to take action, to put her philosophies into practice, and to work for social change. In those three years, she developed, enhanced, and practiced a number of skills that allowed her to feel a greater sense of agency – workshop design and facilitation, curriculum development, supervision of other college students working with her, using an accountability log to track her progress, and community organizing. She also learned important time management skills, such as delegating and saying no. Things didn’t always go as planned, especially during her first year as site coordinator when her college workshops were very difficult to implement, but she learned from those setbacks. As she persisted with BC, she took on additional responsibilities beyond her site, helping with BC student recruitment and joining committees for various projects, including search committees to hire new staff. One particularly prominent memory for Nia was in her second year as site coordinator when she was leading a series of college awareness workshops and the students at the school later walked out in protest of the school’s administration:
We did a youth activism workshop … where we talked to them about how ... sometimes people tell them that youth can’t make change. We watched The Children’s March video, where they really got a chance to see that, you know, here were children making change and creating headlines and really doing things for their community and standing up and being vocal about it…. We had an open discussion about their experience at [their school]…. And then what was supposed to happen was we were supposed to watch Waiting for Superman the next class. But what happened was, there was, I guess the nursing students were supposed to get their certification and something went wrong where apparently they weren’t going to be getting them. So now a lot of nursing students that were going to go straight to work after weren’t going to be able to do this. And so they ended up walking out of school that day, and we were there, and it was just complete chaos. … Me [and the other BC students] were sitting in the hallway, and [overheard the students] demanding answers at their administration, like “why aren’t we getting [the certifications]?”… They’re being vocal and they’re demanding answers. That was cool.

Interestingly, a couple of months after Nia and other BC students were talking to the high school students about youth making headlines, this group of youth made headlines of their own in a few local publications. While Nia can’t say for certain that she and the other BC students directly inspired the students to take action, it certainly served as a critical factor in Nia’s own sense of agency. To see the students she she was working with stand up for themselves had a major impact on Nia as an advocate for youth and for education equity. It also built Nia’s confidence as an educator and facilitator.

Nia built on her skills as an educator during her final year in BC when she began coaching BC students and staff on how to navigate programs such as food assistance. In this way, she became a major resource for students around this area. Part of this was connected to Nia’s own situation – as an AmeriCorps VISTA, she found herself in the position of learning to navigate social systems as an adult, including having to apply for food assistance and other federal benefits. Because of her own learning of this process, she was able to coach BC staff and students to navigate these systems:
Living below the poverty line was not fun and that I think was a physical
reminder about being an agent of change…. I was maneuvering housing, even
learning about heating and electricity, then I took the information that I was
learning … and I was giving it to other college students that I knew that were
struggling paying heating bills who were living off-campus, or students who were
like, “I have to cancel my meal plan, and I can’t eat, and how do I go about
getting groceries?” So teaching them about the SNAP program. And so in my
AmeriCorps role, the physical living below the poverty line also helped in me
learning how to become an agent of change or just be able to be a person who is a
resource for others. Sometimes when people present being an agent of change or
agency to someone, they think it’s so big and so like you have to be someone like
Martin Luther King. Whereas even simply being able to pass knowledge on to
someone is an important part of agency.

Nia was able to find ways to leverage her own situation and share the knowledge she
 gained with other students. For her, this was a crucial way she could enact change and
empower others.

Nia also developed the skill of leveraging resources across the university and
channeling those resources to support community partners. Nia says,

Just my everyday work at BC, being able to leverage resources from the U to be
able to support the work that BC does, and to support our partners was, for me,
kind of the whole, A-HA! This is what it is on a higher ed, a national level to
really implement agency. So it was, I think for me, it was the reason why I
actually went and got a Masters in Higher Ed… [I] really wanted to be able to
gain more knowledge of higher ed…. to impact change, especially for Black and
Latino students. My work as a VISTA, it was just invigorating every day, like
every day I wanted to go out and do my job very well so that others could benefit
from it.

It was almost as if the three prior years of Nia’s involvement in BC – first as a student in
the yearlong course, then two years as a site coordinator – really led to her year as a full-
time AmeriCorps VISTA, where she could fully understand the impact she could have,
the agency she could exercise, with college students and in the communities where BC
was connected. She also came to understand that one doesn’t have to be Martin Luther
King to enact change, but that we can all exercise agency, particularly agency to work for social change.

**Structure**

The structure of BC, as a student-founded, student-run organization, had a profound impact on Nia’s sense of agency and on her understanding of what her ideal professional environment could look like. The elements of the organization that stood out in particular were the collaborations BC engaged with, such as partnerships with other campus organizations; the closeness of the large staff (connected to the sense of belonging she felt); and the peer-to-peer mentoring she experienced. The collaborative approach BC took to their work held long-term implications for Nia and she found it useful post-graduation in full-time work:

BC was really attentive to what was happening around them and how it was impacting us as an organization on campus and how to use the other organizations around us to really get things done, which is something that I’ve really, especially from my VISTA year, which was a lot of learning to leverage resources from different offices, different parts of the campus, which is what I worked on at the end of last year and beginning of this year [in my new job], especially with the students groups that I advised [in my job at my former high school] – both of them are student groups of color and they have very low resources, or none at all, or very low funds. And so very quickly when I went into that position, I took those things that I learned from BC about tapping into organizations around you, leveraging resources, and I started doing that at my current job.

This networking and leveraging of resources, while mentioned as a skill Nia gained in the previous section, was a real marker of the philosophy of the organization and had a major impact on Nia both personally and professionally, well beyond her involvement in BC.

The closeness of the staff and the peer-to-peer mentoring was particularly important to Nia, inspirational in fact. The mentoring relationships were irrespective of job titles and proved that all members of the organization could learn from one another:
When it came to learning and personal development in BC, the titles weren’t important. The [program coordinator] could learn something from me [as a site coordinator]… Those mentoring relationships were no longer restricted by job description, job title, things like that.

And this peer-to-peer exchange was enhanced by the feelings of family that permeated the large organization:

[The BC family is] crazy. Unique. It is one where you can learn a little something from everyone, it doesn’t matter who the person is. It really taught me that hierarchies really don’t work in the job world. Because it’s about being collaborative and in cooperation with each other in order to reach the same goal. So it’s a very collaborative family, people just always getting together to really, I always say, do the good work of the good people. It’s a very supportive family, supportive of what we do as an organization, but also supportive of each other internally…. Someone can say something in the office about education or just a general comment, and it’ll really change the way another person in the office acts, talks, thinks about something. And I don’t think you would ever get that experience anywhere else.

These aspects of BC as an organization – the collaborative work environment, the non-hierarchical way the organization was structured, and the emphasis on supporting one another’s learning and development significantly influenced Nia’s sense of agency and her way of being in the world.

Overall, Nia experienced some major shifts over the course of her time in BC – and felt she was moved from someone who didn’t really question things (e.g., the billboard incident) to someone who not only analyzes what she sees and hears, but thinks of ways to inspire and empower youth to take direct action for change. When we spoke in our fourth interview, Nia was working in a role in her former high school to connect students to internships and other professional opportunities. She was able to take the skills she learned, coupled with her increased awareness about the educational system, and directly apply it in this work setting. In addition, she carried the sense of belonging she felt and the structure she was inspired by as reminders that these were ideal aspects
for her work environments well beyond her years as a student at the U and a staff
member at BC.

Atabex

Growing up in the US and Puerto Rico, Atabex\textsuperscript{22} was raised by two parents – a
mom in the States and a dad on the island – who were fiercely devoted to the
empowerment of their children. Of her mother, Atabex remembered being inspired by her
mom’s devotion to finding the right career, which included going to night school and
trying out different jobs. She remembered:

My mom was a very hardworking woman. She had me at 25, was married at the
time, and she decided to go back to school to finish her bachelor’s degree. And as
I was growing up, I would be with her during the week. She would take me to
school with her – night classes … and I would be knocked out on the train coming
back home. She did so much transitioning back and forth and working, and
definitely nothing stopped her to do what she wanted to do because she [wanted] a
good life for me and her. And that showed [with] her dedication; that definitely
inspired [me], that shows where I got that dedication from, that drive and not
giving up. …

I did see my mom, as I was growing up, that she went through her phases and
trying to adjust herself in the career she wanted to be…. When she first came
from Puerto Rico, and moved out here when she was 18, her first job was at a
chocolate factory. She quit the first day because she couldn’t deal with the smell.
And so, from there to now, she’s working in property management … and is
doing well off of that…. So seeing her starting there and seeing her process, her
transitioning into the career she wanted…. She’s also a constable as well for the
city…. I remember at one point she started going back to school to pursue a
certificate that she’s wanted to do. She’s always gone back and wanted to learn
more …; that’s something that I really admire about her.

\textsuperscript{22} Prior to becoming a part of Bridging Communities, I met Atabex when we both participated in a
yearlong writing workshop and performance. That year she talked at length about Bridging Communities:
she was a fierce advocate for the program and urged me to apply when a graduate instructor position came
open. So, unlike some of the other participants in the study, I knew Atabex prior to joining the BC
community. During my years teaching with BC, though, I didn’t spend much time with Atabex, and when
she decided to leave the program, I was concerned that something happened that had a negative impact on
her. With that in mind, I reached out to Atabex to interview for the project – I was curious if her experience
in BC matched that of participants like Theo and Arnold who were deeply impacted by their involvement.
Atabex’s mother inspired her – inspired her to learn, inspired her to pursue her passions, and continues to inspire her to follow the twists and turns of her path. 

Atabex’s father was also always a source of inspiration for her. As a young girl, Atabex learned about her father’s passion to be “an artist with a mission.” He had a long career of involvement in theater and music in both Puerto Rico and the US, including roles on soap operas and a stint on Broadway. She was forever imprinted, though, by his reason for leaving commercial theater for a different path. She shared:

He was getting into the commercial arts, and at some point he realized that … he should decide to use his art as a way of making social change and creating social justice. And it got to the point that my dad was doing documentaries…. He was doing his soap operas and Telemundo stuff … back in the ‘80s. And when he changed that vision of what his mission was and life as an artist. That’s when he started leaving his marks, his stamps, in many different genres in the artistic world, to the point that I one time was in Puerto Rico and my teacher was showing us a documentary. My father pops up on this documentary – we were in class and I was like, how the hell did this happen? (laughs). And one time I was reading about the Afro-Boricua ethnicity in the island in my history class in Puerto Rico and one of my friends leans over and says, “Oh look! It’s your dad!”… He’s done so much – I could name you numbers of things and there’s some things that I’m still learning about what he’s done as an activist. And he said this quote, and I hold it near and dear to my heart. He said, “I stopped becoming a commercial artist and started to become an artist with a mission.”

Her dad also inspired her with his commitment to his own education – she recalled being five and walking across the stage with him at Harvard University when he was awarded a Masters degree. Ultimately both parents inspired her to pursue her dreams and also to attend college.

Her father’s passion for using theater, music, and dance as a tool for social justice would ultimately bring Atabex at a young age into the same line of work. Before Atabex was born, her father helped to start the Talented and Gifted Latino Program (TAG) in a city in New England. His long-standing relationship with the program would bring
Atabex into the program as well. She remembered a conversation she had with the
director at a very young age, maybe 10 – the director told her, “I’m expecting you to be
here once you hit 13 – I can’t wait to have you in my program.” She did end up joining
TAG at age 13, and would stay involved in TAG throughout high school. The program
brought her a strong sense of connection:

I kept coming back because I loved the fact that I was able to be around folks
from my culture, a lot of folks from my ethnicity, being able to speak Spanish,
being able to do dance activities, be involved with theater – that’s when my love
for theater was born…. And I learned so much about being connected with my
culture and my roots, as well as connecting with other youth.

Atabex would not only find connection there – she would also take on leadership roles at
a young age, which would have a crucial impact on her sense of agency. She shared:

At some point my dad wasn’t teaching [at TAG], so he passed the baton to me, to
teach theater for the afterschool…. So I taught my first theater class there at the
age of 15, and I kept coming back, and then I started working there as a teacher
assistant in the summertime…. I have accomplished so many things there…. I had
so much room to grow, and to go above and beyond and become this leader. It
was such a great experience – it was something that I always hold near and dear to
my heart.

Through her experiences at TAG, she became focused specifically on advocacy for
people of color and for working for social change. At the age of 15, Atabex wrote and
performed her first play focusing on this theme:

The play that I wrote was about the Latinos being the biggest population within
the next 50 years. I explored that idea so much, at the the age of 15. I look back at
these 15-year-olds and I’m thinking, wow – I was really thinking like this? Really
politically and actively about wanting to use art as the voice of these issues that
we don’t see yet, or the possibility of the changes that we can make. I was like,
wow, that’s pretty intense…. Since then, I knew that I could use my creativity in
voicing these different things that are happening around us…. And what we can
do to take advantage of it and create something positive out of it.
Through her dad and the range of experiences she had in TAG, Atabex honed in on her sense of agency as a teenager, and was developing and defining how she would move about the world – as an activist, an advocate, and an educator.

Growing up in two places had a major impact on Atabex. When she was 14, her father and his wife decided to move back to Puerto Rico. As a result, Atabex spent her teen years dividing her time between Puerto Rico during the school year and the US in the summer. She would transition from a middle school in the states to high school in Puerto Rico, an experience that forever shaped her political identity. Through that experience, she would learn a great deal about the history of Puerto Rico and its relationship to the US. Courses about Puerto Rican history and witnessing various political moments on the island – like a referendum for Puerto Rico to become the 51st US state – helped shape Atabex’s identity and her sense of agency significantly:

The obsession with the politics in Puerto Rico was really ridiculous for being such a small island…. I remember driving through the day of the election [and there were] so many flags, because the political campaigns would post [them] up in different corners during that week…. And then one day, I remember me and my parents were driving through San Juan, it was like a wave of people waving the American flag, and I’m like, “Wait!” And my dad was just shaking his head. It was just one of those moments, like – wait, I don’t understand. Why do folks strive so much and want to become Americanized [and] lose an identity that has so much history? … There’s so many issues behind the US, the economy, and the politics. You don’t want to become a part of it. We have enough baggage on ourselves, we don’t want to contribute to that fact.…

In terms of me owning up to engage with community [and] creating social change – that was one. To folks who own up to their identity and to being an advocate for their identity, of who they are as a people.

Another aspect to her evolving commitment was her considering what it means to be a Black Puerto Rican:

Another thing that got to me was my ethnicity as a Black Puerto Rican, that was something else that I needed to own up as [part of working for] social change, and folks being advocates and bringing social awareness about being a Black Puerto
Rican in the United States. And how we don’t get that much recognition in the media or even in public spaces. So that’s something that I’m still dealing with now, how people react – when they say, like, “Oh, you’re Puerto Rican? Are you serious? I thought you were this … or that.” And yeah, you know, sometimes I have to give them a five-minute lecture to keep it moving.

Ultimately, going to high school in Puerto Rico would dramatically shape Atabex’s political and social identities – way more, she says, than if she had solely grown up in the US. She shared:

I feel like had I not been in Puerto Rico, and I lived here for most of my life, I don’t think I would be just as socially aware about the issues that are going on with the politics between the country that I love so much, and the place that I live, which is the US. And knowing that all of the hard work that all these political activists in our past, in our history, have strived so much for folks to have – to keep, to remain this identity. And so wanting to create the social change.

Attending college was never a question for Atabex. When deciding where to attend college, the U seemed like an obvious choice. Several folks from TAG went to the U – a few of them happened to be involved in BC as well. She decided not to join BC in her first year, though, because she really wanted to make sure it was right for her before making a commitment. She found a different opportunity that year, in her first on-campus job working for a small theater company that was devoted to the empowerment of communities of color and oppressed people. Working for this organization would help ease her transition into the college community and also provide her a platform to be around other artists and performers. She shared:

[A]t first, I was a little nervous [about starting college], because a lot of folks who came into the U already knew each other … because they went to high school with each other. And so when I came in, I was coming from the island and I didn’t know anybody, so I had to start from scratch, but it flowed very well… During my first semester, I started getting involved working with [the theater company], which was one of the best things and best starts for me, to get involved as a student and also as an activist as well, helping the community through the arts, as well as organizing…. [T]he staff people that I worked with was very loving, very caring. It felt like a home, and I felt so comfortable coming into that
space every day. I think it was probably one of the fewest student jobs that I had that I was very excited to go to work and sit down and create things, and being part of a team that had so many experiences and backgrounds, and I learned so much from them.

By the end of her first year, Atabex knew she was now ready to make the commitment to enroll in the BC course and so she signed up to start the program her sophomore year.

**BC Experiences and Agency**

As with the other narratives, four themes emerged in Atabex’s reflections on her involvement in BC and the way her sense of agency was influenced. Sense of belonging and the structure of the organization were the most prominent factors for Atabex, but awareness and skill development were significant as well. Ultimately, Atabex’s sense of agency was impacted immensely: the program provided her an important sense of family on the campus and gave her a confidence in her skills as a community organizer, a confidence that would follow her well after she graduated from the U.

**Sense of Belonging**

Following her first year at the U, Atabex decided she was now ready to enroll in the BC course. She took this step because she wanted to work in communities and build her skill sets. Within the first few weeks of being in the course, she was confident that she would find a sense of belonging and support in BC. This was amplified by both the classroom climate and the community in the city and school where she served. The classroom climate was welcoming, giving her an “instant feeling of comfort and that level of trust. In turn, the instructor was motivating and engaging, which made her want to do more and work harder in the course. All of this coupled with interesting readings and time for peers to give each other advice about their work in the community made class meetings positive and exciting.
Ultimately though, the major draw for Atabex was the opportunity to work in the community. She was especially excited to become more involved in a city that had a high population of Puerto Ricans. While there, she felt tangible reminders of her life in Puerto Rico - hearing island slang, seeing Puerto Rican flags everywhere, seeing and smelling foods from Puerto Rico at the restaurants and at community events. She especially loved talking with students who had just come from the island. It gave her a sense of home, a sense of comfort, really a sense of belonging:

[A]t the time, I was so homesick …, coming from spending four years of my life in Puerto Rico and then, there were certain things that I missed about being out there. A lot of my close friends from high school, that I still talk to until this day, are still out there, and I don’t get to see them on a regular basis. And [I missed] a lot of the different cultures and habits. Being able to step into that place, and talking to a lot of the students who just came from the island or were born there, being able to make that type of connection, it felt really good. It put a really warm feeling inside of my heart, definitely. And I can pick up Puerto Rican island slang as we’re talking. So it just felt good. And it felt really homey …: you see all these flags in the middle of Main Street, and being able to stop by the restaurants…. It was just all worth it.

It was this feeling of home that really drew her to participate in BC and that fueled her continued engagement in the program. She shared, “[I]t actually brought me back home when I thought about it. Because I think I was more there trying to connect with my personal home experiences, and trying to feel at home.”

As a second semester sophomore and in the second semester of the BC course, she was approached by a BC staff member with a job offer – this was an easy decision for her and an automatic yes. She would take on the role of coordinating campus tours and community events to make the university campus more accessible to the youth they were serving. The job came with an inspirational title – Community Outreach and College Awareness Coordinator – that gave her a sense of “I’m so ready to make that type of
change; I’m ready to bust down the government doors and create a voice for my people.”

Joining the staff of BC would build on her feelings of home, and the staff provided her with a strong and supportive network of students who were also deeply committed to the mission of the organization and to empowering the youth who they were connected to. She found the office space inclusive and comforting:

[It] became a family – there was a lot of love in the room. Even though we were in a small tight office space, and we wanted to have more space and more room to breathe…. But it was all family love in there. And honestly … it became a life. Because we cared about it so much that we would stay in our office and make sure everything was done, and make sure everything was good before we would go. We had a lot of check-ins, you know. We checked in with each other, like – “Yo, are you doing okay today? Can we sit down and talk about it?” …

[It] could be something that it’s not much of a positive thing because it kind of puts you in that stress mode on top of other things that you need to do with work, with school. But it shows that, at the end of the day, that each of us really cared about what Bridging Communities stands for. And how we made sure that we stood by the mission, and the folks who started Bridging Communities at first. You can tell that a lot of people so much care about it.

Atabex found love and support as a staff member in BC, and was inspired by the other students who were involved, as well as everyone’s commitment to getting the job done. On the other hand, though, there were times where it was stressful on top of her other commitments – at one point, she describes the job feeling more like a full-time job. But at the time, the added stress felt worth it, because she felt like she belonged and that she was surrounded by others who were deeply committed to the work.

Atabex resigned from her position at the end of her junior year. For some, this decision came as a surprise. Full disclosure: at the time, I thought Atabex left the program

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23 Because the job title is connected more to the structure of the organization, we will explore that topic more fully in the next section.
dissatisfied for some reason. As it turned out, this was very much not the case. Atabex chose to leave to focus more on why she came to the U: theater for social change and community empowerment. Because this was not a core facet of BC’s work, Atabex decided that it was time to move on. She shared:

Even though I really did not want to leave Bridging Communities at all – I really didn’t want to because I created such a great family and a great network and great connection with so many people. But at one point, I had to stop – I had to pause on being selfless and start to become selfish, and do the things that I wanted to do to accomplish a lot of my goals before I left, because I wanted to leave the U satisfied with my experiences there. So leaving, stepping away from BC was definitely one of the hardest decisions.

Atabex ultimately made the difficult decision to leave BC but still remained connected to the organization, stopping by the office on occasion to say hi to folks and also attending BC-sponsored community events, some of the like of which she had coordinated when she was on staff. Her sense of belonging remained even after she no longer worked there.

**Structure**

Atabex not only cited the family and home feeling of BC as crucial to her, but the structure of the organization – the titles, the collaborative nature of the work, the structure of staff meetings, and strong role models within the organization – as a critical factor in her sense of agency and the inspiration she felt there. The title she carried during her three semesters on staff – Community Outreach and College Awareness Coordinator – felt huge. But it felt huge in the best of ways – the title empowered her, made her “ready to bust down the government doors and create a voice for [her] people.”

She also found inspiration and support in the collaborative nature of the work at BC. In her staff position, she was paired with another coordinator to accomplish the responsibilities of her role. They worked together closely, their strong relationship
increasing her sense of agency:

[S]he was actually in the class too. So I pulled her in because I knew that she was already taking [on leadership] roles [on campus] and she was very focused, very determined…. I had a good vibe off of her in the classroom setting and I knew her work ethics so I hired her…. She was definitely the backbone in many occasions – when I couldn’t complete something, she would do something and help me out to complete it, or vice versa. I was really excited to have her there, and that’s how she was able to move up [later in the year to be the program coordinator] because she definitely had the focus.

This co-working relationship helped both Atabex and her co-coordinator to get more done in their work. But the co-working component served another purpose – Atabex felt empowered by it from the start, because she was able to play a role in the hiring of her co-coordinator. This was an important aspect of the structure that added to Atabex’s sense of agency – that she had a say as to who she would work closely with that year.

Other aspects of the collaborative nature of the work including committees that supported different projects and the close relationships that BC had with other organizations on- and off-campus. The committee structure of the organization helped Atabex and her co-coordinator execute large projects, such as a bi-annual hip hop showcase. Engaging a committee to help with the event helped with buy-in from students in the course and also delegating some of the tasks:

We thought about ways of how to get the students [in the BC course] more engaged into the program outside of the classroom setting, as more folks to help out with planning an event…. We had so many different committees [like the music committee, the youth performance committee, and the food committee] that we would get together, we would just show the different tasks that were completed. It helped out so much because one of the biggest challenges working for BC is that we have so much stuff to do, that realistically one person cannot do it by themselves…. [B]eing able to engage the classroom to be part of the team – you had so many teams working behind the scenes for that event, that [it] became really successful.

Having committees to support the logistics of the event, plus the agency to develop the
committee structure, served to support Atabex’s sense of agency in this example. In turn, the connections between BC and other organizations both on- and off-campus strengthened Atabex’s work, in that she felt she and the organization could accomplish more. She was inspired by the ways BC partnered with different organizations, all organizations that she saw as united by similar missions. This experience shaped her view of community organizing and was impactful on her post-graduation in her professional career.

The collaborative nature of the work was extended to staff meetings, where Atabex witnessed a great sense of comradery amongst staff members and where she felt supported and encouraged. She never felt there was a hierarchy in those spaces, giving her a greater sense of agency, both in how she was performing and in her ability to give feedback to other staff. Atabex thrived with the open nature of the meetings and the way the staff supported each other. Here she experienced a sense of family and belonging.

The importance of strong role models, both in the organization itself and in the afterschool where Atabex worked while in the BC course, was a significant factor to her sense of agency as well. In her mind, this built on the leadership dynamic she experienced as a participant and leader in the TAG program while in high school. Just as in TAG, students were mentoring students – this happened at the afterschool program that Atabex was involved in via the BC course, where college students mentored high school students who mentored middle school students; this happened in BC itself where students were mentoring each other. There was an aspect that especially stood out – oftentimes the mentors shared similar cultural backgrounds as the youth:

[In] the US, Latinos have the highest number percentages in dropping out of high school for many reasons …– they drop out of school because they want to work to
help out with their families, or they feel really discouraged about going into schools…. So when you have people who progress and set an example, [people who are] part of your culture, and you see them doing amazing things, … you’re motivated in wanting to be just as great as them. [In] BC and TAG, you have people who are high school students doing great in school, that are part of your culture, and that are part of your identity, and seeing them doing great things, it motivates you to want to be like them. So it’s this whole idea about setting role models that BC had, and also TAG had at the same time.

This aspect – this pipeline of support and empowerment – was significant to Atabex, and was something she wanted to emulate in her work as a community organizer after graduating from the university.

In summary, several components of the structure of Bridging Communities were significant to Atabex and supported her sense of agency, including her job title, the collaborative nature of the work, the structure of staff meetings, and strong role models within the organization. Atabex reflected back on the structure of BC as hugely significant, and would go on to compare her work post-graduation to her time at BC.

After she graduated from the U, Atabex worked for a non-profit as an artist-in-residence and youth programs coordinator. She expressed frustrations that this role just didn’t measure up to her BC experience. In meetings, for example, she said:

It’s nothing bad … or drastic, but there was some sense of love in the room in BC…. And that’s something I’m trying to take now and try to bring into the meetings that I have now …; I’m definitely taking the experiences that I had with BC and bringing it here. Because every time when I talk to folks, even though they look at me as the artist …, I always talk about, “Listen, I have organizational experience, I have done community organizing, I have worked with artists, worked with youth…. please do not second guess me…”

I always come back to my work with BC, all the time.

It’s almost as if she felt seen, valued, important at BC – partly because of her sense of belonging there and also because of the structure of the organization. When she started over after graduation, she had to prove herself amongst colleagues who didn’t quite
understand the volume and scope of the work she was involved in when she worked with Bridging Communities. At BC, she didn’t have to prove herself – she felt seen, she felt respected, and, because of that, she felt productive.

### Awareness and Skill Development

Throughout her time in BC – from her year in the BC course to her time as a staff member, Atabex experienced an increasing awareness around what was important to her and how she would continue putting that into practice. Atabex described herself as coming into BC with a high sense of agency – she said, “I came in ready.” So in some ways, she wasn’t “wowed” by some of the topics from the BC course in the way some of the other participants, like Arnold, Theo, or Jessica, were – but she took what she learned and thought about how it would apply to her life. As she said, “I left still with that state of mind of being ready.”

In particular, both the course and her time on staff shifted her understanding about the skills she needs when working in communities. Through course readings and her time working in the community, she developed a more thorough understanding of how to navigate working and building relationships in communities. BC helped her think more about how to connect with communities, to “identify… common ground that I have with the community as I walk in to work with them.” She recalled a reading from the course that touched on this topic, a reading that she would continue to reference well beyond the first time she read it:

> [T]here was one article [that talked] about [working] with youth of color… understanding, being aware about their needs, and trying to understand their needs and try to help them to achieve those needs…. Because understanding the American education in the public school settings, that a lot of the youth of color are put to the side, and they’re not given that much attention that they need, compared to other student populations. And so how we need to kind of re-gear
that focus towards them to give them the attention that they need, and also give
them the type of resources that’s lacking and that’s being offered to them.… 
[N]ow I use that article whenever I’m teaching or wherever I’m working.

Reading articles such as this one helped give Atabex a better sense of working in
communities and how to support youth of color in the US educational context – this was
critical considering that Atabex went to high school in Puerto Rico, experiencing a
slightly different educational environment (one where she felt politically inspired and
motivated, which she found to be different from the youth she worked with while in BC).

Ultimately, being in BC helped Atabex to continue developing herself as a
community organizer, providing her with a range of experiences and ultimately a skill set
that she would look back on proudly. Atabex was proud of the work she accomplished as
the community outreach and college awareness coordinator. After college, she would tote
these experiences as proof of her worth as a community organizer. Atabex was frustrated
when she felt her colleagues at her new job didn’t get it:

[I want them to understand] I have worked with organizations, and specifically
with Bridging Communities, which was student-run – not run by professors or run
by a CEO. This is a student-run agency that I was a part of, and I was one of the
three main organizers in there.…

I want you guys [i.e., staff at her new job] to understand that I do have
experience …, it’s in my resume, I take that with so much pride…. I’m not “just
an artist,” but I also have the same working experience as you have, working with
student activism … and … working with different types of organizations and
college/community partnerships.…

[I]t’s something that I have to constantly remind them, that I don’t have a
certain type of label …– yeah, I can carry this name that I have, I am the artist,
but I’m the artist that has the mind frame of an activist, and the mind frame of a
community organizer.

Again, Atabex “came in ready,” but her work in BC provided her with opportunities to
strengthen her skill set and continue to evolve as a youth educator and a community
organizer.
Ultimately, Atabex came out of her BC experience more self-aware and clear about what she wanted to do with her life. This included being an advocate, and standing up for herself and others. At the close of our final interview, Atabex summarized her two years in BC as follows:

“Empower” is one of my favorite words – and I think being part of BC was really empowering. It helped me mold my focus to what I want to do in life – empowering community members, empowering youth as a role model, and also as an artist [and] as an activist. I know how to stand for certain opinions and certain beliefs because of BC. We always … spoke up when we thought something was wrong…. And we would be opposed to it or defend our reason behind [it], and also support different campaigns and helping student rights…. Bridging Communities was definitely an empowering experience.

Kayla

Kayla was a student of mine the first year I taught with BC. She was committed and focused, a champion of the program. At the start of her sophomore year, she took on an academic internship with BC, where she planned to focus on public relations and outreach for the organization. At a recruiting event for the program at the start of that semester, I was in awe of Kayla’s spirit and commitment to BC. I witnessed her urge an entire room of students to apply for the class, adamant in her belief that BC was a powerful experience both for students and for the schools students are placed in. Simply put, Kayla told them, “This program is the shit.”

But six months later, I learned in a staff meeting that Kayla resigned from her work with the organization. A few staff members asked me to reach out to her and find out why. In an email exchange, Kayla shared:

As for why I left: Bridging Communities is the most unorganized and unfocused organization I have ever worked for, and I’ve worked with five different ones. I am a highly organized and planned person. I strongly dislike last minute plans or assigning last minute tasks; BC seemed to only revolve around last minute and rushed projects. Between 20+ credits, trying to make sure all my classes were in
order so I can graduate early, studying for the MTEL, and working 2 other jobs I had no time or desire to stay with BC.

Kayla’s description of BC haunted me, imprinting itself in my mind for years to come – particularly because it contrasted with what so many other students said about the organization. I decided to seek her out directly to participate in my project. I wanted to get to the bottom of that email she wrote me. I also wondered, what could I learn from a student who had such a negative experience working for BC?

Kayla identifies as brown, with a mix of ethnic identities including Persian and white. She grew up across socioeconomic backgrounds and on both the West and East coasts. She recalled growing up in poverty, first living in Mexico as a very young girl with her mother:

[As a young child] I lived in a border town between Mexico and California…. If we didn’t have guards there, you wouldn’t even know there was a difference between Mexico and California…. houses made out of whatever people can find, so cardboard, parts of billboards, curtains. Most people don’t speak English, most of them are immigrants from Latin countries to Mexico and Guatemala. Most of them are workers in the fields – there’s a lot of orchards…. I was real young when we lived near there. I don’t really remember any of it, but I do remember having to do laundry on the river. I remember going down with my mom, and being taken care of by a neighbor woman who only spoke Spanish, which is where I learned to speak Spanish.

Later in her childhood, Kayla moved with her family to northern California. She has a great deal of pride for the area where she lived there. In her community, the part of town where you are from held a deep significance, and she would strongly identify with her neighborhood. Kayla also yearned for family and found it, although, as she described, not in the most “savory” ways at times:

Growing up there, it made me desensitized to violence and drugs…. It just didn’t seem like such a big deal…. Because I feel like if we stopped to think too much about all the things that were happening around us, we just couldn’t function…. I had a lot of folks that were involved in unsavory activities, and I was involved in
some stuff myself. But it just seemed normal, people bringing guns to school, people having weapons – lockers they changed every two weeks. 

The people that live on your block are the people that you grow up with, they become a second family, more of a family than your actual blood family it seems. And that’s just how it happens, how you grow up, and you have these people that you trust more than you would ever trust your parents or your brother or sister…. It’s just that type of loyalty I don’t think exists in every community. I just know for me and my friends, we’re really loyal to each other. We all know we can rely on each other, and we’re always there for each other. And that is something that is a really big part of what it meant to live in [my city], because you had to be able to rely on somebody in order to get through the day or in order to protect yourself from whatever was happening.

My friends were mostly Black or Hispanic, usually from Mexico. I had a few Middle Eastern friends. I had some white friends and some mixed …. It wasn’t really so much about what color you were, because they were so many colors there…. It was more about what gang you belonged to, what block you grew up in, who you were trying to represent…. For me, identity was highly composed on my area code, my area that I lived in. It basically defined everything about me. That was just who I was – I was from the ###.

In California Kayla fell in love with dance, both through a formal dance education and as a dancer in a street dance group. She found dance to be her safe space, her refuge, where she could escape the hardships of her life. As a pre-teen Kayla and another friend urged her small community of street dancers to take their group on the road and perform at festivals and concerts in and around her home city. Through this experience, Kayla found her voice and her agency at a young age – and would use her strong leadership and persuasive powers to bring others into dance as well:

Street dances were popular in [my area]. It’s just kind of something you do…. You just kind of get a stereo out there, or you’re blasting it from inside your house, and you’re just kind of in the streets…. You see kids dancing all the time, and so a few people on my block were dancing, and [we] were like – we should make our own group, we should develop this into something more than just something we do when we’re mad or angry or have too many emotions that we just dance through. Because in [our city] you can’t really talk about what you’re feeling, just because, one, there’s not really words to describe it. And two, you don’t want to seem weak, because if you seem week, then you’re just an easy target for anyone to take down. So through dance, you could say whatever you wanted to say without actually having to saying it. For me that was really empowering, and it was empowering for my friends too. And now that I look back
on it, I think that’s why we wanted to take it in a more public way, show other people, “This is what we feel. We know you feel it too – come talk to us, but just dance it, don’t talk.” …

We had been dancing [in the neighborhood] for years and years [starting from around fifth grade]…. I was probably one of the more pushy ones to say, “Hey, let’s take this out, let’s make this public, let’s give ourselves a group name, let’s do this.”…. I knew how to be persuasive. I was always good at thinking on my feet quickly about what to say, or persuading people …; me and this other kid D persuaded people to take it public. That’s why D and I rose, I guess, as more the leaders, just because we were comfortable and confident, and we were actually performing, just the two of us, and then we eventually got the whole group behind us. We were big on leading by actions and not just words …, leading by example, that’s how I became one of the main leaders of that group….  

We started moving [and performing] around [the city] when I was in 8th grade, so for 3 years I got to move around with them…. I knew local rappers …. like one rapper [who] was real influential, and he rapped about real stuff that was going on, but trying to make people see that there [are] more options out there. So we got involved with him, and we went around with him and would dance [for] his rap tours, just try to bring the community a semblance of looking at the positive stuff and not always, you know, you don’t have to live the way that you’ve been living, you don’t have to be involved in crime or gangs or whatever it may be ….  

That was really fun times we had together. Because I think we did it without even thinking about why we were doing it – but we all felt really good doing what we were doing. And not just because we would win a few competitions between another dance group, but just because it wasn’t always about the competition. It was about learning from each other….  

I think being one of the leaders of it as such a young age – I was one of younger ones in the group – I think that really helped me because I could see that we were getting more people involved in dance. And even though I was already involved in [gang activity] I was trying to make sure that no one else would go that route.

It was through her involvement in dance and the dance group in particular that Kayla began to exercise agency. She had a strong sense of agency then and was eager to not only act, but to inspire others:

I remember this one [kid], he was like 10 or 11 years old. And I remember getting him involved in dance – he just wanted to know everything, he just devoured it. He was from [a different part of the city] and he actually made his own dance group…. We still keep in contact, so that was like 5 years ago. I think he’s 16 or so right now. And he’s still involved in the community, he’s still doing dance, and as far as I know he’s not in a gang. I think seeing that too has been incredible for
me… Maybe it was because of my group that he didn’t get involved in some other stuff.

Although Kayla was involved in some illicit activity herself, her goal was to inspire youth to choose a different path. And she used her persuasive powers, her agency, to do as much as she could.

The summer before eleventh grade, Kayla’s father received a work promotion and transfer, so she moved with her family to New England. There her life changed dramatically. She moved into a house for the first time and enrolled in a predominantly white school. She described this drastic life change:

[My west coast city] is all low, low class – most of my friends had parents who were on welfare. I hadn’t seen the house before I moved to [New England]. I seriously stood in the driveway and just stared because it was the biggest house I had ever seen. We definitely went up – we’re upper-middle-class now, so I think we went levels above where we were….

It was like being torn out of who you are, like [a] total shredded identity. Because the people I knew and people I loved were all 3,600 miles away. … I came and moved to a very small town, predominantly white. In the high school, there was only two other Asian people and only three other Black people, and one Hispanic person. Everyone else was white, and the school was like 900 kids. … It was a big culture shock, especially because there were – I didn’t even know they existed, but there were neo-Nazi’s in the school, with swastikas and tattoos on them. It was just crazy culture shock….

[After I moved] it became here all about color and race, and no one cared that I was from the ###. They couldn’t imagine what that was like – they had no perception of what that even meant. I know one person in high school was like, “Why do you care so much where you from? Just forget where you’re from, it doesn’t matter.” But I didn’t even know how to explain to them like, that’s who I am, where I’m from is who I am, because it defined how I lived my life.

Here I was defined by what I looked like, the language that I spoke, the way that I talked… what I looked like, rather than anything else. … I started to form my identity based on that. I started forming it more on, “Well, yeah, I’m brown. I have brown skin. I talk differently. I speak Spanish.”

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24 This raises some interesting questions about the idea of passing. Kayla, who identifies as brown, passed as Latina, although she is Persian. When she lived in California she could just be who she was, a multiracial White and Persian woman who was bilingual. But in New England she had to identify with a racial group, and quickly.
Kayla went from a community where she felt connected to a new town where she felt alone, like she had to start over. That meant rethinking how she defined herself, because defining yourself based on where you are from was simply not the norm.

Kayla struggled to navigate the school environment in her new town, feeling that there were no real advocates for her in her high school. When it came to applying for colleges, she mostly figured it out on her own. Kayla described her school and her college search process:

The environment in which I went to school was pretty negatively against me. My first year I only had one friend but I didn’t hang out with her a lot because she had her other friends. So there was really nothing else for me to do but study. It was like putting in the effort, I’m studying, I’m getting really good grades, I might as well take it somewhere, I might as well do something with it. [I started looking up] schools and taking the initiative. Because I hated the high school I went to and I hated the administration, I didn’t like the faculty. No one there told me I should go to college – I even had a guidance counselor who told me, “I don’t think you’d be very good in college.” So he didn’t think I could do it… I wanted to prove them all wrong, because of a lot of the things they said to me – “stupid” and “lazy” among the nicer ones – it was like, no, I’m going to prove you wrong, and here we go, I’m going to college.

**BC Experiences and Agency**

Kayla enrolled in the BC course in her first semester at the U. Kayla does not attribute a great deal of her sense of agency to the program. She does credit her involvement in BC, the course in particular, with enhancing her sense of agency and her drive to take action for social change.

**Awareness**

Kayla felt extremely impacted by the BC course and felt that because of the course, she was set on a path to work for social change. Kayla had always been interested in teaching – this was not profoundly enhanced by BC per se – but the class provided her
with a deeper awareness of issues she felt passion about. Through class discussions, readings, and assignments, Kayla became passionate about BC’s mission for college access and education equity. She describes the effect the class had on her:

It really made me want to work more toward the mission of what BC was. And try to change the way communities look at more poverty-ridden cities and students who live there. And not lowering the expectations – like, they’re just in the ghetto, or, you can’t expect much from them. You know, some things that BC strives to end those kinds of perspectives and thoughts.

The class also helped Kayla to better focus on the teaching path she wanted to pursue, teaching English as a second language. She explained:

It definitely gave me more of an opening – my interest has always been in students with English as a second language…. It definitely gave me more of an opportunity to work with students who didn’t speak English, and it impassioned me to really know that this is something I want to do and I want to help change, whether it’s immersion classes or developing other ways to help teach English….

The BC class, and working so closely with so many students straight out of Puerto Rico who don’t speak English, it was just like – wow, this really is something that I want to help change and help be a part of and help them find success in America, which strongly comes through a strong knowledge of English.…

I didn’t start seriously thinking about it until I was in the BC class. And I was helping people with their English, and we read those couple of articles – or an article about ELL and ESL and the policies surrounding it. And I was like, this is really something that can be progressed.

Kayla was inspired by the course to continue pursuing a career in teaching, with a focus on English language learners. This inspiration came through readings that challenged her, through class discussions, and through assignments. Kayla recalled one assignment – an educational autobiography with a focus on social identities – as challenging but also inspiring:

The “Who Am I?” paper – that one, at first it sucked because I had no idea. I mean, as a freshman, I think it was harder to really know who I was, or … trying to compress my whole life into my own identity, to say who I was and this is what I believe in, and this is what I want to do. But after that paper, I think it really helped me to realize who I was and why I am here in this class, and what I can
bring to the organization [and] to the students that I was helping to teach [and] tutor.

The paper helped Kayla hone in her sense of purpose – for being in the class, for being involved in BC, and for tutoring and mentoring in the community.

Ultimately, Kayla saw that the class was fully focused on developing a greater sense of agency and “getting a group of students to figure out ways of making that change.” The group participatory action research paper was an important assignment for her as well, because she saw it as a way to practice working for change – “just getting the experience of getting out there and seeing what could be done, what needed to be done.”

From her interviews, the course seems to have had the biggest impact on Kayla. For her, the course was “invaluable:”

I do think as incoming U students, it is a valuable class to have, especially if they are coming from a small town or a rural town, or just more interested in what it means to work in a diverse area or an urban area…. It’s probably one of the most beneficial service-learning projects that exists at the U. I’ve perused some of the other service-learning networks there, but none of them seemed as good as [BC].

Kayla reiterated this stance almost five years later through an email she sent me, updating me on her professional path: “After reviewing our transcripts, I see my passion for agency, education, social justice, and activism has just deepened as I’ve grown older. I still credit much of that to the BC class.”

**Sense of Belonging**

The year that Kayla was in the BC course, and early on in her first and last semester as a BC staff member (intern), she felt connected to students in the course, to youth and staff at the afterschool program where she worked, and to BC staff. Strong relationships enhanced her sense of belonging and helped her learn in the process:
For Kayla, her growing sense of awareness, learning, and sense of belonging were interconnected: the community built in the BC classroom provided Kayla the opportunity to increase her own understanding of the material, her peers, and herself.

Kayla also felt a sense of belonging with the larger organization of BC and staff members she met. She described:

I [liked] how … in my first year the workers in BC were very supportive if you had a problem or you needed something. They were always available. That’s really cool – that’s what college is all about, forming close-knit communities. But you don’t often get to see that in a work environment, so I mean that’s why it’s nice to go into a program where everyone is there for you and wants to help you out…. I actually really liked them, and that was one of the reasons why I wanted to be a part of [BC staff] because I felt like we all connected really well. And they all seemed to like me, I liked them. They were laid back and chill, and that’s the kind of people that I’m used to…. [My site coordinator] always contacted me back whenever I texted her or called her; she always had an answer for me when I was a student. So my interactions with staff at that point were actually really good.

Thus, Kayla’s sense of belonging – feeling welcomed, feeling valued, feeling like she had something to offer – was strong.

In addition to the students in the BC course and the staff, Kayla felt a strong connection to the youth and staff at the afterschool program where she worked as part of the BC course. She valued the time she spent there and the relationships she formed. In her first year, she connected with a particular student and felt like she was making a real impact on his life:
Our work with [the afterschool program] was intended to promote agency for the students themselves ... [and] I saw a direct impact that I was making on the kids by the end of the year. [A student I worked with] had a lot of behavioral issues. I think it was mainly because he didn’t get enough attention really from his home, which happens with a lot of the kids, I notice. But it was interesting because [I] was the person he would talk to, or he would trust the most when he was in a bad mood or he wasn’t wanting to do something. I was always the go-to person for him, and I don’t really know that I’ve ever had that happen to me, a student-teacher relationship, and that was cool to see.

And I remember [the site coordinator] told me – I didn’t really notice it until she actually pointed it out to me – that his attitude had improved, and she’s like, “I think it’s because of you, because of the way you interact with him and get him to work on his homework.” He likes to rap and write lyrics, so I would make up these stupid rhymes for him to remember times tables… I’d bring him books about rappers because that’s what he was into. He didn’t know how to read. I did an ID test with him, comprehension also, and he was at a second or first grade level. And by the end of the eight months that we worked together, he was up to [a] fifth grade level, and he was in sixth grade.

Kayla was so inspired by her work and felt a strong connection with the afterschool program and the youth. Importantly, she would volunteer at the afterschool program for an additional two years after the BC course – up until she graduated from the U. This, Kayla said, was truly impactful on her sense of agency and on her future pursuits beyond her undergraduate career: she went on to get a Master’s degree in teaching. The lives she felt she impacted during those years, and the ways she grew as a teacher and community member stand out her - much more significantly that her semester as an intern with BC.

**Skill Development**

Through the BC course, Kayla strengthened her academic skills, particularly with writing research papers and reading dense theoretical material. She would find these skills useful well beyond her first year at the U. She described:

The class itself helped me to, first, it was my first leg into a college research paper, which was extremely helpful for a freshman, let me tell you, extremely helpful. I think every single class after that, writing papers was a breeze, because I used [that] formula for writing the research paper – the lit review and the analysis and the results and discussion – throughout my whole college career. And as a
fresher, I think that was so helpful. I can’t even begin to explain how amazing that was to have that information.

This exercise, coupled with reading assignments that Kayla found challenging - “I had to look up every other word!” - gave her greater confidence in herself as a college student.

And at the time of our interviews, as Kayla was about to embark on a Masters program, she was excited to return to some of the same topics the BC course covered:

I think it also helped me get a glimpse into the type of research that I may get into in grad school. Now that I’m teaching about it, it excites me – I can learn more about, I can actually go more in-depth on the different stuff we talked about in the BC class. Because I know, from the grad classes I was looking at [in] the course schedules …– some of them touch upon diversity in the classroom and the socioeconomics of urban teaching versus rural teaching. It’s going to be interesting because I’ll probably still, when I’m in grad school, be making connections to that BC class.

Following her two-semesters in the BC course, Kayla entered into an academic internship with BC. During that time, she was able to practice skills related to her position that supported her sense of agency. She cited two contributions that she made that semester as things she felt proud of. First, she was able to support one of BC’s major events – a hip-hop and dance showcase – by recruiting a DJ from a popular radio station to play for free; she boasted that this ultimately led to a larger event turnout. Her other major contribution was her assisting with a presentation about the work of BC to a committee of faculty and administrators focused on diversity and inclusion. This presentation seems to have had a lasting impact on Kayla’s sense of agency and her understanding of the value and importance of collaborating across the U. Through the presentations, Kayla and other staff made “our cause known to the community and to the diversity board”; she described this “as a form of agency because we’re trying to get other people involved with our purpose of awareness for higher education and getting the
whole institution to support our cause as well.” Kayla felt inspired by these presentations, especially when afterwards faculty and administrators approached her to talk about the work of BC.

The skills she practiced during her one-semester internship, however, were overshadowed by the challenges she experienced with the staff and ultimately the structure of BC. The aspects she found exciting about BC in her first year – the ways that staff were supportive and encouraging – just didn’t manifest themselves during her internship. She felt that partly had to do with the structure of the organization, which left people searching for stronger leadership and direction.

**Structure**

At the end of her first year, Kayla found herself a fierce advocate of BC, ready to “work more toward the mission of what BC was.” In her second year, Kayla designed an academic, credit-bearing internship to focus her work on public relations and outreach for BC. On top of an already full course load (20+ credits) and two paid jobs, Kayla still wanted to maintain a connection to BC and promote it so that more folks on- and off-campus could better understand the organization that inspired her so much in her first year at the university.

At this point, Kayla’s experience with BC takes a sharp turn, causing her great frustration and disappointment. While some aspects of her internship did contribute to her sense of agency, generally speaking Kayla walked away from the experience washing her hands of the organization. Her biggest frustrations fell primarily into three categories: lack of clarity of organizational structure, overextended employees, and poor communication. Of the lack of clarity of organizational structure, Kayla didn’t
understand people’s roles and felt there was a power struggle between the members of the core team. She would be tasked with a project from one person, only to ask a different staff member for clarification and have that person not know of the project in question. She felt like some staff members’ responsibilities were unclear, and that no one in the organization provided clear leadership or direction, which just exacerbated the problem.

“It wasn’t supposed to be hierarchical,” she shared, and yet,

I saw a dynamic of people wanting to have a leader, being told what to do, because otherwise nothing would get done. For me, I think it was a good idea to have an organization in which people, there’s no real solid leader, and people can bring to the table the projects that they want to work on. But I think in order for that to work, there has to be communication, and it has to be about when to work on the projects, and who to work on the projects, and the easiest way to contact them for the projects. And that’s going to take coordination, it’s going to take work.

Kayla had a few theories as to why the work wasn’t getting done in a systemic and structured way – one of which was because staff members were overextended and couldn’t do their jobs to the full extent.

She witnessed a staff who were simultaneously over-committed and poor communicators. She speculated that these two factors went hand in hand – although she described herself as over-extended (again, 20+ credits and two jobs) and able to communicate, so the factors could be separate issues. She found that many members of the staff carried multiple leadership roles on the campus, including in Greek life and student government, that led them to be unable to follow-through with projects for BC. Whether or not this contributed to poor communication, it was there nonetheless. For Kayla, this looked like her showing up to meetings where others weren’t present; having texts, calls, and emails go unanswered; and hearing about projects last-minute. For someone who described herself as “highly organized,” this last issue was infuriating:
No one really knew what projects could be worked on, and when they should be worked on, and how to get into contact with the people who were supposed to be working on them…. I’m a very organized individual, and I take whatever job I’m given seriously…. I had said at every [staff] meeting… that I need timelines …; you need to give me a week or two weeks, even three days would be great. But I was getting last-minute, “oh, I need this in six hours.” You know, write a press release and here it is the next morning… A lot of things were just very messy and very unorganized…. I was horrified. A couple months in, I was like, “how is this organization still running?!?”

Kayla speculated that the major issues of the organization – particularly lack of structure and communication – could have been foundationally impacted by the moment of time in the history of the organization. Prior to the semester she interned with BC, there had been some significant staff turnover; she wondered if there were different ideas brewing about what the organization should focus on or how it should operate.

Regardless of these circumstances, Kayla became increasingly frustrated and decided to leave altogether in December.

Kayla was surprised by the reaction of staff members when she announced her resignation. After not hearing responses to various requests for information as an intern, her resignation email received multiple rapid replies from numerous people involved in the organization. Kayla remembered:

It was almost laughable because these are people that hardly replied to emails at all … and often [I] could not ever get a hold of them via any communication line, text, phone, email, nothing. So then when I finally sent my resignation to the three people [on the core staff committee], by the next few days, it was boom, boom, boom, I had like 5-6 emails in my inbox. And I just was surprised, first of all, and second of all, I was like – this is ridiculous. You know, it takes me resigning to actually get someone to communicate with me. It’s a little too late though.…

And I remember [one person] emailing me this really long email, saying how he’s really disappointed that I left. And they were hoping that I was going to be the next program coordinator. People were planning my future without me even knowing!…

First, … it made me feel kind of good because then I realized that they recognized that I had whatever they were looking for that it took to be the coordinator. Secondly I think it was total just shock because I mean they had
never approached me with the idea, they had never – I didn’t really have that much interaction with [that particular staff member] really, so I was like, where is it even coming from? Because I hadn’t heard one thing about it, you know? I don’t know – if they had told me, “Oh, we want you to be the [program coordinator]. Why don’t you start working with [the current program coordinator] because he’s graduating?” Maybe it would’ve been a little different.

If staff members recognized Kayla for her contributions during the semester, if they had communicated more consistently with her, if they told her early on that they saw her as a promising leader, perhaps she wouldn’t have left the organization. This represented a shift in her sense of belonging – during her year in the course, Kayla felt a strong sense of connection, but near the end she felt her time was disrespected. Near the end of the interviews, Kayla shared some ideas she had for the organization if she had stayed on:

If I ever did become the undergraduate coordinator, which is a huge, huge job, … I probably would’ve tried to revamp the whole organization…. [I]t would have to be based on organization, and would have to be based on communication. And I would definitely not hire people, no matter how qualified they were, if they could not make the commitment, if they were too busy. We had so many people who … just couldn’t be available for their jobs at BC…. I understand it’s college, and everybody has their things. But when I’m taking 24 credits in a semester, and I’m still there at every staff meeting and everything else. I’m still working at [the afterschool program] two or three times a week, and I’m still helping to choreograph dances. It’s gets a little frustrating…. I never got to see [statistics] of how many [middle school] students that we have followed, that we knew of, that actually made it to college or to the U. I mean, I know of N. and her friend, but I don’t know of anyone else. Not to say that they’re not there, but I’m just – to know those statistics would also be good. … Because most of the [middle school] students – they can become tutors for the [afterschool program], but most of them don’t turnaround to become the tutors after being the tutees. It’s hard, because I’ve seen a lot of the kids that I tutored my first year, and I see them in high school now, and I definitely know they’re in the wrong gang, so it’s kind of disheartening to see that.

Essentially, Kayla learned from that semester what she would have done differently and what she believed could strengthen BC. She wished BC would get information on the youth beyond their middle school years, so that BC could see how many students went on to college.
In a sense, we could consider that the frustrations Kayla experienced still served her sense of agency, maybe even in some concrete and specific ways. First, her year in the course inspired her to continue her path to teaching and cemented a strong relationship in the afterschool program she would continue to work with. And because of the problems she witnessed during her semester as an intern, she came away with a stronger sense of what she would do differently. She also exercised agency by choosing to remove herself from the situation all together, rather than just sticking it out. She had a high need for systems, for clear lines of communication, and for clarity in responsibilities across the organization – and because she wasn’t getting that, she chose to spend her time elsewhere.

Kayla’s biggest takeaway? “Work as an intern definitely made me not want ever again for a student-run organization, unless I was running it (laughs) which I guess that’s a little egotistical, but that’s just probably how I would do it.”

**Theo**

White, middle-class, and Jewish, Theo 25 grew up in a small New England city and was raised by his mom and dad. He was “geeky,” “jockey,” a “skinny gangly kid”:

I’ve always been that way, and I still see myself that way. I’ve always been really school-oriented – I’m the kid who comes home right after school and does his homework. I still do that in college, where everyone else can relax a little bit. [In] elementary and middle school, I’d get teased because of the way I dressed. I was still rocking like dinosaur turtlenecks into middle school, and I guess that wasn’t the cool thing to do when everybody else was wearing Abercrombie. And then in high school, I said “jockey” because I love sports – that was my main focus. But that doesn’t mean that I wasn’t still a big geek in every other respect.

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25 Theo was the first person I interviewed for the study. Throughout the interviews I was touched by his thoughtfulness and his self-reflectivity. In a way, Theo was interviewing himself much of the time – he continuously challenged some of his own reflections and wondered how his identity as a white male impacted the various chapters of his life story.
While he was an athlete, Theo saw a distinction between the “track kids” and the cooler student athletes who played sports like football.

His first lessons about agency and standing up for all people came from his parents. His mom served as a steady role model for both social justice and independence:

[M]y mom is extremely outspoken on just about every justice issue you can imagine…. My mom has always been the breadwinner of the family, owns her own business, and is fiercely independent in many respects. And so I grew up really respecting her and all of her efforts, being a woman in a mostly male-dominated medical field and really holding her own and running a business and being really successful.

Both parents encouraged him to use his voice: “I don’t know whether to call it an expectation or … a certain … morality – [that] it’s important to speak up.”

Theo first learned he was different in his town on an ill-fated bus ride home from school in the third grade. Theo described:

In third grade, there was an instance where I was taking the bus home from school, and I got hit in the head with a piece of paper. And I opened the piece of paper, and there was a swastika on it. And all these kids – there were three kids who were about a year older than me, so they would’ve been fourth graders – they were yelling anti-Semitic stuff, you know – “Jews, burn” and comments. It was pretty heavy. I remember sobbing my eyes out in front of the bus. And finally the bus driver realized, and stopped the bus, and flipped out. She was my hero at the time – she was this really cool lady. But it was my first experience really early on with, I guess, facing prejudice for something that, you know, for me that was a part of my family.

At the age of eight years old, Theo learned he was different, and that his difference as a Jew in his community could potentially put him in danger. He also learned the importance of allyship – of standing up for others, whether or not they shared that particular identity marker with you. His bus driver and his dad set that example:

I’ll never forget her. She wasn’t Jewish. She didn’t have to step into that situation, right? And she made it a point to step in. And the same thing with my dad, who’s also not Jewish, but understood the gravity of the situation, understood certainly the emotional impact, understood my mom’s experience growing up, and took our
faith and identity really seriously, even though he didn’t have any real direct connection [to Judaism] in his life growing up.... You see adults who in those moments step up and it’s an inspire moment.... Those experiences where you’ve seen people step up and do the right thing are certainly really profound.

That experience had such a significant impact on Theo that he wrote a letter to President Bill Clinton about the importance of standing up for all people:

I actually wrote a letter to President Clinton that I never sent, but I had this idea ... – when you have an experience where you have faced serious discrimination, and certainly the experience on the bus when I was younger was a pretty heavy experience. And it just got me thinking that if someone can hate you for being Jewish, then someone can hate you for any one [component] of your identity. And then it makes you think about, well, how am I treating other people? What are my attitudes towards other people? And that idea of hypocrisy, you know – if you’re going to be angered over being a victim of discrimination and then not be angered over other incidences where someone else faces discrimination?

The experience he had in third grade clearly had a huge impact on Theo, both in understanding difference but also in seeing adults around him live out what his parents taught him – the “expectation ... [that] it’s important to speak up.”

For high school, Theo attended a private Catholic school. In his junior year, he took a Catholic theology course that focused on social justice. He remembers reading Beverly Daniel Tatum’s (2003) book, _Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?_, and Peggy McIntosh’s (1990) article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” Looking back on that experience, Theo was most struck by the way students grappled with the concept of institutional racism, and the way his teacher passively engaged them in (not) analyzing the concept. Theo recalled,

[My] Junior year the class is completely oriented towards social justice. And again, it’s Catholic social justice, so we would talk about things like abortion, we would talk about things like the death penalty, so it’s not necessarily radical social justice in the way that we think about it....

[We] read Beverly Tatum’s _Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?_... This is the first time we’d ever heard about institutional racism. And particularly what I know was striking, to me and to everyone else
in the class, was the use of the word racism. Because if … you’re just thinking of it in terms of individual prejudice … you wonder, well why am I racist just for being white? So the feeling in the classroom – and I remember this really vividly – was, “Why is [Tatum] just making up this definition? I don’t understand why she thinks I’m racist, you know, just because I’m white.” …

Everyone was upset by this thought. And I remember my teacher saying, “Well, hey, you know, that’s her opinion.” And so it wasn’t like, “No, this is a reality, this is a system that really affects people.” It was like, “Well, hey, you know, this is the author’s opinion, and she’s entitled to her opinion.”

Theo learned an important lesson by this experience: that conversations about race and racism are better left unanalyzed and undiscussed. By dismissing the concept of institutionalized racism as the author’s opinion, he and his peers were not challenged to examine it, just to acknowledge it and move on.

His senior year Theo took a break from track and began to think about other things:

[A]t the end of my senior year … I was thinking to myself, alright, I need to make some sort of change, I need to do something that, a, isn’t just, you know, self-promoting in the sense that like I’m only just doing this for myself. And b, to do something that also maybe makes the world like a little better. I know that sounds really cheesy, and also really unrealistic … but running track doesn’t do anything for anyone, and it wasn’t doing anything for me. And so it just didn’t feel it had any like value left to it, or any real meaning. So I guess I just wanted to do something heading into college that had some meaning to it.

With that as a motivation, Theo spent some time working in the community. He participated in a few short-term service projects:

It was just really simple stuff, like we volunteered at this school for students and adults with mental and physical handicaps. We had a St. Patrick’s Day celebration with them and helped organize that event. And we did a Relay for Life thing. I know these are simple examples but I really think having never done a lot of that volunteer work before, it awoke something in me, like this has more meaning to it than running around in a big circle or jumping into a sandpit.

This feeling of meaning would follow Theo into his college experience and would lead him to seek out service-oriented activities early on. This ultimately led him to sign up for
the BC course his first week of college.

**BC Experiences and Agency**

Of the seven participants in the study, Theo was the only person involved in BC for his entire college career. He enrolled in the course three days into his first semester and would go on to work for BC for three years after that. Because BC was widely seen as an organization for students of color, folks weren’t necessarily expecting to recruit a white middle class male like Theo. But for Theo, his involvement in BC became a critical marker of his university career.

In his four interviews, Theo spoke at length about how his involvement in BC dramatically impacted his sense of agency. The four themes – i.e., sense of belonging, awareness, skill development, and structure – interacted in important ways to build Theo’s sense of agency from, in his words, a “4” when he started with BC to a full “10” upon his graduation from the U.

**Sense of Belonging**

Theo felt an immense sense of belonging in BC during his four years, making him feel part of something bigger and strengthening his sense of agency. He knew from the moment he stepped in the BC classroom that the experience was going to have an impact on him:

I remember the very first class session vividly …: it was the first time in my entire life that I’d walked into a room, and I was one of only like two white people…. It was like, whoa, I’ve never seen this before. And instantly it was this feeling of: I better check myself, you know?

Classroom strategies such as pair shares helped Theo to feel connected and comfortable right away:
The class just felt different than my other classes…. There was a very intentional move on behalf of the staff to get us talking to each other, [to] make sure that we all knew each other’s names. None of my other classes did that. And we started by sharing a little bit with each other, getting into just pairs, and talking a little bit about ourselves and why we’re taking the class. As a freshman, I really appreciated having that opportunity just to meet with people.

This relationship-building dynamic would prove really useful when, as the semester went along, the class would have “intense and powerful discussions” that would challenge Theo to reflect on his own identity, his whiteness, and what it meant for him as a white person working in communities of color:

We would have these three-hour class discussions. And there were times that they could’ve gone until midnight. We’d be locked in such heated debate or we’d be so fired up about something that was bothering us all. And at the time, I was taking [the] class with Arnold … [and] almost everyone who was a founder in BC, so like Francesca…. And so there was also this element, too, that it wasn’t just … the new folks taking the class, but it was also the people who were on staff, who were really engaged in the class at the time. But it was the kind of place where I felt comfortable enough to have a full open and honest discussion….

It was the kind of place where even if there was something that someone really needed to work on, or there was a teachable moment, I guess I would say, it was on the whole class to jump in. And it was the kind of place where … people could have that open and honest conversation. It helped me to really open my mind up a little bit, and to start thinking more critically about some of these issues.

Theo felt like he belonged and felt comfortable to engage, to be challenged, and to challenge others. This dynamic would allow for not only a strengthening of his sense of awareness but also his sense of agency.

This sense of belonging was enhanced by his work at his afterschool site. By joining with other students in class to go to site regularly, Theo got to know people outside of the classroom; that opportunity didn’t present itself in his other classes. He also felt a strong connection with staff members at the afterschool program, a connection that lasted well beyond his first year with the program.
Numerous relationships marked Theo’s time in the program, but two particular relationships seemed to most impact his sense of belonging and his sense of agency: his relationship with one of the program coordinators, who was a graduate student and a founding member of the program, and his relationship with Arnold, who he was in the course with and worked with for three years after the course. In Theo’s second semester in the course, the program coordinator invited Theo to join her and other BC staff at a meeting with the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs. He remembers that moment as having “a powerful impact on myself and what I imagined I could be a part of or what agency as a student I had.” The program coordinator continued to bring Theo into networking opportunities with others – and she would ultimately teach him about his own potential as a community organizer:

She was just so incredibly good at finding people…. and then doing everything she could to bring them into anything she could. And so with her in particular, there was an immediate personal connection. She really did everything she could to build a relationship with me when I first came in and was in the class. And then just in terms of making people aware and then following through and getting people to come out for events. So whether it was like a protest over like the building of a trash dump in [the city we worked], she was going to get everyone she could out to that event. And if it meant that she was going to call every single person to make a personal connection, then she was going to do that…. She was so influential in terms of bringing me into the organization and getting me to think long-term about what my involvement would look like. And then I also really think she was a huge model when I was in leadership positions of making those personal connections, trying to get people involved in everything I could, calling people incessantly if need be. I thought it was a huge strength of hers and something I tried to emulate.

Theo learned a great deal from the program coordinator about how to build networks, navigate the community, and form collaborations that would result in long-term partnerships. His relationship with her would not only increase his sense of belonging in the course, but also in the organization and the university in general. And later, when he
assumed a leadership role in the organization, he would try to emulate some of the skills and qualities he witnessed in her that he admired.

His relationship with Arnold was one that began in the course and only deepened throughout his four years in college. By living together in their final year at the U, the relationship became a powerful blend of the personal and professional and, as a result, enhanced Theo’s sense of agency tremendously. He was able to solicit regular feedback and advice from Arnold, maximizing their work and friendship relationships:

We were roommates, which was also nice because, checking in on almost a daily basis on what was going on. And you’re inevitably, when you do this kind of work, going to have frustrating days. You’re going to have days where, you know, you don’t reach a kid, or your planning is really frustrating, you can’t figure out what you want to do in a given week in terms of activities. And so having Arnold [who was the program coordinator that year] around … and he’s in this leadership position, right? He’s the one who’s supposed to be intentionally checking in with me. [That] was really huge in my own development.

The relationship with Arnold was one that built over the years and culminated into a true peer-to-peer mentoring relationship and friendship.

Theo’s sense of belonging was not only based on interpersonal relationships, but also on the collective sense he felt as part of the organization. Theo never felt alone because he had a crew of people to support him in his work. Theo shared:

Every staff meeting opens up with a discussion of “how are things going at your site?” – and so that support from your peers. I know [our faculty advisor] talked about this a lot, the idea of mutual mentorship, and I know that was something she was doing with some other professors. But I really do think that exists almost organically within BC – you come to a staff meeting with a problem or challenge that you’re facing and everyone is there listening, everyone is there offering ideas and suggestions to help you improve whatever situation or celebrate your success. That staff dynamic is huge.
This feeling extended beyond staff meetings and permeated all aspects of Theo’s work with the organization, both on-campus in the office and off-campus. Ultimately, Theo described feeling like he was part of a community and a movement:

I wouldn’t say that everyone in BC is my best friend, but there are certain things that I can share with my friends from BC that I feel like I can’t even share with my friends at home sometimes…. Say you are working with a student, and the student has had a really negative experience with the school system or something along that line, I can go to anyone in BC and unpack that with folks and have a real conversation with them. And I can feel like I’m not the only one who gets pissed off … over these sorts of issues. Sometimes I think if I went home to one of my friends and started talking to them about that, … they’d give me some sort of funny look and say, you know, “What are you so fired up about? Why does this matter?”

Having that bond is really remarkable, and it’s the kind of thing that happens every day in the BC office, these real conversations, and it’s not just about stuff that happens in the community – it’s stuff that happens at the U too. To have that network is really comforting, particularly when at times you feel like you’re on an island…. [K]nowing that there’s this group of people that have your back and are coming from the same place, and who genuinely care, is really remarkable. And I’m not sure if you can build that level of friendship in other ways at the U, you know, just partying all the time….

[I]t’s helped me keep sanity in a lot of ways when there’s just like crazy times, you know, happening, either in my life or on campus…. [I]t’s also feeling community in the sense that like we’re united in the work that we’re doing. And united in really caring about these issues. So I think that’s really empowering as well, because again you’re not feeling like you’re going against the system alone, or you’re going to change things on your own…. And honestly, I can’t imagine any other environment that brings such a diverse group of people together. You know, you’re not going to, I think, bring all these people from different backgrounds and different races and ethnicities and religions, I don’t think that group would come together in any other environment. And it’s amazing that it all happens because, you know, it’s people who are really passionate about certain issues, particularly college access.

For Theo, it was about community, about having a group of people he can “get fired up” with. This was a contrast from his relationships with friends at home. While his friends at BC would conspire with him, friends from home would be confused when he got angry about issues related to education equity and college access. It’s almost as if Theo’s involvement in BC marked his sense of belonging so immensely that he began to shift his
social identities as well. The people he used to spend time with no longer held the meaning and support for him that his BC network was able to provide.

Theo’s sense of belonging and his awareness about issues related to power, privilege, and equity played off of one another: it was as if they were in a symbiotic relationship, with one increasing the other and vice versa. Theo named this dynamic, saying that after the class, he continued to learn and his peers continued to teach him:

“you get to continue that good work… building on that learning. [You]… continue to expand your ideas and …continue to interact with the people that you took the class with. And it just never stops, that whole process.”

**Awareness**

In high school, Theo spent some time reflecting on concepts such as institutional racism in his theology classes, and also had a commitment to speaking up for those who were experiencing discrimination. Nonetheless, he would never have imagined the ways the BC course and his relationships in the community would impact the ways he understood himself, his career interests, and issues around education access and equity.

Theo recalled the classroom experience as being one where he was challenged and could challenge others to talk about a range of issues. He and his peers grappled with topics such as identity, privilege, whiteness, and racism. In contrast to his high school theology course, the BC instructor and students weren’t afraid to wrestle with concepts that not everyone agreed on. Students challenged Theo about his own privilege as a white male and the possibility that, even though he was Jewish, perhaps he could harbor some racist thoughts or concepts. They challenged him to think about the U itself, and the possible ways the university could be a racist institution. At first, he was somewhat
resistant to some of these ideas – “again, that brick wall went up to a certain degree.” But he continued to engage, to question, to ponder.

As these conversations permeated his classroom experiences, Theo began building relationships off-campus at his afterschool site. In the first month of school, when he attended a community event designed for college and university students to learn more about the city and the community. Prior to attending the event, Theo had only heard of the city as “a bad place” with a lot of crime. This community event would begin to undo some of that thinking:

I didn’t really have the best view of [the city] coming in. [The event] was the first step in changing that…. There was a panel with [two community organizers] and another woman who was the first Latina city counselor…. And it was just so cool to hear all these voices, and to hear about all these people doing really strong good community work. And it was amazing …, a huge shift in my thinking that way.26

This event marked the beginning of his relationship-building and work with youth in the community, youth who were predominantly from Latinx backgrounds. Through these relationships, Theo began re-examining his own attitudes and stereotypes. He also recognized the gaps in his knowledge about Latinx culture and enrolled in several courses in Latin American and Caribbean Studies, as well as Spanish language courses:

[I] really got back into Spanish, and that became a huge passion…. Spanish beforehand was always this thing that I took in class that never had any real context to it. But getting the opportunity to use it in a natural environment working with students and using it really as a way to connect with people too was amazing to me. There were students who were in the after-school program who had literally moved [to the US] two weeks before and spoke little-to-no English, and when you’re in the after-school program, your goal is to help them complete their homework, whether it’s English or Spanish. And so I thought it was really cool that I had this tool that I could use to connect with folks.

Not only would Theo go on to minor in Spanish, but post-graduation Theo would complete a Masters in Teaching and would work as a Spanish teacher at the middle

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26 Recall that Arnold shared similar impacts that this introductory event had on him: challenging him to question preconceived notions about the city and changing his view of the culture of the city.
school level for four years. The ways this experience impacts him are immense – it not only leads him to feel more connected to the community in which he is working, but it hugely impacts his academic trajectory and his professional life post-graduation. Theo names this specifically when he says that if he hadn’t participated in BC, “I know I wouldn’t have ended up a teacher; I know that for a fact.”

Theo described experiencing an “A-ha” moment sometime during the first year, where several components of his thinking came together:

Over the course of the year and having those intense classroom discussions and continuing to go to site, my ideas about class, about privilege, about race, about equity issues, across the board completely changed. And it was the first time that I started to become much more conscious of the way I was thinking, and of the way that other people were thinking.

Much of what he was thinking also pertained to college access – who had access to pathways that lead to higher education, and who did not:

I had a moment of reckoning at some point, where all of it came together, and realizing that the U is a public university, and it’s supposed to be open and accessible to everyone. And it’s really horrible that people in these communities don’t necessarily have access to this huge state resource that is a public university, that is supposed to be open and available in some respect to everyone. That was the part that didn’t come through until a little later in the year.

He likened his evolving awareness to a model that the instructor presented about experiential learning – “it was a linear spiral” where “you go to your site, you have this experience, and you come back together, and you talk. You share experiences, and then you carry those experiences and those discussions in class with you as you move forward.”

Just as Nia credited BC with playing the “challenger role” in her life, Theo was equally impacted by his years working with BC:
The whole experience for me was life-changing. You’re supposed to go to college not just to get an education or to study business or something like that. It’s really about opening your mind. BC was the catalyst that was what got me at least thinking and exposed to new ideas and to new cultures. It was all folded into this one experience…. [It’s hard to fully articulate all the changes I went through, and all the attitudes I think I had to slowly check. It definitely was not this linear thing, and I definitely got into those arguments in class because sometimes it was a tough sell for me. I wasn’t just buying into all the concepts, but continuing on that path, continuing on that journey, giving it a chance. And, really thanks to all the other students in the class, I think I was fortunate enough to work out some of those issues, and to finally get it, and to have that a-ha moment. It was incredible.

For both Nia and Theo, who came from very different backgrounds, their BC experiences were profound and transformative. It gave them the tools to analyze their surroundings and to think differently about their worlds.

Throughout Theo’s experience in BC, he attempted to exercise his own agency by taking his new learnings and his challenges, and talking about them with family and friends. Whether it was another student in his residence hall, a friend from home, or his parents, Theo talked at length about what he was learning and the doubts he was starting to have about what he earlier thought was the “normative” experience. First, he got into a disagreement with another student in his residence hall, and then friends from back home: “I never would’ve done that stuff before. I never would’ve – if my friend said something, like referencing a stereotype or something like that – I don’t think I would’ve checked [them] before. But you know, I was like really fired up.” He would have long phone conversations with his parents about what he was learning, and how it was affecting him:

I would have these 2-hour conversations [with my parents after class] and I’d be like, “Well, we just talked about this,” and I would just be so fired up…. Sometimes they would be stubborn in their attitudes. I tried to talk to them about institutional racism … in terms of how, say the government, doesn’t necessarily reflect the diversity in the nation… I remember getting into these debates with my parents at times, too. And they kind of gave me this like, “Oh god, you’re turning into one of those [university] liberal types.” And you know, my parents are pretty
forward-thinking folks generally. But even with them, I was butting heads on some stuff that I was learning in the class.

Theo’s growing awareness was noticed by his co-workers in BC. Of Theo, Francesca remarked:

It gives me hope. Because I see someone like Theo – he’s this white suburban kid. He went to an all-boys prep school before in the suburbs. And he came into BC thinking, “Oh, yeah, community service, I like doing community service. I did that in high school.” But you know, he really cared deep. I felt like he really let that experience change him, and it brought up a lot of things that he hadn’t really thought about yet. And I’ve seen him moved to tears about a lot of these issues. I never expected to see this white jockey kid be moved like that.

Theo too was taken aback by what he had learned:

[I]t’s just all been like a humbling experience in the sense that my normative or my supposed normative reality just wasn’t reality at all…. I go back to that class where [a peer] called me out and said, “Well maybe you’re a racist and you don’t know it.” And at the time, you know, again that brick wall went up to a certain degree. And now it’s like – my god, Theo, you literally had access to everything, … there was never a roadblock that really prevented me from going to school or ending up in some other privileged place, where I look back and say what was I thinking, or where was I coming from? You know, recognizing all that was just like a huge, huge wakeup call.

He was pretty convinced that this wakeup call was because of his years with BC. This was verified when, as a college senior, he had a conversation with someone he went to high school with, who was in that same theology class but would not go on to critically examine issues of racism in the same way. Theo though would not only examine the idea of institutional racism but would analyze the way his former teacher facilitated the conversation:

The idea of being called … racist for something you didn’t do, for something that isn’t directly correlating to an individual prejudice, is going to be instantly met with a brick wall. Everyone was upset by this thought. And I remember my teacher saying “Well, hey, you know, that’s her opinion.” … It wasn’t conveyed to us [as] we need to unpack this a little more. You need to fully understand where this definition is coming from. You need to understand that this is a definition of racism in academia. This is not just talking about
individual prejudice…. [I]t just wasn’t unfolded, it wasn’t discussed to the extent that it should’ve been.…..

Because the other thing that happens, too, is that you have this Black author writing about racism, and then it just becomes this discredited message, and you just get this one message from this one Black author. Then it’s just like this Black woman who is coming up with her own opinion about how she feels about race, instead of really looking at her opinion as something that’s valid … or not even her opinion – not looking at her writing in the context of social justice more generally, and that she’s not just this one woman. And so in another way, it foments a negative outlook on her, which ties back into race, too.

And I remember I had a conversation with one of my really close friends – this was last year – and we were talking about that class and that book. And he said, “Well, I don’t understand why he had us read that. She basically just invented her own definition of racism.” This was last year – he’s a senior in college with me. And that’s still the message that he was carrying with him from high school. So in some ways, you could almost see it as, really dangerous too to half-present someone’s writing, and half-present the ideas in that writing, without any other context.

We can almost see the parallel experience Theo could have had through his classmate, and the possibility that had his conceptions of racism not gone examined through the BC course, experiences in the community, and the collective community he was introduced to in BC, that he could have continued to maintain the “brick walls” he encountered in high school. And while Theo’s old classmate didn’t challenge his initial conception of Tatum’s (2003) theories of racism, Theo went a different path. In his words,

It’s really easy to go through the U … as a “mainstream student.” You can come here, … pay your tuition, … party for 4 years and get your degree in psychology, and never really think about the university as a machine, never think about why you’re here and someone else isn’t. You never really think about why your tuition goes up a thousand bucks, except to say, “Oh, this sucks!”

It’s possible, it’s easy, in a lot of ways to just float through. And then there’s another route where you start to peel away the layers of really great marketing schemes and start to see reality. And so in terms of understanding your privilege … just being in college, and understanding, you know, like all this crazy messed up stuff that happens.

Ultimately, Theo was completely transformed by his involvement in BC. For Theo, BC was “everything”: 

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It really is everything in the sense that it started out as this great academic opportunity … to take part in something that was both real and theoretical…. [W]hen you actually have the opportunity to interact with folks in a community like [city name], and you actually get to internalize and see firsthand some of the things that you’re learning about and seeing in the classroom. It’s a completely different learning experience. And when you’re talking about something like race or educational equity, and you can sit in a classroom all day and talk about that stuff, and never really have the opportunity to see it or to internalize it or something along that line.

So in terms of myself, my own learning; in terms of changing attitudes that I had, both positive and negative; in terms of changing conceptions and notions of cultures and people; it’s really tough to change those ideas from a book. So that experience going through the class, that experience throughout the last 4 years of my life, has just had a tremendous, tremendous impact on my outlook of the world.

For Theo, the blend that BC provided him, the range of experiences – both theoretical and practical, academic and professional, and the variety of roles he played as student, staff member, community member, and community organizer, shifted the ways he viewed himself and the world around him. This shifted and heightened awareness would serve as an important factor to facilitate his sense of agency because he was much more confident about why he should work for change.

**Skill Development**

Another factor in Theo’s four years in BC that contributed to his sense of agency was the way in which his skills as a student, an educator, and an administrator were developed. Of his academic skill development, Theo spoke at length not only about the active role he took in classroom discussions, but also the course assignments, particularly the participatory action research project.
For the participatory action research project, Theo and a small group of his classmates became interested in the history of TRIO programs at the University and spent hours and hours in the archives of the library to learn more. For their research, Theo and his team also interviewed former U staff members and attended strategizing meetings with university officials. The project had a huge impact on Theo – he began to see that he could be capable of proposing action at the policy level. Of the assignment itself, Theo shared:

Within the first couple months of class, you’re envisioning an action research project that you are designing from the ground up essentially. And then within a few short months you’re expected to really carry it out…. It’s a totally different experience to walk into a class and expect it to be this driving force on a weekly basis on what you’re most passionate about and what you want to see happen. And so with respect to just the academics, the structure of doing action research really requires agency, if you’re serious about not only doing the research but actually carrying out a project…. The requirements of you are far different, and really are calling on you to be much more of an agent than just about any other academic experience I’ve had in my life.

Theo’s action research had a lasting impact, but he was also impacted by other projects undertaken by BC students. He was especially inspired by Arnold’s project:

Arnold and [another student] did this really powerful photo project where he was working with students [in his high school]…. I thought it was really cool he was coming back to his community; he was working with these students over the course of the year…. And so me and [some staff from BC] had gone down together to go see the display. And I just remember that being really, really powerful, and then I thought it was such a cool way to get students engaged in thinking. … It wasn’t just people on staff who had the opportunity to do something, it was us too. And it was empowering for everyone who was in the class to get to finish their project in a way that had meaning…. I’m sure there [are] so many other classes where you do a final research project … and you maybe hand in a 30-page paper and you never see it again, and you never think about it again…. And this was completely different – this actually had meaning to it.

27 According to the US Department of Education (n.d.), “the Federal TRIO programs (TRIO) are Federal outreach and student service programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.”
Theo learned and practiced research methodology that allowed him to design a project with real life application; in turn, he learned and was inspired by the projects he saw his peers carrying out. He wasn’t just reading articles about studies that others conducted – he and his peers were using action research in the communities where they were also working in.

In addition to the development of academic skills, Theo developed and practiced skills useful for teaching and working with youth, including tutoring skills, curriculum design, and group facilitation. Theo shared stories about working with individuals in an afterschool setting and trying to inspire kids to want to learn, to want to do their homework. Of one relationship in particular, Theo shared,

[I worked with one student my entire freshman year.] And there’s an hour or so of homework time every day. And for 55 minutes of that hour, every single day, he would sit there and just make fun of me while I tried to get him to do homework. It was the steepest learning curve for me to figure out how I was going to motivate him to get to work. And he would just like make fun of me and make fun of me and say things about my mom. And I’d just be like, “Come on, don’t you want to just like do your work?” And he would just go on and on and on, and it was so funny – and so frustrating at the same time. And you know, gradually, over the course of the year, we both got a little better relationship, and so it would only take maybe a half-an-hour of him making fun of me, to do the homework.… It was the kind of thing where I understood that the work had some meaning to it, and that it wasn’t just – oh, you’re going to an after-school program to hang out with kids. It was the bigger picture, about access issues and college awareness. The work immediately felt meaningful in that respect.

Theo had to learn persistence and patience in his work with youth, both one-on-one and in small groups. He was able to learn these skills because he felt connected to a much larger issue – the “bigger picture [of] access issues and college awareness,” which goes back to the mission and goals of BC as an organization.

In addition to one-on-one tutoring skills, Theo learned to design afterschool curricula. In his senior year, he served as site coordinator for a new afterschool
partnership. In that role, Theo had to design lessons, gather materials, facilitate activities, and delegate to other college students from the BC course. Theo explained:

I was doing all the planning and organization and actually carrying out the program…. It was a ton of [responsibility], in a way that was much different from my previous experience where I’m just a tutor/mentor in another program – this was me trying to create afterschool clubs and programs…. It was a ton of responsibility and also a lot of freedom, which was really beautiful as well, getting to feel like I could try and lead the curriculum building and, having had some experience in previous years, try to develop something that would be beneficial for my students.

This was an added level of responsibility, and an added skill set: being able to design curriculum for a group of youth, not just stepping in to carry out someone else’s plan of action.

Connected to this, Theo gained a set of skills that would be useful in an administrative setting. These skills were gained not only in the years when he was a site coordinator and was managing afterschool program activities, but also in his Junior year when he served as program coordinator for BC. That year, Theo was charged with supervising student staff, liaising with university officials and other campus organizations, and managing the budget process. Of that experience, Theo exclaimed, “I’ve never been so stressed out in my entire life!” He explained:

This was literally like you’re trying to see everything at once…. If someone has an issue at their site with one of their students, they come to you. If there’s an issue on campus where you’re thinking about funding, that’s your responsibility. If you have to go meet with an administrator to deal with some issue where they’re not letting us do something, that’s your responsibility…. It almost feels like, in some ways, all roads lead to you…. [It was] a huge wake-up call …. a lot more than I thought it was going to be …; the program is a lot more multi-faceted than I even expected…. I mean come on, you’re having to [coordinate] an organization that has at this point close to 20 staff members, has a budget of $250,000 and an additional $70,000 in grants. And you’re responsible for coordinating an advisory board for a group of professional educators and administrators…. I’ve never heard of any other situation in which a student would have the opportunity to take on that kind
of role…. I was only taking 12 credits at the time, knowing that I was going to be stressed out. And it was still the craziest semester I’ve ever had at the U. Period. … But I guess in other ways, it was good in terms of pushing myself and continuing to open up on that thinking. It was cool to get the opportunity to think big picture and do some of that planning and to maybe, having had that experience that last couple years on staff, to see where changes could be made for the better, and to have the opportunity to really take on some of those bigger projects. So in certain respects, it was also rewarding, you know? It wasn’t just totally this miserable experience.

More than once, Theo questioned if the opportunities he had as a BC staff member were regularly available through traditional college student employment. As site coordinator, Theo focused exclusively on the projects, programs, and activities at one after-school program; as program coordinator, Theo was supporting all of the site coordinators, on top of managing different aspects of the BC project list. And for Theo, it was overwhelming, but also rewarding.

**Structure**

The structure of BC was a major factor in Theo’s development of agency during his college years. Of the structure, the following themes came out in Theo’s interviews as significant: the group dynamics of staff meetings; the classroom dynamics, with student staff in the classroom in particular; and the ways BC networked across campus. Pretty early on in his first year, Theo witnessed group dynamics at staff meetings and the ways that students in BC were taking on leadership roles that impressed and inspired him:

> [Before I was on staff and was still in the course] I started going to staff meetings…. [They] mirrored the class in the sense that there were a lot of people

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28 The level of stress experienced in the program coordinator role was universally communicated by the three participants in the study who held that position. While the amount of responsibility can be empowering, might there be a cut-off point, where the responsibility becomes so terribly overwhelming that the job is undoable? And if the job is ever undoable, what are the consequences, both to the individual students in the role and to the organization as a whole?

29 This package of administrative skills would be critical for Theo when, years later, he moved from being a classroom teacher to positions in school administration.
who were really strong personalities, people who had different visions of the
direction of the program, had this cool collection of different ideas. And so staff
meetings would sometimes get really heated, intense too. For me, coming in as a
new person in [that] environment, I was sometimes taken aback by how, say,
[some staff members] would interact with each other. Sometimes they would be
yelling at each other in a staff meeting. But at the same time, they were all really
good friends. And so, it was again this really cool environment in which people
get really fired up about issues. Maybe [they] had very different ideas, but it was a
safe enough space where you could get those ideas out and settle those things.
And at the end of the day, everyone was still friends….

I also remember, I went to an advisory board meeting too, and it was packed
…; at least 20 people around the table …., probably half of staff was there. The
advisory board was full, there were other people, maybe in SGA, who had come
to the meeting too. And there were some really powerful discussions. It really
cemented my wanting to be a part of this. It was really incredible to see students
take on such big leadership roles, and to be running this program. It just felt really
empowering to be part of something like that – where everything else at the U is
kind of set up for you, and you just come into some existing structure. This was
like we were doing everything, we were running the show, and it was really,
really cool that way.

The group dynamics, the ownership that students took on, the way that students brought
their ideas together, the way that BC was grounded in an advisory process with other
folks from the U – all of these aspects of the structure of the organization were exciting
and strengthened Theo’s passion and interest. They would also become a foundation on
which he would base his own professional performance on when he would take on larger
leadership skills in the organization in his junior and senior years.

In addition to the culture of meetings and the student leadership opportunities,
Theo was inspired by how student staff engaged in the course in his year as a student, and
in the following year when he was a staff member. Student staff would return to the
classroom after completing the course, would read and present readings to the students in
the class, and would support BC students in making connections between the course
material, classroom conversations, and happenings at the school and afterschool
programs where they served. To Theo, this model was incredibly empowering for all
involved – a “professorless classroom” (Addes & Keene, 2006, p. 229) where students were teaching students:

[I]t was a really good experience in terms of, having gone through the class, to watch and work with students as they were going through their class, and going through the same process that you were going through a year earlier…. [A]nything, if you’re passionate about it, it’s exciting to be able to share that passion. And to be a participant in that consciousness, or maybe in the development of consciousness, or to be a participant in that class development was just really, really cool. And to get to work with other students one-on-one, it’s entirely unique. There’s only two classes at the U where students are teaching the students. And the dynamic is very different because you’re all students, you’re not just working with the professor. There’s no sort of barrier that’s built up necessarily, in terms of your interactions. And so a lot of times, the conversations can just be a lot more honest.

Also significant for Theo was the way BC built networks across campus. For example, Theo was inspired by the structure of the advisory board and the way that this group of folks from across campus came together to envision and advise BC. Even more, Theo was mentored to see how crucial networking and relationship-building was for the organization’s success. This element influenced Theo in and out of work settings:

BC … makes you much more capable of not only doing the work that we were doing, but also just navigating the university too, and knowing where resources are, and knowing where you can help other people turn to…. [Y]ou don’t feel like this helpless person, like, “Oh my god, which office do I go to? Which dean do I have to talk to? Where do I have to turn?” You are already clued into that in your work. When you need to take care of something personal in terms of your academics or something along that line, you’re already clued into that. So that’s pretty remarkable too.

Theo felt more able and independent maneuvering the university environment as a result of his participation in BC.

These structural aspects empowered Theo, making him feel unstoppable. The various components of BC’s structure – the leadership opportunities, the networking,
resources – were the ultimate recipe to increase his sense of agency. The organization’s capacity to get things done empowered and inspired Theo:

[T]he number one thing, especially with respect to agency, is that – if you got fired up and passionate about something in BC, right? So many undergraduates you come across get fired up and passionate about issues, and then how many of them have either the resources or the support to actually carry it out?

That’s what I really think makes the organization unique …; of course there’s monetary resources, there’s connections, there’s those things that allow you to run a service learning organization. But then also the people support – be it the graduate coordinator, be it your fellow undergraduate staff, who are equally passionate and equally supportive in what you have to bring to the table. I think that’s huge…. [W]ithout that kind of structure, I would’ve been an armchair activist.

Ultimately, that capacity was rooted in the people who made up the organization. The people were the glue that held it all together. And all of these things combined were “everything” to Theo, impacting him personally, academically, and professionally well beyond his years at the U.

**Francesca**

Francesca identifies as a middle-class Latina and grew up in a New England city. She was raised by her mom, an elementary school teacher, and her dad, a social worker. Both parents were college-educated and were very involved in their community. It almost seemed that a sense of agency and a desire to work for social change was ingrained in her from birth, as if it was in her DNA:

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30 Francesca was the final person I interviewed for the project. I sought her out because I was curious to hear from a BC founder, to see how her years of involvement with the organization shaped her sense of agency. I had met Francesca a few times and heard her present on the history of the organization, but I never worked with her. I also knew that Francesca was involved in some political controversies with various campus constituents prior to her departure from the U. I was eager to talk to Francesca, to hear the story of BC from one of the founders, to hear where she was now, and to hear how Francesca made meaning of that period in her life.
I remember being in elementary school, and it was like I knew: my mom taught at my elementary school, so I knew … she helped people. And I knew my dad, he was a social worker at a homeless shelter, and I knew that he helped people who needed help. I knew that both of my parents, their jobs were to help people, and they did good work for the community. And then I knew my grandmother was involved: she was really involved in education reform in [her city], and she was a professor around this thing called Reading Recovery. … [M]y grandfather was an Episcopal priest. He was really involved in the peace movement and the civil rights movement, and he involved my grandmother too. They involved my dad and his siblings. My dad, when he was 13, he actually got Martin Luther King’s autograph.

Growing up, there was a lot of intergenerational conversation. We didn’t really have a kid’s table or anything, so we were always around when my parents were having conversations with their friends or their family members. We were encouraged to participate in the conversations too.

Francesca recounted various stories of political engagement, including taking part in a protest with her father and members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to protect racial quotas in the magnet schools in her community. This was a significant story in her memory:

This might have been my earliest kind of political action … there actually used to be racial quotas in all of those schools. When I was in the fourth grade, … some white girl’s family sued the public schools because they said she did better, she ranked higher than one of her African American peers and didn’t get into the top school, and this girl did. So they sued.

And so then my parents – who knew right away they wanted us to go to those schools, they wanted us to have a better chance to get into those schools – got a little bit involved in wanting to fight the end of quotas.

The NAACP, they wanted to represent the city in this fight to keep the racial quotas. I remember my dad took me and my sister to an NAACP meeting, and we joined the NAACP in hoping that we could somehow help keep the quotes in the [magnet] schools. I was probably 9 or 10, but I remember going to that meeting. And I don’t really remember that much that was talked about, but I remember knowing that it was really cool that I got to be a cardholding member of the NAACP.

And so begins Francesca’s life as a community organizer, as a cardholding member of the NAACP at the age of 9.
Once Francesca reached middle school age, she became more active and engaged in the community in her own right, independent from her parents. She joined two community organizations designed to promote the leadership development and empowerment of youth from the community, youth of color in particular – and she would stay involved with one of these organizations for an extended period of time, well into her 20s.

A critical component of her involvement in these two organizations was her empowerment as a Latina. One of the organizations focused specifically on the recruitment and retention of Latino\(^{31}\) students in her magnet high school. Of this experience, Francesca recalled:

The summer before I went to the [magnet school], I got involved with this program called TAG …, Talented and Gifted Latino Program.\(^{32}\) It was targeting mostly Latino students who were about to enter into the [magnet schools], because they had a low retention rate of Latino students…. These schools have really good reputations. Almost all the students who graduate go to college. So [TAG] would invite all these Latino students who were about to go in to do enrichment classes over the summer. We had English class and math class and science and Latin because … both the top two schools, you have to take Latin and that’s kind of a struggle for a lot of students because it’s hard to see the point. They were really trying to prepare us, but at the same time help us get to know each other before going into the high school without knowing anybody. Because they bring in students from all over the city….\(^{33}\)

It’s interesting, because going into [high school], I had never really been to school with that many white students before…. That was a big culture shock, but it’s like if we met all these kids in the summer, we’d have some friends who came

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31 I use the word “Latino” as a group identifier here because it was the chosen word of my participant. The language around this group of folks varies, with some choosing the term “Latinx” as a gender-neutral option over other identifiers such as Latino, Latina/o, or Latin@. For further discussion on this term, see Ramirez and Blay, 2017.

32 This indeed is the same program that Atabex’s father helped develop and that Atabex also participated in.

33 There are some interesting connections with participants in the study to note: Nia attended the same magnet school as Francesca, and Atabex attended the same summer enrichment program as Francesca. In some ways, this reflects the ways members of BC would work their networks to bring folks into the program year after year.
from a similar background as us. And during the school year, … we had our TAG club which is like the Latino cultural club of the school.

So that was a really big part of my educational experience – I was at the school, but every summer I was at TAG as a student. And then by the time I was entering my Junior year, I was a teacher assistant at the program…. And my junior and senior year of the high school, I was on the E-board…

Having that type of community – a really supportive community with people of similar backgrounds was something that was just a really big part of my life growing up, from when I was 12 years old on. And that’s probably how I developed a lot of my identity around being Latina, because this group was a big part of my life.

Her involvement in TAG gave her a greater sense of community once she entered into the predominantly white environment of the magnet school. This community feeling would be fostered year-round through summer enrichment activities and the TAG club during the school year.

Through a second organization based in her neighborhood – the Task Force – she would be groomed to be a community organizer. She received trainings in community organizing, leadership, and community action. She was also trained as a literacy tutor and received a stipend to tutor students in her old elementary school. Of her early years with the Task Force, Francesca remembers taking part community campaigns and movements:

There was this vacant piece of land across from the train station…. And Kmart had plans to build a Kmart there, and there was this huge campaign that said, “We don’t want a Kmart here – we want a youth center.” Because this is right on neighborhood lines, this is a really hot area. And what our community really needs is some neutral ground, a safe place for us to go. Because we were running our programs out of the elementary school cafeteria at the time, and we had a small storefront office.

And so there was this huge Youth First campaign. And I remember it was shortly after I got involved, so I must’ve been in the 9th grade. We were marching in the streets saying, “This land shouldn’t be sold to Kmart because it’s ours!” And around the same time, there was a lot of gentrification happening, and we were learning about all that stuff.…

The Task Force … had a campaign to reduce the voting age in [our city] for neighborhood council elections to 16, because there was such a huge young population in the neighborhood; it had a higher concentration of teenagers than any other neighborhood in the city…. we had youth leaders in the organization
that were actually running for those seats on the neighborhood council. And so we learned how to campaign for them and we did voter registration.

We learned early on, we were encouraged early on to be like, “Yeah, we’re kids, but we know what’s going on, and so we have the right to be able to share our input and our opinions. And as a matter of fact, we’re almost a majority in this neighborhood, and so our opinions should be considered in what’s going to happen to this piece of land, because we make up most of the people who live here.”

The Task Force played a significant role in her life and in her development of a sense of agency. During these years, she was shaped into an activist.

As she began to consider where to go to college, Francesca had one primary goal: to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to be a community organizer. Her father was an alum of the U, and shared with her some of the history of student activism on the campus. This got her hooked. She explained:

Because I was interested in activism when I was applying to schools, I wanted to go to a school that had … some action around social justice, or where I could get a good education about that…. I was excited to be going to the U because I knew it did have a history of activism. My dad was an alum, and he said when he was there in the ‘70s it was a really great place…. I went to the U really wanting to learn how to be a better asset to my community. And to learn more about social movements and politics and how change happens.

Francesca arrived to the U ready to get started with activism and organizing with other students. She came in excited, because she saw on the news a few months earlier about student protests on the campus: “I saw on the news that there [were] students … protesting around lack of diversity and access and things…. I was excited about it, but I just didn’t really know where it was happening.” And she wouldn’t find where it was happening for quite some time.

In her first semester, she was placed in a living-learning community focused on her major. This meant she was housed in a residence hall with other Political Science
majors and was co-enrolled in classes with them. She did not have the experience she was hoping for in that community:

[T]hey were all political science nerds, they just wanted to get into political discussions right away, even before classes started. They were just kind of talking about politics [and] they’d ask me, “Oh, so what do you want to do with political science?” They all wanted to be lawyers. And then I’d say, “Oh, I want to be a community organizer,” and they’d be like, “Wow, I could never do something that wouldn’t make any money”. …

I just hated how they all talked about politics, because it was totally removed from any type of connection to real people. They talked about politics like it was a football game, like how you see people talk about it on TV. But even – they just kind of cared about these hot-button issues, like the war on abortion or things like that. [But] I had this idea – I want to study politics because I want to get to know the enemy better…. I totally did not connect with anybody in terms of politics on the floor. And I just kind of thought everybody was corny.

Francesca kept searching for community in other ways on the campus, but kept coming up with loose ends. Because she couldn’t find “her people,” she went home almost every weekend her first semester:

I got a job at the [health food store on campus] because I thought – they’re vegetarian, maybe they have similar values and stuff. But then … just because they’re hippies doesn’t mean they’re not racist. And that was something that I had to learn. And I was like – okay, I don’t really fit with these people either. So then after that, I [thought] maybe I’m just going to focus on school and … I would go home on the weekends.

But then my roommate, and then my neighbor, they were involved in student government and the ALAANA caucus, and they would try to convince me to do it. I just thought it was like student council at your high school, and to me it just seemed like it was a really corny thing. I didn’t want to sit in Senate meetings or anything – I just wasn’t really interested in it.…

And then one day, I thought maybe I could get involved in a Latino club or something … but I’m neither Dominican or Puerto Rican … and it also seems like those clubs were more interested in partying together than really looking at Latino as a political identity. So I wasn’t really interested in that either. So I just went home every weekend.

At some point in her first year, though, Francesca decided to stay on-campus one weekend, and she ended up completely changing her college experience as a result:
There was this one weekend that I decided that I wasn’t going to go home, that I would just hang out with my floormates. But then they told me that they actually weren’t going to be around because they were going on a retreat with ALANA Caucus. … And they were like, “Yeah, they say you can come if you’re interested in actually doing stuff with them.” I was just like, “Well, I guess I’ll give it a shot.” So I went, and then I just ended up getting really into the conversations that they were having.

That retreat would open the door for Francesca’s extended involvement in the Student Government Association. She would help with various elections in the second semester of her first year and would join the Educational Accessibility Committee – “because they were talking about issues that I cared about … – accessibility, affordability, accountability, and diversity.” That committee would ultimately design the program that would become Bridging Communities.

**BC Experiences and Agency**

In Francesca’s sophomore year, Bridging Communities began as a pilot program and she was hired as a site coordinator, serving as a liaison and providing on-site support with an afterschool program at a local middle school. While in that role, she also enrolled in the first iteration of the BC course, which at the time was a group independent study with a team of students. In her junior year, BC became a student-run agency in it’s own right, so Francesca moved to a new position and served as the first program coordinator. She enrolled in the course a second time, and also worked with other staff in BC to develop college awareness workshops, similar to those that Nia would go on to facilitate years later. In her fourth and final year at the U, Francesca would again serve as program coordinator.

The same themes as previous participants – awareness, sense of belonging, and structure – will be used to explore Francesca’s experiences in BC. Because some of
Francesca’s experiences look very different from the other participants, primarily due to the point in time she was involved, the skills Francesca talks about developing will imbedded throughout, but mostly included in the “structure” theme.

**Awareness**

Like the other participants, Francesca started out enrolled in the BC course in her first year with the program, although that first year the course was a one-credit group independent study. She ultimately enrolled in a version of the course each year for almost three years, so she had continuous involvement and learning on the topics in focus. The BC course, she shared:

> was an opportunity for me to try to make the connection with all these theoretical ideas of oppression and stuff. And giving real examples and putting into context how we’re coming across these issues in our workplace [i.e., the afterschool programs where she was serving as a tutor/mentor].

> I remember once we were talking about an issue of gentrification and I would be able to make the connection well. One of the high school students we were working with… she told me that she actually used to live [right by the U] with her family. But the rent got too expensive and so then they had to leave. And now they’re in [the city we work in that is nearby], and the [high schools in these communities] are completely different… So what did that mean for her? And she definitely like living [by the U] more than she liked living in [the city she lives now]. We were talking about gentrification, and I could talk about how conflicted I felt, because around this time, I’m looking for off-campus housing with my friends, and I’m just – wow – because we’re being asked to move off-campus by the university because there isn’t enough housing for everybody, I’m taking affordable housing away from a family who wants to live there and not just for a couple of years.

> And so I think [the class] was a good place to process things… also, we learned a lot of the historical context of public higher education. And I think the way how I saw it as being really important that we have this class time was because we wanted BC to not only be just, you know, “oh, it’s fun, we’re building relationships with kids in a poor neighborhood.” I wanted it to be a transformative experience for everyone. So, it’s nice that we can get a van and drive and tutor some kids a couple hours a week. But when we come back to the U, what are we doing? … Reciprocity was the big word, because we’re going in and helping in [the nearby city] but what are we doing on our own campus, so that they have access to the resources that we have here?
The course was a space for Francesca to explore questions that arose as moved more deeply into the work. Interestingly, as a young organizer, Francesca was part of the Youth First campaign for a youth center in her home neighborhood. As a college student though, Francesca became part of a group – college students – that was displacing people in neighborhoods near the U. The course became a space for Francesca to process the complexity of these issues.

Beyond building her own awareness, Francesca and the other BC founders wanted the course to be transformative for other students involved – more than just “oh, that’s fun, hanging out with kids.” This comment connects to something Theo said about his impression of service partnerships at the U:

There’s a lot of stuff at the U where you can go to some of the schools and do macaroni necklaces with kids, and maybe that’s what I thought [BC] would be like from the get-go. And it wasn’t until I sort of got into the program that I realized, well, I think our work goes a lot deeper than macaroni necklaces, at least. But you know, I started to see like the bigger layers behind BC and the mission and that sort of thing.

Francesca described that the goal with BC, both through the course and the work in schools and afterschool programs, was for it to be more than just hanging out, making macaroni necklaces, and leaving – and through that, that it might be a different kind of opportunity for students than what she observed was currently happening at the university.

**Sense of Belonging**

Francesca felt a significant connection to the group of student organizers that designed BC, some of whom became part of BC during the pilot year and beyond. This sense of belonging had a lasting impact on Francesca. When we first spoke, roughly three years after she left the U, and then during our follow-up conversation five years after that,
she considered the relationships she developed to be the biggest, most lasting aspect of her work with BC. She felt deeply connected to the people she worked with, forming crucial relationships that would be sustained well after leaving the U. Francesca described the experience:

> It was a big time commitment, because … it actually did make up a lot of my school credit and it was my job. But it was also my social circle and so I felt like even, sometimes it was like hanging out – we were all doing similar work. And we were doing that informal building. So it definitely took up most of my time. But it wasn’t all work – but even when I wasn’t working, I [would] still hang out in the BC office. It was my social circle. Most of my friends at the U were involved in BC somehow, or if they weren’t in BC, they were in SGA, and they were doing work that supported BC.

Theo described BC as “everything” – Francesca saw it as everything too. BC was her job, it was essentially her major – since really she came to college to get further training as a community organizer – and it was her social base. She found comfort in the office and spent much of her time there, on the clock or not. And her social relationships were folks who she would spend a great deal of time organizing with, be it organizing based in the community where BC worked or on the university campus itself.

Francesca also saw this relationship-building as an important aspect of her job once she became program coordinator. In that role, her main priority was to build relationships with other students and staff in BC, while at the same time raising their awareness about the organization’s mission and goals:

> [I worked hard to build] personal relationships with everybody who was involved in BC…. I just really wanted to pull them over to my side. That’s what I felt like was my big responsibility as coordinator. My job was to get other people engaged and to get other people upset about what they were seeing the current climate was. I wanted people to want more in their university and in their educational experience, and want to take control over that, from where they were…. [That’s what I] felt in my heart was my responsibility as coordinator, and all those administrative and logistical things were just what I used to build those relationships to try to get people to come over onto the right side of the argument.
Essentially, she felt her job was to raise the awareness of students around her, to bring them over to “the right side of the argument,” and her biggest strategy in doing this was through building relationships with every student in BC. To change someone’s thinking, she not only built a personal relationship with them, but also made relationships more than about the superficial – she made those relationships about college access, about social justice, about examining issues of power and privilege in relationship to the public university where they were based.

Francesca’s perception of and relationships with white people were also deeply impacted during her years of involvement with BC. Her work with BC gave her hope that white people can care about movements for equity and access for people of color. She talked about Theo and another student as examples of this:

It gives me hope. Because I see someone like Theo … he really cared deep…. I never expected to see this white jockey kid be moved like that…. And [another white male student] – he was part of the Republican Club when he first came to the U. And he was involved in SGA, and … he was on the Educational Accessibility Committee that helped create BC…. People always joke about him being an alpha male because he looks like a meathead and he wears Abercrombie and Fitch and stuff. But he really tries to understand social justice and now he’s in law school. I just saw him as – wow, he really came to college to learn and I feel like he really did. He was just so open to learning and so smart.

And so you see these two straight white men…. I feel like maybe [they] changed a lot of their values through this experience. That’s what college should be if you have all these privileged people going into it. You’d hope that they’d come out thinking of themselves more of a citizen of the world and more engaged…. 

It gave me a lot of hope that that can happen. That you can change people, you can reach people’s hearts and minds, and it is possible to convince people to fight for social justice. Maybe before I had this assumption why people aren’t going to be on your side – because they see your liberation as a threat to them. It gave me even more compassion because I could see that people can be changed.

I think that’s an important thing for a student of color to realize. Because a lot of time we might have the tendency to segregate ourselves. But it’s important that we learn to coexist with white people and to also see them as human beings.
The sense of belonging that Francesca felt, then, wasn’t only with students of color and with the friends she had prior to starting BC, but with white students who she felt were genuinely impacted by their experiences with BC.

The relationships that Francesca developed during her years with BC would follow her well beyond her years at the U. Earlier, Arnold spoke about feeling like he was part of an “army” of people fighting for educational access and equity. Francesca would attest to this idea in the ways that she maintained connections with the various folks she worked with well after she departed the U. Sharing a story about running into an alum of BC after leaving the U, she says:

It’s really profound that we’re all still committed to this type of youth empowerment work. We have these connections to each other, we can still support each other…. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that our paths are crossing still, that speaks to the sustainability because even if maybe BC doesn’t exist, there are people leaving BC who are committed to this type of work. And they’re committed to a larger movement, and so we’re continuing. We might be doing it through a different organization, but we’re still committed to the same thing.

I think that’s something we were hoping [for]: … it might have been just a group of activist friends but through these institutions of BC and SGA, that helps us create a shared identity that we feel attached to. So it’s okay that I left the U, but I was a member of BC, and this is the work that I did, and I’m still committed to doing that type of work.

Her sense of belonging wasn’t only bound by the relationships she formed, then – it was the shared values, the shared commitments, the shared identity with the other students she worked with.

**Structure**

The structure of BC factored into Francesca’s sense of agency in important ways. Remember that Francesca came to college to study community organizing. In a sense, she created this course of study for herself, both through her major and via the creation of BC, which allowed for academic pursuits, work in the community, and a paying job on
campus doing the organizing work she wanted to do. When the program was created, Francesca hoped the program would provide an accessible pathway for a wide variety of students to be politicized:

Not everybody wants to be a radical activist. Not everybody wants to lobby. That’s not what everybody’s interested in or what they’re good at…. When you’re doing policy work, that’s really time-consuming, but there is this instant gratification in service…. I feel like I need to see all those things happening, and I need that combination of direct service and feeling that gratification that I’m making a difference in someone’s life. But I also need to be able to see that something is being addressed in the bigger scheme of it all. I definitely think that that’s kind of an analysis about how change happens. That’s something that I learned at the U through BC and through some of the other service-learning classes I had, or some of the other extracurricular activities…. I was just really trying to get people to envision how they wanted the university to run…. I wanted BC to be that political experience for someone. Because it’s not hard to convince someone to tutor a kid, but I wanted them to advocate for that kid to get to the college campus, and to fight for that kid. Anytime I could make that pitch in [the BC] class or in a [BC] meeting or something like that, I kind of felt like that was my thing – everything I did was with that in mind. Even though we had a lot of student leaders who were involved in their clubs, and they were leaders that way, I wanted them to also be politicized and hold the administration accountable, and be involved in the fight to protect their organizations which were often being targeted for cuts and things.

It was as though the structure of BC directly lent itself to Francesca’s skill development as a community organizer. And for her, BC incorporated direct service as a way to make the movement more accessible. In other words, she and other founders saw service and community engagement as an accessible and gratifying way to get involved in a larger movement that otherwise could be alienating to folks. It was as if the service focus of BC – the tutoring and mentoring aspect of the yearlong course that all BC staffers took prior to working for BC – became a gateway to policy advocacy.

The structure of BC also instilled in Francesca an important sense of independence and self-reliance in making decisions and determining the direction of the organization. As a BC staff member, she felt compelled to take responsibility for
decision-making: as a student-run organization, the students couldn’t really depend on or rely on professors or staff members to make those decisions for them. That structural reality had great implications for Francesca well beyond her tenure at the U. Almost ten years after her BC experience, she feels confident in her ability to make professional decisions, and she works hard to instill this same sense of empowerment in youth and other folks she works with. One of her mottos is “do your own work;” she encourages others to rely on themselves and to believe that they have the agency and the capacity to navigate systems in their own right.

On Leaving the University in Her Senior Year

There are some other aspects of the structure and its impact on Francesca that bear mentioning, as they had significant impacts on her university experience. A series of circumstances in Francesca’s senior year caused her great distress and ultimately led to her departure from the university. A student club on campus published a newspaper-style document, where they accused BC staff of misusing student funds for personal gain. The publication caught the attention of rightwing groups nationally; one national organization threatened to sue the university based on the student accusations. Francesca described:

[N]ear the end of my involvement [with BC], I had been targeted by a couple of rightwing student groups. They were accusing me of mismanaging money, but they were just saying some really cruel things about me. They even got national rightwing student groups involved…. I tried to file a complaint against the students, but there was this larger rightwing organization that was threatening to sue the university unless I was reprimanded somehow.

I felt like when I went into the dean of students’ office, it was a setup. I thought I was going in there to talk about how I felt violated and how I felt humiliated and how I felt these students needed some sort of action. And then I just had the administrator of the school telling me … “Well, if you don’t like what people have to say, maybe you should just choose not to read it.” … Like it’s my fault because I put myself in that position.
And then I had a lot of the people around me [who] were saying, “You should be proud that this happened, they’re only attacking you because you’re a powerful person…. you’re a target because you’re doing the right thing.”

And I would tell myself that. But at the same time, I felt I was singled out…. And to this day, I don’t think I did anything wrong. And I was being attacked for it, not only just [by] a bunch of different students, but I felt like the larger institution and the law was on their side and I just felt really defeated and hurt. And I just needed a break from everything…. so I went back home….

I just felt really defeated and overworked and burnt out…. I became a little bit more introverted. And I kind of felt like sometimes not really wanting to express my views about things or organize. I just kind of felt like a lot of things would overwhelm me…. I think [the reason] some people [don’t want to fight for change is] because they’re afraid to go against the grain; taking the path of resistance is scary. I understand that firsthand because I thought I stood up for what I believed in, and I had people trying to break me down. And it was a really scary experience. I don’t think that most people would want that. I feel like it was done to send a message to other people, like, “We’re going to find a way to get you if you’re going to try to fight for change. We’re going to find all these loopholes to put you back in your place.”

I felt that firsthand and it did scare me. I was just like – … I can’t be fighting like this for the rest of my life. It’s just like, I don’t think I could handle it, emotionally, mentally, physically. I felt scared to fight for change.

It really did kind of break my heart, because I cared about it so much. I kind of understand why people – it’s not that people don’t care, I feel like most people know what’s going on, people know what the word racism means. And a person of color – they know what racism is. It’s not a matter of not knowing or not caring, but there are so many examples of people who got the shit beat out of them or killed for standing up for what was right…. Are you willing to put yourself on the line? I feel like it takes a lot to be that person. I think I kind of doubted where I could be that person, you know? Because … as much as I cared about the kids in [the city we worked in], I care about people who are suffering. But I also have to care for me. I feel like it’s kind of just a human instinct, you know? You need to sustain yourself.34

34 This incident haunted the organization well beyond the publication of the newsletter that targeted Francesca. The following semester, a group of students filed a formal complaint to the university, claiming BC misused student funds. Theo spoke about this in his interviews, as the complaint was filed when Theo served as the program coordinator. Theo described the complaint:

[T]here was also the 50-page complaint that came out about BC in the middle of October. It specifically named me and some other folks who were working with BC at the time. I remember I had so many panicked phone calls with my parents at the time, just so freaked out about what was going to happen to BC, and what was going to happen to me. Am I going to get kicked out of school? What’s going to happen to everyone else who’s working [in BC]? It was just all this political backlash from years past that had built up and built up, that finally came to a head. That was really stressful … [because it felt like] people think the work that you’re doing doesn’t have value or they’re trying to ruin it. I guess I just had all these fears about being in this leadership role too, and thinking, “Oh God, if this program falls apart, then it’s going to fall on me.”
Much of Francesca’s activism was devoted to college awareness and college access for oppressed peoples. Was the structure of BC so overwhelming for students that it led them to a longer time to degree, such as Arnold, or to not completing college altogether? As we learned from Theo, his semester as program coordinator was extremely stressful, even with a smaller course load. Francesca shared that in her tenure with BC, she learned intimately that “there’s no such thing as a part-time organizing position.” Of her time with BC, she learned:

If you’re really committed to organizing, you’re going to have to do a lot of work … there’s so much time that’s uncompensated…. It’s always with you, because it’s so personal. And you’re talking to people about it all the time, and it has this deep impact on you…. the people who started BC, we worked crazy hours, and we committed – we over-committed ourselves because … that’s just how we were.

Is the nature of the work such that it takes over students’ lives and makes it more difficult for them to fully engage and complete their course commitments?35

Attaining a Bachelor’s degree wasn’t necessarily Francesca’s primary goal in attending the U. Remember, she wanted to be a community organizer, and wanted her time at the U to provide her with further training and knowledge towards this goal.

Perhaps, in a way, the creation of BC in and of itself was her college degree:

[T]he other day, I visited the TAG office…. they asked me why I didn’t finish undergrad. And I was just kind of talking to them about everything that I went through. And even they knew [about BC] – they were like “yeah, but Bridging Communities is still there.”

35 In turn, is there something particular to being a student-run organization that makes BC more vulnerable to risk, and puts student reputations on the line more? If BC was structured as a more traditional student leadership program – say, nested in Student Affairs, Multicultural Affairs, or Community Engagement – complete with a full-time professional staff person, could the student staff have been more protected or secure from public accusations? On the one hand, students in a leadership program with staff oversight might be safeguarded in some ways, if professional staff are seen as the first line of defense. On the other hand, though, the idea in and of itself could be considered disempowering to students. Obviously, there are different ways to view this, and this is a question we will return to at length in the discussion section.
For her, BC became her legacy, her contribution – a representation of her college years and her diploma.

Almost 10 years after leaving the university, Francesca has still not received her Bachelors degree. She shared that at her youngest sister’s college graduation, she felt a twinge of guilt for not finishing – not for herself, necessarily, but for her parents. In general, though, Francesca did not particularly seem concerned about her delayed completion: she was focused on the movement for education equity and access – and when the work became unhealthy for her, she decided to take a break. She wasn’t worried about completing college – she shared plans for completing her remaining coursework and graduating in the future.

More importantly to Francesca, she found her love of organizing again. When she first left the university, Francesca retreated to the safety of her family and took about six months completely off. She took time to “re-evaluate some of the choices” she was making – she “started to sleep better and eat better and exercise more and just kind of made that the focus” of her life. After that, she gradually re-entered the work world, starting with a part-time job that still allowed for time to take care of herself. She then began working in roles where she was teaching and tutoring, jobs that she described as service-oriented. She started missing organizing, which led her to returning to the Task Force, where she worked with a group of teens to organize performances in the community that would build community:

[This summer I] have found myself rejuvenated by my involvement with the Task Force again because I’m working with a group of 8 teenagers. We’re working on making these community events, family-friendly events in the neighborhood… keeping kids engaged through dance, through exercise, through performances, through face-painting, through sports…. we’re having these events on the steps of an old abandoned Catholic church in the community that’s about to be turned into
luxury condominiums … this immense beautiful church that used to be such a big part of this Latino neighborhood is now getting turned into luxury condos, just like everything else.

But I think the act of us – we’re providing this service of, we’re creating a fun thing for the neighborhood to go [to]. I can still make the connection that it’s more about a larger movement, about reclaiming this space that belongs to the community.

Ultimately, Francesca found that although organizing work was more consuming than “just service work,” it was more meaningful to her, and in the end was really what she was meant to do. More recently, she moved to a new position where she was working in labor organizing. She was excited by the challenges of her new position and to have the opportunity to work for justice from a slightly different angle. And she sounded happy, healthy, optimistic – and truly grateful for the experiences she had at the U, particularly through her work with BC.
CHAPTER 5
COMMON THEMES

Diving into each participant’s story offers us a rich picture of their lives, their experiences at the U, and how their involvement in BC shaped them. For some, those impacts were massively significant; for others, they were important but not as deep. Moving from the individual narratives, a set of themes emerged across the group. Using the three research questions as a guide, those themes will be explored here. The heftiest research question – about agency and the ways participants understood agency before, during, and after BC – will represent the first and largest section of this chapter. The second section will unpack the second two questions: the ways participants label the work of BC (i.e., as service-learning, as activism, or as something else), and the ways that students do, or do not, see themselves connected to a larger service-learning effort.

Connections between the BC Experience and Participants’ Sense of Agency

This study focuses primarily on agency – how the participants, student leaders in Bridging Communities, came to understand their capacity to take action during their time with BC. This question was broken down into three parts:

1. How participants perceived their sense of agency before they joined BC;
2. How participants perceived the ways their sense of agency changed during the BC course and their year(s) as staff; and
3. How participants imagined their future roles in community and political life.

Pre-BC Sense of Agency

The seven participants in the study started BC at a range of places. For some of them, agency – one’s capacity to take action – was a concept fully realized to them and
carried out in a variety of contexts. For others, it wasn’t until they reached the U, and then joined BC, that they began to realize they were independent actors and could move about the world, making decisions for themselves; further, they began to see themselves as part of larger social justice and education equity movements. If we consider agency on a spectrum from low (i.e., felt like they were going through the motions, being directed by others, etc.) to high (independent, taking action for social change), the participants could roughly be placed in three groups:

- **Group 1**: Arnold, Jessica, and Theo
- **Group 2**: Kayla and Nia
- **Group 3**: Atabex and Francesca

Group 1 would be considered to have a relatively low sense of agency prior to BC, Group 2 a relatively medium sense of agency, and Group 3 a high sense of agency. I would describe these groupings as “rough” because there is a great deal of nuance to these categories and they are not necessarily operationalized definitions. Nonetheless, they can be helpful in considering how participants understood their own sense of agency prior to coming to the U and joining BC.

**Group 1: Arnold, Jessica, and Theo**

When asked during his interview to quantify his sense of agency as he entered college, Arnold gave himself an “absolute zero.” For Arnold, this meant going through the motions – he enjoyed being in school and he was fascinated with how things worked. Arnold’s conceptions of taking action were based on overcoming challenges, such as problem sets, tests, quizzes, etc. He wasn’t thinking about the civic sphere however – as such, his sense of civic agency was particularly low. Jessica too considered herself to
have little to no sense of agency prior to coming to the U. She recalled her upbringing as “fairly directed and sheltered.” Her most empowering moments were when she got her first job at her local grocer and began making her own money – a feeling that was incredibly satisfying and gave her the first taste of independence from her parents. She still, though, was very cautious to follow her parents’ wishes and expectations.

Theo’s narrative placed him in this group as well, although we might consider him at a slightly different place along the low-to-high continuum for a few reasons. Before college, Theo didn’t really see himself as one to take action, except in the arena of cross country, where he spent a considerable amount of time working out and participating in competitions. On the other hand, Theo highlighted a few significant moments in his later high school years that began to nudge him and enhance his sense of agency. Remember, for example, the letter written but never sent to the president, calling on people to stand up for injustice and discrimination. As he neared the end of high school, Theo began to move away from spending all of his time training for cross country in order to get involved in community service at his school. He began wondering what his purpose was and how he might impact the lives of others. He didn’t see himself as an agent of change at all, but he started to crack open the door and think about how he might do more.

**Group 2: Kayla and Nia**

Kayla and Nia were further along the continuum in their understandings of agency and their own sense of agency in particular. Throughout her youth in California, Kayla found ways to develop as a leader and to see herself as someone who was capable of taking action. The biggest example from her story was her involvement in the street
dance movement in her home community. Kayla had been part of a street dance group for some time, but eventually prompted the group to take their dance to the next level and to travel and perform with various hip-hop artists in their community. Kayla had seen struggle and at some points was involved in what she called “unsavory activities;” she wanted her dance group to inspire youth to go a different direction. When her family moved across the country, she directed her sense of agency inward, working on her academics partly to prove her teachers’ low expectations of her to be incorrect. When Kayla arrived to the U, she was eager to find an opportunity that allowed her to further her passions and to lead her to a teaching career.

Like Kayla, Nia had specific experiences prior to coming to the U where she began to formulate her own sense of agency and ability to educate others, take action, and empower young people. As an intern at the City Aquarium for much of her high school years, Nia was provided opportunities to design college preparation workshops for other teens and she began learning facilitation and curriculum development skills. She also developed close relationships with her supervisor and other interns, and felt further empowered by those folks to take action. Nia didn’t necessarily see her work as connected to social change at that point in her life – she more saw the work as a fun and engaging opportunity, a chance to become lost within the walls of the City Aquarium, which in some ways become her home and her safe place.

**Group 3: Francesca and Atabex**

Francesca and Atabex came into BC with a high sense of agency. Both spent considerable time before college taking action in their communities. In addition, both had a strong sense of their abilities to take action, specifically in the civic sphere and working
for social change. Atabex described herself as someone who “came in ready.” Through her admiration of her parents, as well as her own experiences as a teacher and activist in high school, she came into the U ready to build on her experiences and further refine her vision as an “artist with a mission.” Atabex came into the BC course and later the staff with a fire and passion to work for social change and for the empowerment of her community.

Francesca came in with a high sense of agency, but this shouldn’t be surprising, as Francesca was in a slightly different category from the other six participants. As one of the founders of BC, Francesca was intimately involved with the research, development, and implementation of BC as a program. This involved a great deal of action-taking and strategizing with constituents, including members of student government, folks in the local community, and faculty, staff, and administrators on the campus. But her time at the U was not the beginning of Francesca’s identity as an actor and activist. From her earliest memories of being (literally) a card-carrying member of the NAACP, to participating in protests against gentrification in her home community, to being a leader in her high school and outside-of-school involvement, Francesca developed a strong sense of agency early on and saw BC as an avenue to support others in their understanding of social injustice and in their own development of agency.

**Sense of Agency and Experiences in Bridging Communities**

While all participants came into their years with BC with varying life experiences, they all reported being influenced by various aspects of the Bridging Communities experience. In Chapter Four, participant narratives explored specific aspects of the BC experience and the ways participants felt their sense of agency was changed and/or
enhanced through their involvement with BC. Four major themes emerged and were used to structure the narratives: sense of belonging, awareness, skills, and structure. Figure 2 represents each of these themes and how they interact and influence each other.

Following an explanation of each the themes, the figure will be explained in greater depth. The bigger question – how did participants’ experiences in BC impact their overall sense of agency, from where they were prior to BC to after? – will be explored after that.

**Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging involves “finding a role in relation to others which makes [a student] feel valued, will contribute to [their] feeling of self-worth, and will contribute to a feeling of kindship with an increasing number of persons” (American Council on Education, 1949/1987, pp. 22-23). A person feels like they belong when they feel welcomed, important, and connected to those around them. For participants in BC, this factor was significant and was touched on throughout the interviews. When someone felt valued and important, they were more willing to give of themselves to the organization: this was especially true for Arnold, Theo, Atabex, Nia, and Francesca. On the other hand, when someone’s sense of belonging was challenged, their willingness to be fully involved was challenged as well, as was the case with Kayla and Jessica.

A major element contributing to participants’ feelings of belonging was *relationships*. Bringle, Clayton, and Price (2009) explore relationships within service-learning courses as multilayered and involving many constituents – students, faculty, administrators, community organizational staff (i.e., teachers and administrators in schools), and community residents (i.e., youth and families). Participants cited a range of relationships as significant in leading to a sense of belonging. They spoke of student-
student relationships: with students within the BC course, but also relationships with instructors (graduate students), as well as BC staff members (undergraduate and graduate students). They also emphasized relationships with folks in the communities they served: teachers, youth, and community organizers. The participants’ sense of belonging tended to increase when the relationships created a sense of safety and trust. All participants talked about feeling connected to and inspired by people in the BC course and in the organization broadly.

Of important significance were friendships across and within various identities, but particularly race and ethnicity. Several participants highlighted this with great significance. Through the relationships she developed in BC, Nia grew to trust white people. Francesca began to see white people differently and came away with a greater sense of hope that white people cared about education equity and equity in general for communities of color. The relationships Kayla developed through the BC course helped her feel connected, and she learned from similarities and differences in her classmates.

For some, the relationships – both one-to-one relationships and connections in small groups – developed into something greater: a sense of family. Theo shared that there were many things he could only talk about with other members of the organization and that folks outside of BC just didn’t get it. He also witnessed a collective identity, particularly in BC staff meetings. Atabex described a sense of “family love” and that her work and study with BC “became a life.” Arnold too spoke about BC as a family to him.

The relationships and family dynamics of BC led some to feel a greater sense of self-worth and to feel important. For example, Arnold’s self-confidence increased greatly and he suddenly felt like the “star athlete” through his work. In turn, the relationships
across roles within the organization (i.e., between students in the course and student staff members) led to a deeper investment in the organization, and a desire to stick with it, to move from being a student in the BC course to joining the BC staff. Theo spoke of mutual mentoring that occurred at all levels, as students went in small groups together to their sites and also through relationships amongst the BC staff. Kayla, Theo, and Nia emphasized the close relationships they developed with staff and youth at the schools and sites where they were placed. Fran described these relationships as inspirational, leading her to innovate and do more.

Relationships did not always lead to a sense of belonging, however. Two important examples illustrate this point. Kayla initially developed strong connections in the BC course and at the afterschool program where she was placed. In her internship semester, though, she felt disconnected to BC staff, which led to her departure from the organization. She did stay engaged at the afterschool program though for the rest of her time at the U, despite terminating her relationship with BC. Throughout her four years of involvement with BC, Jessica experienced a somewhat conflicted sense of belonging. She felt like an insider at some points, but an outsider as well. She further explained:

I’m looking at it from an intellectual [standpoint] … I don’t feel like an outsider because I feel like Bridging Communities had a direct effect on me, and I feel like I’ve had some effect on Bridging Communities. And then emotionally, certain people have helped me with things…. [But] socially it’s a whole other thing…. that’s where I feel like more of an outsider.

Importantly, Jessica outlines an even greater complexity about sense of belonging – that it consists of multiple elements, including intellectual and social; one can feel belonging in some but not all aspects. For the majority of the participants, including Kayla, a kind of social and emotional connection led to a sense of belonging, but for Jessica, other
aspects of the experience (which actually connect with the next section around awareness of academic and career interests) helped to enhance her sense of belonging within the organization.

Another aspect within sense of belonging is important to emphasize here: the place where BC’s partnerships were located and their impacts on sense of belonging. This was especially true for two participants, Arnold and Atabex. A Puerto Rican woman, Atabex felt an immediate sense of home and belonging when she began working with BC’s community partners. It felt natural – her understanding of slang, her feeling of familiarity when seeing flags and seeing foods in local restaurants – and reminded her of the island and what she missed so dearly about living there. Like Atabex, Arnold felt a sense of belonging because some aspects of his work were based in his home city. For example, his participatory action research project took on even greater significance to him because he worked with youth from his home community. In turn, his work as site coordinator was doubly important to him for this same reason.

Beyond relationships and place, sense of belonging was just a feeling for some folks and hard for them to put into words. It was enhanced by several structural aspects of the organization, including who was in the room – i.e., students of color and an instructor of color; how – pedagogical strategies; and why – the importance and acceptance of the organization’s mission.

Awareness

Awareness was a second major theme that emerged from participants’ experiences in BC, both in the course and as staff members. Nia described this most vividly by referring to BC as her core learning factor at the U: BC ultimately “disrupted”
her education and changed the course of her thinking and her life. Theo described BC as “the catalyst” that got him “thinking and exposed to new ideas and to new cultures.” For the participants, the impacts on their awareness fell into three categories: awareness of (1) self, (2) academic and career interests, and (3) education equity and advocacy.

**Self-Awareness**

Several participants learned a great deal about themselves through their BC experiences, with the course being most impactful. Arnold grew to understand himself much more intensely, as if he had just opened a “whole book” about himself. For Theo, many of the ideas he held about the world coming into the course were challenged by his classmates, causing him to rethink not only the ideas themselves but himself. Nia began to see herself more as an agent of change, especially as she learned and practiced new skills and concepts.

A key aspect of the self-awareness was participants’ understandings of their racial identities. Arnold described how he came to understand the significance of his African American identity, particularly within the context of a predominantly-white university. For the first time, he started reflecting on the connection of his blackness to “the way I vote, what I see of success, how I see school and college currently.” He began to look more critically at the students around him, questioning why there weren’t more people like him at the U: “I started looking at this, like – how many people… are like me in the room that I’m in, at any given time? … It’s usually one in my class and in my work… like one or two or three.”

Theo and Jess learned a great deal about themselves as white people. Prior to the BC course, Jess “had totally thought… from the white perspective.” Being in a space
with a critical mass of people of color forced her to rethink who she was and what her ideas and beliefs represented. As she learned about concepts such as white privilege (McIntosh, 1990), she reflected critically on her beliefs. She began to question what she knew prior to BC and was open to learning from her classmates. Prior to BC she “never questioned anything… I just repeated what I heard.” Through the conversations with her classmates, she saw her “white perspective” reflected back to her, and began to question what was true for her. For Theo, engaging conversations and debates in the BC course led him to think deeply about what it meant to be white. He was openly challenged by his peers in ways he found exciting and profound. While at times he was resistant to people’s ideas, he began to question how being white impacted the ways he could move about the university and the world.

An additional level of self-awareness had to do with unpacking stereotypes people held, particularly about the communities surrounding the university. When he first came to the U, Theo was told the city BC worked in was “a bad place.” Arnold too began BC with similar information – that it was a city where his friends got into fights, or where people were busted for drug use: “it was a community that was just like the hood – I never knew anything else about it…” Within the first month of school, BC sponsored an event where students could learn about the city and meet community leaders. At this event, Theo and Arnold’s assumptions of the city began to unravel. They learned about the history of the city and the Puerto Rican population there; they heard from community organizers and city officials about city policies; and they learned about exciting work happening in the community. Arnold was shocked at how wrong his assumptions were.
Theo and Arnold would begin to create new and different understandings of the community, seeing it as a place of empowerment and possibility.

**Awareness of Academic and Career Interests**

As participants became more aware of themselves, their identities, and their assumptions, they also honed their academic and career interests. BC coursework and experiences were hugely impactful in this regard for almost all of the participants. Theo, for example, recognized gaps in his knowledge about Latinx culture and began taking courses in Latin American Studies. He also enrolled in Spanish courses, mostly so he could connect more with youth in the afterschool program. Prior to enrolling in the BC course, Arnold primarily took science and math courses. After the BC course, though, he became more interested and excited to take courses in related topics, including “some sort of dialogue or social justice workshop. And BC was the start of that – no other class started that, no other class talked about this kind of stuff when I was doing my undergrad.” Similarly, Nia’s enrollment and interest in the BC course led her to take related courses, such as a course in intergroup dialogue and history courses that used first-person perspectives:

that’s one of the things that I get from BC, is that I always want to know another part of the story… So I took History of the Civil Rights Movement because I wanted to hear from the mouth of someone who was in the civil rights movement… I took Blues Women Soul Women Jazz Women … [n]ot because I really wanted to listen to jazz and stuff, but I really wanted to know what the perspective of women were on the world, their life, and music at that time.

Beyond impacting students’ course selection, all of the study participants would go on to careers in youth development, with the majority working in school-settings.

Many would credit BC with either confirming this interest or sparking a desire to teach. Arnold shared, “literally I don’t know how, if I would’ve never worked for BC, I
would’ve ever thought about being a teacher.” Theo echoed this sentiment, saying that if he hadn’t participated in BC, “I know I wouldn’t have ended up a teacher; I know that for a fact.” Jessica, a legal studies major, decided in her junior year to pursue a Masters in teaching, and credited Bridging Communities for leading her down this path. Nia, too, shared that she’d likely have pursued something else if it weren’t for BC:

I probably would’ve been heavily influenced by my family to go into a career that would make more money… But BC has always set that constant reminder for me of why the work needs to be done, and why people need to go into the education field.

For Kayla, teaching was already on her horizons, and the BC course confirmed her passion and interest, by helping to get her to “start seriously thinking about it.” Similarly, Atabex and Francesca experienced this confirmation, although not for careers as classroom teachers but for careers in community organizing. BC helped Atabex to mold her focus into wanting to work in community organizing and the arts, especially in shaping her awareness of the skills needed for working in communities.

Passion for Education Equity and Advocacy

A third type of awareness touched on in the interviews was an awareness of education equity and the resulting commitment that participants developed towards that issue. For some folks, this awareness was newly developed through their BC experiences, while for some it was deepened and advanced. Called on to be a substitute teacher on her very first day, Nia was concerned by an overreliance on subs at the school she served. She also became troubled by patterns related to in-school suspension: “It’d be one day, they were there, the next day they’re not…. [T]he young girls were always there … but the boys were always in and out of trouble.” She began to think about these issues on a
policy level: she moved from easily dismissing issues (“oh, the school system – terrible”) to “really looking at why there’s issues with the school system.”

Arnold had not thought much about education access and equity before the BC course, and became deeply interested and committed to it. He shared, “When I learn an equation in physics, I lose it right afterwards, because I’ll just be like it’s in a book somewhere. But how I feel about injustices in America, racially in education, that’s not lost to me – it didn’t leave my brain…” Kayla was similarly impacted, sharing that the BC course made her want to work towards education equity and challenging the low expectations that people often have of students who come from poverty.

For Francesca, the BC course and other courses increased her awareness around education equity. She made connections with the theory she was studying, historical realities of higher education in the US, what she experienced growing up, and what she was seeing in the schools. Theo, too, began thinking a great deal about the role of higher education in this picture, and became committed to college access when he “had a moment of reckoning,” learning that “people in these communities don’t necessarily have access to this huge state resource that is a public university, that is supposed to be open and available in some respect to everyone.”

Summary

Awareness – of self and identity, academic and career interests, and the issue of education equity – was significant for participants. For many, this awareness led them to consider ways they could practice their own agency to work for change. Through learning more about themselves and the issues, they began to think about and take action towards creating change. As with sense of belonging, awareness was enhanced by several
structural aspects of the organization, including who was in the room – i.e., students of
color and an instructor of color, and the relationships students developed with each other
and folks in the community; how – pedagogical strategies and course content; and why –
the importance and acceptance of the organization’s mission.

Skill Development

Participants reported developing a range of skills through their time with
BC that would enhance their sense of agency and make them more confident in their
abilities to act in the world. The skills that came up in the interviews can be grouped into
four categories: administrative, teaching and research, communication, and advocacy.
There is certainly some overlap with these categories – for example, one could consider
“communication” to be a skill essential for administration or advocacy. Nonetheless, the
four categories were useful as a way to group participants’ stories and experiences.

Administrative Skills

Of the four groups of skills, the most prominent was administrative skills that
would be considered in line with volunteer and non-profit management. Skills in this area
included: networking and leveraging resources, volunteer management and coordination,
accountability, developing budgets, hiring new employees, and time management.
Participants were emphatic as to the professional development they received in this area,
mostly while on staff in BC.

Several participants, including Theo, Arnold, Nia, and Atabex, expanded upon
their growth in skills related to networking and building relationships across campus and
across town. Atabex came away from her BC experience with greater confidence in her
ability to build relationships and find common ground with communities she worked in.
In turn, she learned to look at the bigger picture within a community and considering the variety of organizations that have common goals. She shared that in her work after BC, she carried this perspective with her with the goal to “keep the positivity between the relationships between different neighborhoods… I was able to see the different points of view from different organizations having the same type of mission.” Theo and Arnold talked at length about honing this skill, particularly when they were in the program coordinator role. Arnold emphasized that the role called on him to “act as a liaison… a face of the organization.” Arnold and Theo had to become comfortable networking and representing BC with confidence. Theo shared that he learned a great deal about networking within the university, how to collaborate with groups and individuals around campus, and as a result learned to navigate the campus with greater confidence. Nia spoke about not only learning to network, but also of learning how to leverage resources for herself and other BC students and staff.

Volunteer management and coordination was another theme that emerged in several interviews. Jessica and Arnold, for example, spoke about the skills as well as the challenges in managing volunteers, particularly when it came to holding the line with their fellow students. Jessica recalled the frustrations related to supervising other student volunteers when they were chronically late or absent. For Arnold, this was especially challenging when the person he was supervising was someone he had known for a long time.

Relatedly, participants were also challenged by and learned from evaluating their peers, both volunteers and staff. Jessica struggled with the power issues inherent in evaluation, including age, race, and gender: “I struggled with… having confidence… to
be able to grade somebody [when they were older than me] … I also struggled with the idea of being a white woman grading students that were students of color or a man.”

Theo talked about the task of evaluating his peers as an important and challenging one:

You’re doing grading, you’re doing professional evaluations – that’s absolutely something that you would do in any sort of management position… [I]t’s a huge lesson in interacting with folks and giving people feedback about work… It’s particularly tough when those people are your peers… it’s uncomfortable sometimes if you need to tell someone that they’re not doing part of their job, and that’s your responsibility. You need to think really critically about the way that you approach that, and the way that you learn to support people to help them to be as successful as possible.

Additional administrative skills were significant for participants. Nia, for example, learned a lot about working with a large staff and how colleagues can hold each other accountable, such as through using an accountability log, which was a new experience for her. Theo and Arnold reflected on the challenges – and sheer stress – of the budgeting process, and what it meant for them as undergraduate coordinators to have to advocate for funds to various groups on campus. Jessica shared about what she learned when she was asked to chair a hiring committee for a new staff member. Kayla learned a lot when she presented to a group of faculty and administrators about BC as an organization. As a result of BC being student-run, Francesca learned more about self-reliance and independent decision-making; because they couldn’t depend on staff or professors, BC staff had to make decisions about both small and big picture issues. All in all, participants shared a variety of administrative skills that they learned as BC staff in particular, and that this skill development increased their sense of agency.

**Teaching and Research Skills**

Participants described several skills they learned and practiced that could be grouped into a teaching and research category. These included: reading articles, writing
academic papers, learning and using participatory action research methods, and
developing and implementing curriculum. Kayla took the BC course in her first year at
the U; she shared that through that experience she learned how to read articles and write
academic papers, and thus felt ready for further coursework, not only at the
undergraduate level but also the graduate level.

Learning participatory action research methods was emphasized by participants as
significant in their understanding of agency. Nia explained that the research project
taught her a great deal about taking action:

We knew what we were trying to become agents of change, because we were to
choose a project and actually either try to implement it, or try to make it as
realistic as possible for it to actually be implemented. So now we knew what we
were doing was somehow going to impact the site that we were at, the students
that we were at, the partners that we were working with. And I think that’s why, for
me, it was in BC and especially in the class time that I started actually using the
word “agency” in my vocabulary, and to actually start thinking of myself as an
agent of change.

The project was also hugely impactful for Arnold, providing him the opportunity to learn
research, networking, and relationship-building skills. His project went well beyond the
bounds of the U, culminating in a presentation at a public library and an art exhibit;
importantly, Arnold’s new skill also increased his sense of belonging in BC, in that he
felt important to the organization and also to his home community where his project was
implemented. Kayla explain that “the class is almost wholly about agency and getting a
group of students to figure out ways of making that change – I think that could really be
seen in the research projects that we did.” Theo shared that the project was important
because “it was empowering for everyone who was in the class to get to finish their
project in a way that had meaning.” For him, this type of work was different than any
other course he had at the U, where the typical research meant “you maybe hand in a 30-page paper and you never see it again.”

Another skill in this area was curriculum development. Theo, Arnold, and Nia spoke at length about developing this skill during their time with BC. Arnold first developed a curriculum as part of his participatory action research project, and then a few years later developed a second curriculum with a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) focus. Theo spoke about how he “had to set up curriculum and design a day’s activities, and to manage like a classroom-esque environment;” he felt this was immensely different than a more typical volunteer role of just showing up and plugging into what’s already going on in a school or afterschool setting. For Theo, it was “a ton of responsibility and also a lot of freedom which was really beautiful as well.”

In addition to curriculum development, participants gained confidence to teach and facilitate through their BC experiences. Jess shared that it was through her BC experiences that she found the confidence to teach. By working in school settings, she learned different teaching skills – she gained a confidence that she could stand at the front of a roomful of middle schoolers, as well as working with them side-by-side in the classroom.

Beyond classroom teaching opportunities, participants gained confidence at facilitating and also at modifying their facilitation when it was necessary to do that. Nia spoke about this experience when the lessons she was teaching didn’t go as planned. She learned how to flex and change things up to meet the needs of her students, a skill she continued to find useful long after BC.
Communication Skills

A variety of communication skills were emphasized by participants, including listening with empathy, and giving and receiving feedback. Jessica spoke about the course context being an important opportunity for her to listen intently. Prior to college, Jessica “had always been looking at what [she] was saying, and not listening to other people.” She realized early on in her BC course that she was spending more time listening to respond rather than listening to learn, so she forcing herself to stop and listen, to “step back, step back for a little bit, sit in the back, watch people, listen to what everybody else has to say.” This shift in her engagement led a huge learning opportunity for her. She came to see listening as “a form of agency in itself: make a change and have the one white individual in the room not be talking and not trying to lead the conversation.”

The skill of giving and receiving feedback (which certainly includes the art of listening) was significant for several students. Atabex shared how important staff meetings were because of the opportunity provided in those spaces for giving and receiving feedback; the meetings were critical for her and led to a greater sense of belonging. For Theo, the feedback process was essential to his growth and it strengthened his relationships with several on the staff: for example, he solicited regular feedback and advice from Arnold, which deepened their work and friendship relationships. Nia touched on the topic of feedback as well, sharing a story of a feedback session she had with another staff member at the end of a very difficult semester when the college workshop series she designed did not go as planned; their conversation brought them both to a greater understanding about what happened.
Advocacy Skills

Skills in this category were less specific than in the other categories, and seemed more to be utilizing other skill categories in an applied way. Some participants talked about learning and feeling empowered to speak up. Atabex shared that through BC she learned how to stand up for what she believes in. This was because in BC “we always stuck by something, we always spoke up when we thought something was wrong… And we would be opposed to, and defend our reason behind [it].”

For Jessica, her time with BC empowered her to stand up to authority. In this particular example, Jessica reflected on dynamics in her post-graduate teaching position:

Like the tutoring, we have to fill out these stupid logs … and I was supposed to be trained on it. And whatever, I was supposed to be doing it for the whole time, and they just gave it all to me now, and they’re like, “Okay, we need it by today.”

And you know, telling the person, “It’s not gonna happen, not gonna give it to you now, I have classes, I have students that wanna do this, I have students who wanna do that, I’m gonna sit with this one child who is not going to recess because he’s being bullied, and I’m not gonna work on this log for you.”

And they’re like, “Well, it’s due today,” and I said, “Well that’s, I’m not gonna do it, so I’m sorry, your log can wait.”

Thinking about this story, Jessica continued:

Before BC I feared the man way too much to put a child before that…. I was too worried about what would happen to me if I didn’t do what they wanted right then. I would’ve asked the child, “Oh, let’s fill this log out together,” like that: try to make it fun for them. But it would’ve just been the wrong thing to do.

BC has always been that empowering force for me, and also the force that really made me look at myself and where I am in the world. I have stopped putting myself in front of certain things, but I’ve also stopped letting people put themselves in front of me.

Interestingly, Jessica focused a great deal of her BC experience on listening, but in this example she is emphasizing how her BC years empowered her to speak up for others and to raise her voice when she disagrees with something.
Summary

Participants described a range of skills that they developed and/or enhanced through their time in BC. These skills – in communication, in administration, in teaching and research, and in advocacy – supported their growth and confidence in seeing themselves as agents of change.

Figure 2 presents the major themes of Skills, Awareness, and Sense of Belonging as connected in enhancing agency for participants. Two-sided arrows connect these categories as a way to indicate how each supports and influences the other. For example, a stronger sense of belonging in the organization could enhance both awareness and skill development, and vice versa.

Structure/Levers

One final category on Figure 2 has to do with “levers” or, more specifically, structural components of the BC experience that contributed to participants’ sense of belonging, awareness, and skills. While the circles in the middle represent the “what,” the levers/structure represent how: the aspects of BC that students found to support their growth in agency. Themes in this category included:

- Critical mass of people of color: BC enrolling a critical mass of students of color in the course and the organization as a whole;
- Course strategies: aspects of the BC course, including the identity of the instructor, pedagogical methods, and content
Sense of Belonging
Awareness
Skills
Advocacy
Communication
Teaching & Research
Career & Academic Interests
Passion for Education Equity & Advocacy
Administrative
Cross-Race Perceptions
Increased Feelings of Support
Sense of Family and a Collective Identity
Self-Awareness
- Get to know self more
- Racial identity formation
- Unpack stereotypes and assumptions about people and places

Increased Feelings of Support
Sense of Family and a Collective Identity
Self-Awareness
- Get to know self more
- Racial identity formation
- Unpack stereotypes and assumptions about people and places

Career & Academic Interests
- More aware of academic interests which lead to taking course in Education and other areas
- Leads to or confirms interest in education-related careers

Passion for Education Equity & Advocacy
- Internalize the organizational mission
- Learn about the history of higher education and the role of the public university
- Learn about the school system

Administrative
- Working with community organizations
- Evaluating others
- Budgets
- Hiring
- Networking
- Leveraging resources
- Time management

Advocacy
- Advocating for youth
- Using my voice to speak up

Communication
- Listening
- Empathy
- Giving and receiving feedback

Teaching & Research
- Reading articles
- Writing academic papers
- Participatory research methods
- Curriculum development

STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS (LEVERS)
* CRITICAL MASS OF PEOPLE OF COLOR: leads to increase in Sense of Belonging, Awareness, and Skills
* COURSE STRATEGIES (pedagogy and content): leads to increase in Sense of Belonging, Awareness, and Skills
* RELATIONSHIP-CENTERED: creates and facilitates Sense of Belonging, leads to increase in Awareness, and facilitates the development of Skills
* MISSION: leads to increase in Sense of Belonging and Awareness

Figure 2: Conceptual map of major themes.
- Relationship-centered: the ways the BC course and organization emphasized relationships; and
- Mission: the organization’s strong affiliation with a mission.

These levers were touched on when relevant throughout the narratives and will also be summarized here.

**Critical Mass of People of Color**

The U is a predominantly white institution. Generally speaking, community engagement and service-learning opportunities also tend to be highly populated by white students (Gilbride-Brown, 2008). Arnold, for example, spoke about how when he was back at his dorm or at social events, he was often surrounded by other Black men and students of color, but he was often the only student of color in his classes. So for participants to walk into the BC classroom and see other students of color, other Black and Brown people, it helped them to feel at ease. Arnold recalled, “It was really just a different world: never in the same room had I seen so many people that looked like me, people of color, and also people who didn’t.” Atabex recalled having an “instant feeling of comfort and … trust” in the course, as a result of both the students and the instructor. Nia was also impacted by the BC course instructor: “being able to see a person of color teaching on a collegiate level was mind-blowing to me … [he] was so urban and I was like, ‘whoa!’ He’d go up there and bebop, ‘and he had his sneakers on with his fitted hats.” Her instructor changed her stereotypes of what a college professor should look like – she remembered thinking: “He’s not wearing a bowtie and a button-up shirt!” No – just like her, he was a person of color and was making his way through through higher
education. Nia went on to meet several graduate students of color students through BC, helping her to see that she too could go on to pursue graduate study.

For the white participants in the study, the critical mass of students of color served a somewhat different purpose. Jessica had never been in a classroom, or any space really, with that many people of color – it led her to listen more, to reflect on her identity as a white woman, and to learn from different perspectives in the group. She also added, “BC was the only place in my entire life where I was in the minority as a white female. It sort of forced me to look at myself and to see that I could have agency, but to see what kind of power comes with that.” Theo too had never been in a space where he was one of only a few white people. Through the relationships he built in the course and with staff, he learned a great deal about himself and others: “getting the opportunity to build really close relationships with folks who are dealing with issues, it certainly changes your ability to empathize, and it certainly makes you think twice about your own experience.”

**Course Strategies**

Another structural element of the Bridging Communities experience that stood out to participants was the way the course was taught. Theo remembered this course being on of the few in his years at the U where he actually learned people’s names and learned about people’s lives. Aided by the small class size of no more than 25 students, teaching methods such as small groups and pair shares helped break the ice and get folks talking. Large group discussions and even debates were important for students to listen, speak, and learn about a range of issues: Francesca spoke about reflecting on the issue of gentrification; Theo reflected on the whiteness of the university; Arnold reflected on his Black identity and how it showed up for him in the voting booth and elsewhere; Jessica
thought about issues of segregation. All of these topics came up through vibrant classroom discussions where students were given the space to challenge themselves and each other. Group projects allowed students the opportunity to learn how to work with others to accomplish tasks. Also, the participatory action research project gave students a project that felt meaningful and applicable outside of the campus bounds. That project in particular was mentioned by several participants as one that either taught them important lessons about working in groups (i.e., groupwork isn’t that bad after all) and/or aided them in understanding various issues impacting communities, such as with Arnold’s photovoice project or Theo’s project focusing on Trio programs at the U.

**Relationship-Centered**

The developing of relationships is a central component to the BC experience: not only through the course where pedagogical strategies encouraged relationship building, but also through organizing strategies where staff were encouraged and mentored by others to spend a great deal of time building relationships with a wide network of folks. Theo reflected on how deeply he was impacted by one of the program coordinators in this regard:

She was just so incredibly good at finding people…. just in terms of making people aware and then following through and getting people to come out for events…. [I]f it meant that she was going to call every single person to make a personal connection, then she was going to do that…. She was so influential in terms of … making those personal connections, trying to get people involved in everything I could, calling people incessantly if need be. I thought it was a huge strength of hers and something I tried to emulate.

When she served as the program coordinator, Francesca saw relationship-building with people on- and off-campus as a huge part of her job, helping to create a strong network of
support. Arnold, too, saw building relationships with and supporting every single staff member as a large part of his role.

The relationship component of the organization was limited to staff or the classroom, but was critical to the BC’s work with community organizations. Atabex learned a great deal about community organizing from this structural component of BC, saying that it was where she learned the importance of networking with organizations within the community that do similar work. Jessica and Arnold spoke about the relationships they built in school and afterschool settings, and how these relationships paved the way for both self-learning (Jessica learning to teach) and strengthening the programs themselves.

Interestingly, though, lack of significant relationships also led to some feelings of discomfort and a lack of belonging. Jessica’s narrative covers this some: her friendship with Arnold was important, as was her relationship with one of the graduate student staff members, but a poor relationship with a different graduate student staff left her feeling unimportant and unnecessary, ultimately leading her to count down the days until she left the organization.

In Figure 2, relationships as a central component appears both as a structural component of BC and as an aspect of sense of belonging. Sense of belonging certainly consists of other elements, such as cultural elements (music, food, clothing styles, etc.), but in the case of this study, relationships was the element that came up in the interviews as what facilitated participants sense of belonging in the program. In turn, the relationship-centered element of BC contributed to other themes. For example, through relationships, participants learned more about themselves and others (awareness);
relationships could also create ripe learning environments for the learning and practicing of new skills.

**Mission-Centered**

The organization’s mission was another structural component that enhanced participants’ experiences in BC and served as a lever to impact their sense of belonging, skill development, and awareness. Arnold, Atabex, Kayla, and Theo spoke to the importance of the organization’s mission in their work. For Arnold, understanding and maintaining a commitment to the organization’s mission was crucial to his persistence: “I feel like the mission statement was flowing through my veins, and that’s the only thing that kept me sane.” Atabex shared that a connection to the mission helped her and others cope with stressors that came their way: “at the end of the day, each of us really cared…. We made sure that we stood by the mission and the folks who started BC. You can tell a lot of people … care about it.” Kayla was drawn to take the BC course because she liked “all the people, … the purpose, the mission” and that as a result of the course she was even more committed to the organization’s mission. Theo talked about coming to better understand the mission over time, saying that the mission of BC had more complexity and layers than some of the other service programs he had been involved with in the past.

**Additional Structural Components**

There were additional structural components that came up in the interviews and were explored at greater depth in the participant narratives. Atabex, for example, spoke about the significance of her job title – Community Outreach and College Awareness Coordinator. The job title made her feel important and empowered to do big things.
Inversely, Jessica’s job as office manager, and its accompanying job title, did the opposite: she felt uninspired, unimportant, and unnecessary.

A few folks brought up staff meetings as an important structural component of the organization. Theo, for example, felt inspired by heated conversations at staff meetings about the organization’s future; these exchanges reminded him of conversations in the classroom that inspired him to learn more and do more. Atabex too was inspired by staff meetings and the opportunities staff had to get feedback about the work they were doing; post-graduation, she wanted to bring some of the same dynamics to the meetings at her job as an artist in residence.

A structural component that was emphasized by Francesca and Theo was that BC was student-directed. This component was not included in the list of structural components and levers in the figure because it is the overarching marker (i.e., type) of the organization, rather than a component of the organization. Nonetheless, this aspect of BC was touched on in the “structure” section of some of the narratives so bears mentioning here as well.

One final structural component of Bridging Communities touched on by participants was the political nature of the organization. Francesca’s goal, and the goal of the organization in her mind, was to politicize students. BC used direct service as a means for students to build relationships with youth and begin to consider the policy-implications of the work they engaged in. Ultimately, she hoped it would inspire them to work for policy changes locally, regionally, and nationally. For Francesca, though, the political nature of the organization impacted her in other ways: by making her a target of political attacks on and off campus and leading to her taking a leave from the U.
Summary

Structural components of BC, including who is in the room, how course meetings are run, and the centrality of relationships and the organizational mission, are important to the conversation about agency because they serve as “levers” for the experiences students have. These components can work to facilitate a students’ sense of belonging, strengthen their awareness, and enhance their skills, resulting in greater confidence and a greater sense of agency over the course of the program and beyond.

Overall Influence on Sense of Agency

Figure 2 depicts the three main themes – awareness, sense of belonging, and skills – as well as the levers that impacted these areas for the seven participants. The previous section, as well as Chapter Four, offer a window into the ways participants’ reflected on their time with BC and how it influenced them. The question remains: how were they ultimately impacted by their time in BC? Just as participants were ordered from low-to-high in terms of agency prior to BC, how might they be ordered post-BC? The task feels more complicated here, because of the question about influence: in considering a shift in sense of agency, how does BC participation serve as a lever of impact? What other aspects of students’ experience may have contributed to a change in their sense of agency? In turn, is there a value placed on low versus high? In other words, is a high sense of agency more valuable and more valued? If the participants were roughly placed into three groups (low, medium, and high) earlier, should they be placed into groups again? I feel more hesitant to do that here, for some reason, but will first pose placements and then unpack why I would place students in those categories.

Medium-to-High: Francesca
High, Group 1: Arnold, Theo, Nia, Atabex

High, Group 2: Jessica, Kayla

Medium-to-High Sense of Agency: Francesca

One of the founders of BC, Francesca began her experience there with a relatively high sense of agency. She still learned a great deal about her self through the experience, but her primary motivator was to create a transformative experience for other students. The things she learned, and the learning she witnessed in others, was inspiring to her. On the other hand, her sense of agency was challenged by a critical incident in her final year, when she was publicly accused of mismanaging funds and national rightwing groups threatened to sue the university unless she was punished. When she sought support from University officials, she felt targeted and set-up. This led her to withdraw, not only from the U but from the public eye:

I became a little bit more introverted…. It was a really scary experience. I don’t think that most people would want that. I feel like it was done to send a message to other people, like, “We’re going to find a way to get you if you’re going to try to fight for change. We’re going to find all these loopholes to put you back in your place.”

I felt that firsthand and it did scare me. I was just like – … I can’t be fighting like this for the rest of my life. It’s just like, I don’t think I could handle it, emotionally, mentally, physically. I felt scared to fight for change…. 

[A]re you willing to put yourself on the line? I feel like it takes a lot to be that person. I think I kind of doubted where I could be that person, you know?
Because … as much as I cared about the kids in [the city we worked in], I care about people who are suffering. But I also have to care for me. I feel like it’s kind of just a human instinct, you know? You need to sustain yourself.

The experience with both university officials, student groups, and national groups – and ultimately the attention Francesca received – let her to retreat a little. She turned her focus inward on her own self-care, and eventually did return to working with youth. In time, she would return to community organizing.
Does this mean Francesca had a lower sense of agency than the other participants? Or is it more that a critical incident led her to step back from community organizing for a few years? I might argue that we are seeing a combination of these two factors. She began her time with BC feeling unstoppable, like she could do anything and would do anything to promote the mission of BC. But this very public incident led her to pause, to promote her own self care.

In Chapter One, the development of agency was examined not only from an increase but also a decrease. Miller (1997) found that for some students, service-learning courses can lead to? feeling a lesser sense of power or agency: in his study, male students of color showed the largest drop in their understanding of their sense of agency to impact change. To explain this drop, Miller imagined that service learning could provide a developmentally-appropriate intervention from students, helping them to be more realistic about their capacity for making change. Could this phenomenon be captured in Francesca’s experience?

This is one possible explanation for her story, but does not provide a complete picture. Francesca felt threatened and unsafe – she didn’t want to be the object of national attention, she wanted to advocate for college access and equity. She didn’t want to be the face of the movement – she wanted BC to be the catalyst (as it was for Theo), the challenger (as it was for Nia), the inspiration. And so she took a break. She did learn an important lesson about self-care, and in time return to organizing work, where she again exercised the independent decision-making and other skills that she honed in during her time at BC. In other words, her sense of agency took a temporary dip, but in time rebounded.
High Sense of Agency, Group 1: Arnold, Theo, Nia, and Atabex

The majority of participants consider themselves to have an increased sense of agency as a result of their college experiences, and this first group attributed much of that to their work in BC. Theo described BC as his everything – a place where he learned a great deal about himself and others, and where he experienced a group of students working together to “get fired up and passionate about something … and have the resources and support to actually carry it out.” As a result, he felt fully capable to take action and work for change, particular because of the experiences with his peers at BC and as a result of the skill set he developed. Arnold too felt he moved from having almost no sense of agency to being, in his own words, a “full-fledged 10: I believe it scientifically ... and spiritually. There is no doubt in my mind that I can enact change in the world.” While he was involved in other activities at the U, he was convinced that BC was the catalyst for this growth: “I almost feel elite that I was able to get this kind of experience from BC. BC is unique…. BC had everything.” Nia too found her time in BC to be particularly impactful on her sense of agency – while she came in feeling a strong sense of agency, the BC course challenged her to think more systematically about the world and at the same time she learned skills and strategies to work for change. Finally, Atabex found her work with BC to be inspiring, and learned a great deal from some of the structural elements of the program. She described herself as coming in ready to work for change, and leaving the program even more ready to do the work.

High Sense of Agency, Group 2: Jessica and Kayla

Both Jessica and Kayla experienced a growth in their sense of agency, but their stories were a little bit different from those of Arnold, Theo, Nia, and Atabex. Jessica was
definitely impacted by her BC experience: she credited BC with empowering her to stand up for youth and to use her voice in her professional life – to “stand up to the man.” On the other hand, other experiences during her college years, including her years working with the service immersion program, provided her with a greater sense of belonging. I would imagine the combination of these two programs, along with some other aspects of her college years, worked together to increase her sense of agency. BC certainly played a part but wasn’t “everything” to her in the way that it was for some of the other participants.

Kayla came into the BC course with a strong sense of agency, and continued to hold a strong sense of agency after. She may have relied on this sense when she elected to leave BC after interning for only one semester: she identified what she felt were some dysfunctional organizational characteristics (such as poor communication and follow-through) and decided it was best to invest her time and energy elsewhere. However, she did continue her work with the afterschool program until graduation. Just as Jessica, then, BC was a factor in her sense of agency but was one of a range of factors.

**Future Community Life**

The final component of the first research question explores the future, asking how participants see their roles in community and political beyond the U, beyond BC, and beyond the time of the interviews. By this point in the chapter, this question feels like it has been answered a few times over and in a few different ways, so I will summarize the main points here: participants envisioned themselves in the future in a few different ways – as unstoppable, as “ready,” and as measured.
Arnold came out of the experience feeling unstoppable. He felt ready to take his place in the “army” fighting for education equity, and his post-graduate work in the community and his training as a teacher would help him to feel even more ready. Like Arnold, Theo too felt unstoppable, possessing the experience and skills to teach or even to go into non-profit management. Theo would ultimately pursue a teaching and educational administrative career. Jessica felt unstoppable as well and more confident to stand up to authority and advocate for youth.

With her career goals shifted, Nia felt ready – empowered and skilled in fighting for education equity. Nia ended her time in BC having developed a ten-year plan for her career, ultimately leading to a position in education reform. Atabex too felt ready. She credited BC with helping to “mold my focus” in what she wanted to do in her life; she believed she “definitely developed a better idea of what [she] wanted to do in life as an activist and an artist and working in the community.” Kayla too felt ready, and attributed some of this to her experience in the BC course: years later, she shared, “my passion for agency, education, social justice, and activism has just deepened as I’ve grown older. I still credit much of that to the [BC course].”

Francesca came out of the experience feeling somewhat measured: she withdrew from community work after the incident that happened in her final year with BC, spent some time taking care of herself, and then returned to a life of public work. She learned the hard way that a strong sense of agency should be tempered with an eye to self-care.

Overall, the common theme weaving together the participants’ views of their roles in the work in the community in the future was through their work with youth. All seven participants ultimately went on to youth-serving careers, including teaching,
administration, and community work. Some of them returned to their home communities to pursue that work, while others moved to new parts of the country. But all seven engaged in this work, and four of the seven – Arnold, Jessica, Nia, and Theo – solely credited this path to their years with BC. It was a result of the work they engaged in, their time in schools, and being mentored and inspired by others in BC – both undergraduate and graduate students – who were pursuing paths in the field of education. For the other three participants – Francesca, Atabex, and Kayla – their time in BC validated their previous decision to pursue youth empowerment work.

Research Question Two: What’s in a Name? Description of BC as Service-Learning, Activism, or Something Else

Language is critical. The ways students classify the work of Bridging Communities, or any organization for that matter, can be an important indicator as to whether a student would be attracted to engage in that organization. The seven participants used a range of words when talking about Bridging Communities and their work. The most common descriptors included: organizing, organizer, and community organizing; activism and activist; advocacy and advocate; service-learning; and empowerment, including youth empowerment and community empowerment. The number of participants who described BC using the various descriptors can be seen in Table 2. Some participants used two or more terms to describe the work, and one participant, Francesca, one of the founders of the organization, used almost all (5 out of 6) of the categories to describe Bridging Communities.
Table 2: Terms used to describe the work of Bridging Communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term(s)</th>
<th>Number of Participants Using Term(s)</th>
<th>Names of Participants Using Term(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizing, Community Organizing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Arnold, Nia, Atabex, Theo, Francesca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy, Advocate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Arnold, Nia, Jessica, Francesca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activism, Activist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Atabex, Theo, Francesca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service-Learning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Theo, Francesca, Kayla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment, including Youth and Community Empowerment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Atabex, Francesca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-Based Learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Arnold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The terms “organizing” and “community organizing” were the most common references to the work of BC, with five of the seven participants classifying the work in this way. As someone who aspired to be a community organizer, Francesca hoped BC would be a space for students to learn and practice community organizing, and that students would be “radicalized.” She referred to her time with BC as a time when she did a great deal of political organizing, and she saw tutoring youth as a “political act.” Arnold described BC as being “birthed from organizing;” he was drawn to join Bridging Communities because of its connection to student government, which he saw as a hub of “student engagement and empowerment.” Atabex described the work of BC as student organizing and activism, with a big emphasis on the organization being student-run – she referenced her time in BC as a time when she did community organizing, which helped shaped her “mind frame of an organizer.” Just like Atabex, Theo emphasized the student organizing aspect of BC, saying, “the most profound piece of it is that it’s all student-run; it’s not coming from any top-down place, it’s not coming from any set structure that was
created for us. It was and has always been just us.” Nia credits BC with teaching her about community organizing and helping her find a sense of purpose.

“Advocacy” and “advocate” were the next most frequent descriptors of the work of Bridging Communities, with four of the seven participants using these terms. This is not all that surprising, considering there were staff positions with “advocacy” in the title, and the notion of “policy advocacy” is one emphasized in the organization. Arnold described BC as an organization that “first off is about advocacy, social change, and education.” Nia considered staff and students of BC to be advocates for folks in the local community, advocating for access to the U. She explained:

The work that Bridging Communities is doing is really disrupting the story that the U is telling everyone else. … If you go through the [view]book [and the website], it’ll have all your attractions that you can do here, and it tells you all about the [city that the U is located in]. But what does the university really know about the [surrounding] community? Do you know what’s going on at the high schools? Do you know what’s going on at the middle school level? Do you even recognize the fact that [a community center 30 minutes from the U], because of the tornado, has no roof? It rained on them, and all their electronics were stolen. This is the community that we’re in, even though [the cities BC works in] are 30-45 minutes away from us, that’s still the community that we’re in. Being the largest university on this side of [the state], and we’re not as a university advocating for those people. That’s what Bridging Communities is doing, … we’re putting ourselves in there in order to be able to become an ally and be the voice of those communities for the U.

For Nia, it was crucial that students in BC were trained to serve as advocates for the youth they worked with, and that they understood the larger goal of making the campus more accessible. Francesca echoed the importance of policy advocacy, saying that the direct service of BC had to be coupled with this in order to be effective:

I believe that service is an important component of how change happens. But there also needs to be this kind of policy work and people working on changing institutions. Because we could be fighting these large issues, but people can’t wait for the change to happen when they have these immediate needs that need to be met. … [W]e need to meet people’s needs, their basic needs. It’s like, if we want
more Latino students from [surrounding communities] to come to the U, we could be pushing at the greater level for more affirmative action policies, more financial aid, and all these things. But in the meantime, what are we doing to prepare the youth to be successful at the U? So there needs to be service to get them to that level. And then there needs to be policy work happening so that there is a pipeline for them to get there. Because otherwise, it’s just kind of a false promise.

Ultimately, while Bridging Communities did not solely focus on advocacy, it was a crucial aspect of the work.

Three of the participants used the terms “activism” or “activist” to describe their work with Bridging Communities. Theo referenced becoming involved in the “political activism element” of BC early on, indicating that this was part of the work of BC, but not the entirety of the work. Atabex used the notion of student activism multiple times, saying that “student activism is the way to go.” Francesca was the most insistent on Bridging Communities being in the realm of student activism, and shared how, in her experience in the BC course, a great deal of time was spent grounding the students in the history of student activism at the U. She also talked about the downsides of being a student activist, and how that led to her departure from the U.

Interestingly, “service-learning” – the term of focus in the research question – was only used by three of the seven participants. Two of the participants, Theo and Francesca, specifically used service-learning to describe the actual credit-bearing course associated with Bridging Communities – thus, the term would directly indicate a credit-bearing, academic component, and students would only consider being a part of a service-learning experience if they were enrolled in the course and receiving academic credit. Only one participant, Kayla, used the term service-learning to describe the organization as a whole, and this was in contrast to other service-learning initiatives at the U. She shared:
I do think the class and the service-learning itself is the most beneficial – it’s probably one of the most beneficial service-learning projects that exists at the U. I’ve perused some of the other service-learning networks there, but none of them just seemed as good as what I had already done.

Although the other four participants did not refer to the work of BC as service-learning, one participant, Arnold, did use the phrase “community-based learning,” saying that Bridging Communities is an outstanding example of community-based learning programs.

Finally, the term “empowerment” was referenced by two participants – Atabex and Francesca. While other participants used the terms “empower” or “empowerment” to reference their feelings of self-empowerment, Atabex and Francesca specifically spoke about the work of Bridging Communities focusing on either community empowerment (Atabex) or youth empowerment (both Atabex and Francesca). Atabex explained that “empower” is one of her favorite words, and she believed strongly that one of the goals of BC was to empower communities and youth in particular. In her mind, this empowerment work goes hand in hand with community organizing and activism. While Francesca didn’t speak of the concept of community or youth empowerment as much as Atabex, she did refer to the work of Bridging Communities as “youth empowerment work.”

Although there may not have been full consensus on what BC is, there was a good deal of agreement on what Bridging Communities is not: it is not community service nor is it volunteerism. All participants spoke to this notion, with some going into great detail

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36 She was so taken with the notion of empowerment that she even chose her pseudonym based on it. Atabex, she explained, is “the fertility Goddess, mother nature Taíno goddess… She is the mother nature of life and so she is such an empowering figure. She’s the highest, in that she is praised to as bringing life to the world and bringing to the Taíno culture.”
about why the work of Bridging Communities was different than community service or volunteerism. For Nia, her work as a member of BC went much deeper than what she considered to be community service:

I just really think about the relationships that I’ve formed with my students, and thinking about how I’m still pretty proactive in most of their lives. … I’ll go to personal things that they’re having, even though they’re not my college workshop students anymore. But I’m invested in still being that role model or that mentor in their life, that I still communicate with them personally and check on them and still really make an effort to be still present in their life. You know, compared to just like coming in, doing work – well, if it was community service, coming in and doing my community service and then completely erasing myself from their life.

For Nia, there is a long-term investment and building of relationships that distinguish her commitment versus that of someone who performs community service. Arnold shared this same perspective:

Before Bridging Communities, I already had the notion that when you volunteered, what are you really doing? You’re going there, you’re putting together something, you’re smiling, and then you’re leaving. I’ve seen that because I’ve been a product of it… [It is not how] Bridging Communities does it, not for a year, a solid complete year – no breaking out and no running away, no flaking in the community. A solid year… It takes volunteering to a next level because it takes you being there, and then you come back, and you’re not done, that’s not it. You have to tie something together, you have to mold it together. Volunteerism to me has no reflection because you don’t see like how I did, how I didn’t do, what I didn’t do. You don’t evaluate your help… Volunteering is two-dimensional. You go in, you do what you have to do, and you leave. And the 3-D – you take it to a whole new level. As [a BC staff member said,] “HNL – hole ‘nutha level.”

Both Arnold and Nia viewed volunteerism and community service as short-term, noncommittal, and superficial versus the work of Bridging Communities, which they saw as long-term and ongoing, as deeper and more meaningful.

Jessica’s previous notions of service were challenged once she began the BC course. When she was in high school, she saw “community service totally from the
service perspective.” But in the BC course, she was taught that “it’s not about coming into a community and helping them and dropping down from your level to theirs.”

Through her experiences at the U via BC, she began to value the notion of reciprocity and that everyone teaches and learns. She shared:

[Now] I hear people – like [a friend] who goes to New Orleans and she builds houses and stuff. And when she talks about it, she’s like – it’s very top-down, like, “I went there and I saved these people’s lives, and I built a house, and now they can live and be happy because I did this,” and all this stuff. And it’s just like, you know – it’s awesome to have a house, but they were living before you got there. They just had a different house or they were in a shelter. They weren’t necessarily [in a] horrible existence before you… That’s sort of how [the other program that I participated in at the U] made it feel – they didn’t want to be like that, but they sort of were. And Bridging Communities just wasn’t like that.

As explored in her narrative, we see Jessica comparing the different service-learning programs she participated in at the U. She critiques service for its traditional definition of helping and goes on to say that the alternative break program she participated in was also just helping, even though it did not intend to approach the work from that perspective.

Bridging Communities brought a different focus – one on reciprocity – and, in Jessica’s experience, succeeded in building reciprocal relationships. She was offended by “the idea of a college student coming down to unload all this knowledge they have on these students and help them with their classes and mentor them, because we just know so much.” While she didn’t necessarily say community service in and of itself is a problematic notion, she appreciated BC for expanding her thinking about it, so she could see it as more than just helping people.

Theo was first attracted to BC for the community service element, but as he became more involved, his perspective began to change. He shared:

I think I was pulled [to take the BC course because I liked] working with kids. Like – this is cool, I’d been a camp counselor, so it seemed like a fun opportunity
to continue working with kids in college. But I can’t remember necessarily if there was anything deeper than that. … [A]s I transitioned into the program, it was sort of like these layers were unfolding, and sort of seeing that it was a whole lot deeper than just, okay, you’re going to hang out with some kids in an afterschool program. … There’s a lot of stuff at the U where you can go to some of the schools and do macaroni necklaces with kids, and maybe that’s what I thought it would be from the get-go. It wasn’t until I got into the program that I realized our work goes a lot deeper than macaroni necklaces. I started to see the bigger layers behind BC and the mission and that sort of thing.

Over time, Theo’s philosophy of the work shifted from one focused on helping to looking at the bigger picture.

From Francesca’s perspective, one goal of including direct service as a component of the work of Bridging Communities was to get students in the door to advocacy; Theo’s story illustrates that Francesca’s strategy worked. In her eyes, this strategy could make the movement of college access more appealing to a wider swath of students, students who might not necessarily consider themselves activists. She explained:

I wanted Bridging Communities to be a way to kind of radicalize students. But I also understand that not everybody wants to be a radical activist, not everybody wants to lobby. That’s not what everybody’s interested in or what they’re good at. But if we create opportunities for people to participate in a social movement in a way that’s accessible to them, then that might be like – you know what, I don’t want to run for student government, but the idea of tutoring a middle school student, that’s something that I feel like I’m more prepared to do. But still making that connection to a larger movement, it allows more people to participate, and you’re not alienating people by your radical views. It’s like not everybody has the patience to [do policy work,] … that’s really time-consuming. But there is this instant gratification in service. … I feel like I need to see all those things happening, and so I need that combination of direct service and the feeling of gratification that I’m making a difference in someone’s life. But I also need to be able to see that something is being addressed in the bigger scheme of it all.

So service – call it community service, volunteerism, or direct service – was useful then when it was a part of a bigger scheme and was connected to policy advocacy. Hence where the multiple elements of Bridging Communities were born.
In summary, the seven participants were not quite in consensus as to what Bridging Communities should be classified as, but the concept of community organizing was used most consistently, more so than service-learning. Although in this paper I refer to Bridging Communities as student-initiated community engagement, the participants in this study used a wider range of names to describe their work.

**Research Question Three: Part of a Larger Effort, or No?**

The final research question asked if the participants in the study saw themselves as part of a larger service-learning effort on the campus or elsewhere. Just as with the last section, the answer here was: not so much. Only three participants even used the term service-learning to describe the work of BC, and two of three used it specifically in reference to the BC course, not the entirety of the organization. As far as grouping BC as part of a service-learning effort, Kayla said she felt it was the best the campus had to offer, and Arnold, while using the term community-based learning, said he felt BC was unique, a shining example of the potential of community-based learning:

> I just think it’s rare. I look at all the students right now who are just out of college community-based learning… and I just think it’s so rare. I almost feel elite that I was able to get this kind of experience from BC. I think everyone should [have this opportunity]. BC is unique. [Later in my life] I may stumble upon the most successful community-based learning program in the world, and [I’ll] still compare it to BC, because BC had everything.

Although he classified BC as community-based learning, Arnold felt it was stronger than other service-learning experiences he had seen or would see in the future.

While she did not use the term “service-learning” a single time in the interview, Jessica drew parallels between BC and the other service-learning program she participated in the U – the one that focused on alternative break trips. In that sense, she
made some categorical linkages to the two programs, but she didn’t necessarily see the
two as part of a common effort.

While most participants did not feel a part of a larger service-learning effort, they
did feel connected to something bigger – a movement for educational equity and college
access. Theo considered BC to be part of a movement, but more directly on the campus
via the organization’s interactions with university administrators:

One thing I can certainly say is that there are issues and campaigns on campus
where people come together on a certain issue… Certainly coming in as a
freshman and seeing this huge – maybe I guess movement is the right word –
seeing this huge sort of push amongst students against key issues that were
affecting students’ lives both on- and off-campus. And pushing against the
university and pushing against the administration… [I]n many ways, it does
become this microcosm of a social movement, because it’s generally focused on
campus as opposed to larger issues… [But] it’s hard for me to define anything as
a movement. One of the things I can definitely say is that there was always sort of
this network of folks who were willing to push back on something if it came up.

For Francesca, the movement went well beyond the campus: “I felt like I was part of a
movement to make college more accessible and affordable to underrepresented students,
specifically low-income students of color. I was connected to national networks that were
doing that.” Connected to this idea for Francesca was that through participation in BC,
the students were creating a shared identity, one that they would take with them well
beyond their time at the U. Just like Francesca, Nia and Arnold referred to feeling a part
of something larger than the campus. Arnold spoke several times about a “fight for
educational rights” and about being a part of an “army” of educators, with BC as his
“initiation” into that army. In sharing how BC transformed her career goals, Nia referred
to herself as being “part of the change:”

I would have to say [being involved in Bridging Communities] makes me want to
continue to do the kind of work that I do now. Sometimes a lot of people speak to
me and say, “you know, you could be making a lot more money” … but because
of the way I developed within BC, there’s something about waking up and knowing that you are a part of the change that makes me continue doing my job.

The majority of the participants, then, did see themselves connected to something larger, but that something wasn’t “service-learning.” The idea of service-learning seems to be more of a categorical designation, a descriptor for the academic experience that they engaged in. Just as they took a chemistry class or a math class, they took a “service-learning” class. The notion didn’t really go beyond that.

**Summary**

The research questions were quite extensive, with the first focusing on the participants’ perceptions of their sense of agency, and the later two considering participants’ reflections on the field of service-learning, both in name and their identification with it. This chapter examined how the participants considered their sense of agency prior to, during, and after their time with BC, including an emphasis on major themes of factors contributing to their sense of agency (i.e., what) and the structural components that influences those factors (i.e., how). Participants’ labeling of BC as either service-learning or something else was explored, as was their imagining themselves as a part of a movement. Ultimately, participants did not emphasize the term “service-learning,” nor did they see themselves as part of a service-learning movement; they instead preferred the term “organizing” and saw themselves as part of a movement for college access and education equity.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION & REFLECTION

At the start of this research process, I wanted to understand the concept and development of agency: How did participants in a program like BC come to understand themselves as being capable of taking action? And what would it mean for them in their lives beyond BC? In turn, I was curious as to the ways participants in BC named their experiences – as service-learning, community engagement, or something altogether different. In this final chapter, I will explore the collective experiences of the participants’ sense of agency. I will expand on the themes present in Chapter 5 and reflect on larger patterns of their development of agency over time. The chapter will then consider the implications of this study for theories of agency, including Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) trichordal theory, along with additional theories pertaining to identity development. The findings pertaining to the secondary research questions about naming – what the participants called their work – will also be considered. The chapter will close with my own reflections about my experiences as a community engagement professional and what I have learned through this research project.

The Development of Agency: Transformation, Elevation, and Frustration

In Chapters 4 and 5, factors influencing agency, including sense of belonging, awareness, and skill development, and the structural components enhancing those factors, were unpacked. BC clearly impacted the lives of the seven participants – some monumentally and some to a lesser extent. Their experiences in the course, in the community, and in staff positions strengthened their sense of agency, leading them to believe they were actors, agents, able to work for change, and that they had the skills
enabling them to do so. The structural components (i.e., levers) of BC enhanced sense of belonging, awareness, and skill development – and these three different categories seemed to play off of one another. While a participant wasn’t necessarily impacted across all three categories, there did seem to be some interplay between them.

Beyond the factors and the levers explored in previous chapters, there were some important trends in the ways participants made meaning of their experiences. The participants’ stories of their experiences as they connected to their sense of agency tended to fall into three general categories: transformation, elevation, and frustration. Participants could have had experiences in only one, or two, or even all three of these categories. The trends in some ways seem to connect more to theories of identity development, with agency as a subtext. First, trends will be explained and illustrated, and then we will consider implications for theories of agency and identity development.

**Transformation**

Look up the word transformation, and you will find terms such as change or metamorphosis: becoming something else. Several of the participants described moments during their time in BC where they began to feel some sense of transformation, a sense that they were changing – shedding old beliefs and patterns and adopting new ones. These moments are akin to what Harro (2010) would describe as a “critical incident that creates cognitive dissonance,” initiating the Waking Up component of the Cycle of Liberation. Harro’s cycle offers us a way to imagine a “pattern of events that leads us toward liberation” from oppressive thinking, be it towards others or ourselves. Such patterns could lead to developing what Love (2010) calls a liberatory consciousness. Love writes:
A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live their lives in oppressive systems and institutions with awareness and intentionality, rather than on the basis of the socialization to which they have been subjected. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to maintain an awareness of the dynamics of oppression characterizing society without giving in to despair and hopelessness about that condition, to maintain an awareness of the role played by each individual in the maintenance of the system without blaming them for the roles they play, and at the same time practice intentionality about changing the systems of oppression. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live “outside” the pattern of thought and behavior learned through the socialization process that helps to perpetuate oppressive systems. (p. 599)

For Theo, this process began in the first semester of the BC course, a four-credit service-learning course that introduced students to the mission of BC and various topics related to that mission. During the course, Theo engaged in deep and meaningful dialogue with his peers; he was inspired by dynamic and lengthy conversations where the class grappled with questions of discrimination, institutional oppression, and more. His peers confronted him about ways he may have been unaware of the opportunities he had because of his identities, particularly his White and male identities. The confrontations didn’t lead him to retreat, though – they led him to reflect and reconsider his past experiences. As discussed in Chapter 5, these conversations led him to reflect on himself (i.e., self-awareness), but they also enhanced his sense of belonging in BC. Ultimately, they led Theo to transform, to become more confident in his sense of agency and his commitment to working for equity and justice. For Arnold, the BC course also served as a critical moment, the beginning of a transformation. There he found his voice: he was excited to raise his hand and ask questions, because he knew it would result in a meaningful and inspirational conversation.

The process of transformation, beginning with a waking up moment, continued throughout and beyond the course and was heavily influenced by opportunities
participants had for building relationships in schools. While students were having deep and meaningful conversations in the BC classroom, they also connected with youth in schools and afterschool programs. Some participants, such as Atabex, connected with youth who had shared their lived experiences. For other participants, such as Theo, the work in schools was an important cultural learning moment.

Ultimately, several participants “woke up” through their time with BC – the course and engagement with the community helped them to learn more about the community, about BC’s mission of college access and equity, and about themselves. This waking up – perhaps we would connect this with the theme of awareness – would start their journey towards their own liberation and liberatory consciousness (Harro, 2010; Love, 2010).

This trend of “waking up,” what I have called here transformation, was significant for the participants, but it shouldn’t necessarily be seen as unique to the Bridging Communities experience. Researchers have found that academic courses focusing on identity and social justice, including intergroup dialogue courses, can be an entry point for students to begin considering their identities and reflecting on larger systems of oppression and injustice (see, for example, Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). In turn, service-learning and community engagement courses have been shown to illuminate this for students as well, as noted in Chapter 2. As a result, this trend, while affirming to the goals of the program, as highlighted in Francesca’s narrative, shouldn’t be particularly surprising.
Elevation

A second trend in the development of agency for the participants is elevation. Elevation is the idea that one is lifting – that one goes from one level to the next. I would assert that, for this group, elevation represents the idea that participants grew in their sense of agency and their self-efficacy, or the belief in themselves to be capable of making change. This trend has some overlap with the previous notion of transformation, but is slightly different in that it is focusing more on personal growth and skill building. This was indicated in a few areas: participants’ professional skill building, their relationships with campus stakeholders and administrators, their creating and developing new programs (including curriculum design and facilitation), and ultimately the opportunities for them to make mistakes and learn from their mistakes.

An example of an elevation of skills would be Jessica and her focus on developing her skills as a listener. In the BC course, she went from being an avid talker to fully focusing on listening to others. For the first time in her life, she walked into the room and was in the minority as a white woman. Her initial feelings in that moment – surprise, mild discomfort, a desire to belong – helped her realize she had a lot to learn. She set to listening deeply, and not talking out of obligation or for the professor’s approval, as she might have done in earlier phases of her education.

Arnold also shared many stories that touched on the theme of elevation. As he progressed through BC, he became stronger and more confident as a teacher, facilitator, and professional. He learned and applied research skills; he designed and taught lessons

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37 Forgive the cheesy metaphor, but perhaps we could say that Bridging Communities served as the vehicle, or elevator, that supported students in their evolution or transformation.
on STEM topics; he built relationships with his fellow staff members, working hard to empower them, and in the process empower himself. He grew confident in his sense of agency and in his ability to act in the world. BC and the experiences he had over the years he was involved not only transformed his understanding of himself and the world, but he was also elevated into a professional, possessing the skills needed for teaching and managing.

**Frustration**

A third trend in participants’ stories is the notion of frustration: that aspects of their experience in the course or on staff with BC caused them to feel a sense of frustration. For some participants, reaching frustration caused them to check out of the program, literally and figuratively. For others, moments of frustration caused them to persist in the program and overcome those feelings.

The most apparent example of this trend is through Kayla’s story and her decision to quit her internship with BC. Frustration is certainly a word that accurately describes her feelings at that time: she felt a lack of direction from others in BC in terms of projects and deadlines; she felt there was poor communication as well, which only worsened the situation. She was also frustrated that when she announced she was leaving, some folks tried to keep her onboard: she was flattered by their reasons, but she was frustrated that their admiration of her wasn’t communicated sooner. Importantly for Kayla, her frustration didn’t seem to arrest her sense of agency. In a way, it may have even propelled her sense of agency even more: she took control and left her position, yet she maintained a connection with the afterschool program and the community she first worked in during the BC course. So the organization felt her absence, but the community and the youth did
not. In turn, she wasn’t dissuaded from her pursuit of opportunities to continue working on the mission of BC, she just did so in other ways.

Connected to this story are Jessica’s concerns about her senior year with BC, when she took on the position of office manager. She originally offered to take the role because it needed to be done. She was willing to step aside from the site coordinator role and let a new person do that work. In the end, though, she felt abandoned by other staff in BC when the office manager role was removed from the core staff committee and felt further frustrated when she was tasked with what she felt were meaningless responsibilities, like making business cards for other staff or liaising with college offices about computer problems. This frustration led Jessica to check out mentally: while she didn’t actually leave her position, she went through the motions until her graduation ended the job for her. I would argue that in some ways this experience impacted her sense of agency, at least for the short term: her removal from the committee in particular led to her feeling powerless within the organization. She felt as a fourth-year staff she had some insights to offer, but didn’t feel like she could contribute or that her contributions mattered. When she looked back on that semester and other semesters in BC, Jessica wished she had put herself out there more. Her frustration then led not only to her checking out but also to some disappointment when looking back on that period.

Another story line that fits in with this theme is Francesca and the critical incident she experienced that led her to depart the university altogether. This aspect of Francesca’s story is detailed at length in Chapter 4, when she was publicly accused of mismanaging money and the accusations were brought to school administrators. Her frustrations were deep – verging on feelings of disappointment and fear – and she opted out of school and
community organizing for a period of time. In this example, I would argue that her sense of agency was definitely impacted. She took a step back from her work in the community to focus inward. She would eventually return to working with youth, but she was definitely impacted by the incident at the U.

A final and important example of frustration in participants’ stories is the feeling of being too overwhelmed to do the work that BC required. This was prevalent in several participants’ stories, including Atabex’s: “I was just kind of feeling overwhelmed, because Bridging Communities was amazing, but at the same time all the responsibilities that they had for the students was literally like a full-time job.” This feeling was especially prominent in the stories from participants who served as program coordinator, including Arnold, Francesca, and Theo. All three participants who served in that role spoke about how difficult it was. Theo shared that it was his most stressful time at the U, even when taking a smaller class load. Francesca spoke about the challenges of being the “face” of the organization, and ultimately being called out publicly. Arnold described feeling both overwhelmed and powerless at the thought that the organization might not achieve its big goals:

“As a [program coordinator] in Bridging Communities, I really got a chance to see the bigger picture of the organization, of the organization’s place in the university…. As I looked at all the issues, I had the sense of extreme powerlessness at times because certain things just felt inevitable. It was almost like it made me sad to think that some of our goals just won’t happen this year, won’t happen at the university, some of our goals won’t happen with this staff currently. And that’s a very large weight.

Ultimately, as program coordinators, Arnold, Theo, and Francesca all felt an enormous sense of responsibility to BC’s purpose and goals, and a simultaneous fear that BC
wouldn’t achieve those goals, and that it would be all their fault. It was as if they were the bottom line of the organization, the glue holding it all together.

What these various stories – struggles with communication and with job responsibilities, challenges with being in the public eye, feelings of overwhelm and a pressure to produce – have in common is a sense of frustration. Further, the participants are faced with challenges and they have to decide how to respond. So how, then, did the participants cope with these moments of frustration? Did frustration have a stalling effect on the participants’ abilities to take action, or rather, did the frustration inspire them to act? And if an action resulted, what type of action was it – an action for self-preservation? For perseverance?

The consequences for frustration weren’t necessarily consistent. In Kayla’s case, she took action by leaving BC and deciding on other ways to be involved in issues related to the BC mission; for Francesca and Jessica, each took action by opting out of their deep involvement in the work (an act of self-preservation, perhaps). Perhaps these moments of frustration have something key in common with the critical incidents mentioned in the transformation trend. These moments of frustration led them down a path that impacted them, albeit differently than the dramatic impact of personal transformation like that discussed earlier.

**Implications for Theories of Agency and Identity Development**

In grounding the conversation for this project, I explored several streams of literature, including critical service-learning and theories of agency. While a conceptual framework is important to provide a lens for any research, the nature of phenomenological interviewing allows for participants to make meaning for themselves,
outside of the confines of any theory. With that said, what implications do the factors explored in Chapter 5, as well as the trends in participants’ development of agency, have for theories of agency and theories of identity development, and critical service learning generally?

Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) trichordal theory of agency proposes that a person’s perceptions of themselves in the past, present, and future braid together to impact their sense of agency and their action-taking. They theorize that structure shapes us but does not bind us: our sense of agency is certainly impacted by the systems surrounding us, but we are not merely cogs in the wheel of that system either. This interplay between structure and agency is in line with how many sociologists and psychologists have come to see the relationships between identity, culture, and agency (Cote & Levine, 2002).

The seven participants in this study arrived to the Bridging Communities experience with a unique past and a unique set of patterns and routines, and their experiences in Bridging Communities influenced their sense of agency – albeit differently. The narratives in Chapter 4 paint a picture of each participant prior to their BC involvement. Jessica, for example, felt she was fairly dependent on her parents for her decision-making and action-taking prior to attending the U; she considered her pre-university self to have a pretty low sense of agency as a result. Arnold saw himself as having no sense of agency and no real ability to act in the world; ironically, though, he spoke at length about an important lesson he learned in elementary school – to look challenges in the eye and face them down:

I didn’t know what that meant, but I do now. And now it’s everything I saw as something that’s stopping me, I would just kind of say, you know: this essay is
hard – no, it’s just challenging. This application is hard – no, it’s just challenging. Everything is a challenge, everything is a competition between you and it to get past it.

He may not have developed a sense of civic agency, per se, but this part of his story does show some past pattern of a sense of agency and an ability to take action. Regardless of where participants fell in terms of their confidence in their ability to take action, they brought in some sense of themselves and their abilities to act, ranging anywhere from low to relatively high.

How were these iterations – i.e., past patterns and habits – influenced by their time in BC? Recall how Emirbayer and Mische (1998) described the second element of the chordal triad – the projective dimension:

As they respond to the challenges and uncertainties of social life, actors are capable of distancing themselves (at least in partial exploratory ways) from schemas, habits, and traditions that constrain social identities and institutions. This capacity … enables them to reconstruct and innovate upon those traditions in accordance with evolving desires and purposes. (p. 983)

Returning to the stories of Arnold and Jessica as examples, we can reflect on how their experiences in BC influenced, possibly even altered the schemas and habits that they developed as youth. Arnold went from seeing himself and other people as “blank sheets of paper” to seeing the complexity of how identity and systems of power and oppression impact our lives. Arnold came to see himself as a Black man, unpacking the complexities of what that meant for him and other Black men, “the way I vote, what I see of success, how I see school and college currently.” Coupled with this growing understanding of self, Arnold was learning new skills in his work with BC, such as with his participatory action research project. It’s as if his previous understanding of taking action – “it’s not hard, it’s challenging” – became contextualized through his growing understanding of identity.
This understanding, coupled with the BC mission constantly humming in the background ("flowing through my veins… the only thing that kept me sane"), gave him a greater context for his capacity for action. He could now apply that desire to rise to the challenge with a purpose behind it: his purpose was for education equity and for social justice. For Jessica, she moved from old patterns of just doing what she thought others wanted to do, to standing up for what she felt was right:

Before BC I feared the man way too much to put a child before that… BC has always been that empowering force for me…. I have stopped putting myself in front of certain things, but I’ve also stopped letting people put themselves in front of me.

Jessica went from taking direction to feeling empowered to stand up for herself and for others. Here we see Jessica’s past patterns being re-worked; her future orientation, her ability to imagine herself in the world, shifts to her feeling empowered and no longer waiting for others, particularly people in positions of authority, to give her direction.

The third dimension of the chordal triad concerns actual action-taking or decision-making and takes place in the present moment. Although I imagined the three-interview series to complement the trichordal theory, I came to see that the present moment, the practical-evaluative dimension, is actually much harder to explore with interviews focused on making meaning of the past. Participants were asked to reflect on themselves in the past (i.e., their pre-BC life and the BC experiences) and then who are they are now. But the practical-evaluative dimension rests in the present moment and in actual decision-making – i.e., in recognizing a problem, deciding what to do, and then doing it. Participants weren’t observed actually evaluating problems and taking action, like they might have been in a laboratory study. Instead, the interviews took place at a particular moment in their lives, in the year or two or three after they left the U. Their lives have
continued on, and they have taken many actions, civic and otherwise, since that moment in time. How do we, then, make meaning of this aspect of their theory?

In Chapter 2, Figure 1 presents the ways a range of terms – efficacy, empowerment, agency, and action – relate to one another. In my mind, the answer to the question about the third chord of agency – the practical-evaluative dimension – rests in the relationship between those concepts. With the absence of either questions presenting participants with problems to solve, or actual observations of them in their work with BC, we are only left with their sense of themselves and how they would assess this action-taking dimension. I wonder, too, if in asking them to assess this aspect, I would in fact be evaluating their sense of self-efficacy rather than their actual abilities.

Ultimately, the stories of the participants in this study indicate that the structural components of BC led them to feel a greater sense of belonging, to build awareness, and to develop skills. In turn, sense of belonging, awareness, and skill development interacted with one another: as sense of belonging increased, awareness and skills increased. This was not the case with every participant, but certainly a dynamic that seemed to be present with several.

Beyond theories of agency, there are interesting connections between the trends of transformation, elevation, and frustration, and theories of identity development and to the concept of liberatory consciousness. In their theory of social identity development, Hardiman & Jackson (1997) propose developmental pathways that are generally applicable to people of all social identities. Their theory is based on a set of racial identity development theories (as expanded upon in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson’s (2001) book, New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development), but their model looks to capture
identity development more generally. They propose five stages of development that are not necessarily linear and in fact can happen concurrently: naïve/no social consciousness, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization. Of the three trends discussed in this chapter, the trend “transformation” maps quite well to Hardiman and Jackson’s stage of redefinition. In transformation, participants are in a sense redefining the ways they view themselves and others. Hardiman and Jackson describe redefinition as: “creating an identity that is independent of an oppressive system based on hierarchical superiority” (p. 23). People with identities that hold power, such as white people, begin thinking more positively about themselves (i.e., move away from their “white guilt” and also blaming other white folks), while recognizing the rich contributions made by people of all identities. For oppressed identities, people look to build community with people with shared identities and to redefine how they see themselves outside of the negative views taught to them by the larger systems.

The trends explored in this chapter also mesh well with Barbara Love’s (2010) notion of liberatory consciousness. Love describes liberatory consciousness as consisting of four elements: awareness, analysis, action, and accountability/allyship. She explains:

Awareness … includes … noticing what is happening. The second part includes analyzing what is happening from a stance of awareness along with the possibilities for action. The third part of the task includes deciding on the basis of that analysis what needs to be done, and seeing to it that the action is accomplished. The fourth part … requires that individuals accept accountability to self and community for the consequences of the action that has been taken or not taken. (p. 600)

Many of these elements were present in the stories of the participants and the ways they made meaning of their BC experience. They learned about themselves and their own identities, as well as the identities of their peers. They learned about systems of power
and inequality, and began to lean in to the BC mission. They also developed an
awareness about how they might engage with this system – and all chose pathways of
youth development work, either in or outside of formal school settings. In this learning,
they developed not only an awareness but also the ability to analyze the things they were
learning.

The next component of Love’s (2010) framework, action, is much aligned with
agency, particularly the practical-evaluative dimension of agency – “deciding … what
needs to be done, and seeing to it that the action is accomplished” (p. 600). In BC,
students were building their sense of agency, or their skills and abilities to make
decisions and act on those decisions.

The final component, accountability and allyship, was touched on by participants
as they reflected on their relationships with one another. For Francesca, the BC
experience gave her hope that people she before couldn’t trust, namely white folks,
would become allies and advocates, even accomplices, for people of color and other
oppressed folks.38 For Theo, he shifted his course of study to learn more about Latin
American cultures and also to become fluent in Spanish, so that he could better build
relationships in the community and better understand issues and concerns; ultimately so
he could be a more informed advocate for education access and equity.

The participants’ experience can also be examined through the lens of Bobbi
Harro’s (2010) cycle of liberation. In the model, Harro explores the intrapersonal,

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38 See Clemmon’s (2017) essay “Ally or Accomplice? The Language of Activism” for an exploration of the
different terms.
interpersonal, and systemic ways that people work for liberation. The cycle presents seven phases or aspects, including waking up, getting ready, reaching out, building community, coalescing, creating change, and maintaining. Importantly, the process is cyclical and never-ending. Harro notes that we can begin “through slow evolution or through a critical incident, and will repeat or recycle many times in the process. There is no specific beginning or end point, just as one is never ‘done’ working to end oppression” (p. 53). At the core of Harro’s cycle are a set of traits and qualities that hold it together: self-love, hope, self-esteem, balance, joy, support, security, spiritual base, and authentic love of others. I think of this model as I reflect on the stories of Arnold, Atabex, Francesca, Jessica, Kayla, Nia, and Theo. For some of them, their participation in the BC course overlaps with the getting ready and reaching out phases; their engagement in the course and then in staff, and for some the resulting sense of belonging, overlaps with the building community phase. The work they became involved with, in some cases, overlaps with the coalescing and creating change phases. And the worries that kept them up at night, particularly evident in the stories from participants who served as program coordinators, shows the challenges but importance of the maintaining phase.

I present the stories of participants through the lenses of liberatory consciousness and the cycle liberation in order to illustrate the enormous potential of student-initiated community engagement. Participants in this study came to identify themselves as agents and actors passionate for education access and equity, and situated this movement within systems of inequality. This is very much in line with the structural tenets called for by

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39 I appreciate the way Harro (2010) defines liberation: “as ‘critical transformation,’ in the language and thinking of Paulo Freire. By this, I mean that one must ‘name the problem’ in terms of systemic assumptions, structures, rules, or roles that are flawed. Significant social change cannot happen until we are thinking on a systemic level” (p. 52; emphasis in original).
critical service-learning scholars and practitioners, namely: a focus on social change, analyzing power structures within society at large, and attention to mutuality. With the added element of student-initiation in place, participants understood power not only on a conceptual level but in practice. Ultimately, they had to, as Francesca’s personal motto attests, “do your own work.” They had great responsibility for decision-making; this led participants to develop the capacity to look within and not to people in positions of authority. This element brought home concepts of agency on an even deeper level.

**Why the Names and the Namers are Important**

The second and third research questions of this project stepped away from questions of agency to take a broader look at service-learning and community engagement as a field. The second question asked how participants described their work – as service-learning or something else entirely; and the third question asked participants if they felt connected to a service-learning movement/field/discipline generally. Their answers generally pointed to “no”: while a few participants used the term service-learning, the terms organizing/community organizing and advocacy/advocate were more common (see Table 2 in Chapter 5). As noted in Chapter 5, participants were generally in unison that the work of Bridging Communities was *not* service, i.e., community service or volunteerism. Participants did not indicate feeling part of a service-learning movement or effort, either on the campus or beyond. Some participants went to great lengths to depict BC as *something else*: it was different from other programs that they came across, with references to simplistic interactions (“macaroni necklaces”), or more

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40 These trends in naming were not analyzed quantitatively for statistical significance – I merely noted frequencies in word usage. With that said, the trends are interesting to unpack.
transactional exchanges in communities (like when Jessica reflected on the community partnerships in the other program she was involved in). Rather than feeling any identification with a service-learning or community engagement paradigm, participants instead felt strong connections to a movement for education equity and access. This connects to the mission of Bridging Communities; considering that BC’s mission-centered approach was found to be an important structural lever in impacting agency, the participants’ affiliation with this movement would make sense.

The implications for naming – and looking at the term “service-learning” in particular – are significant. As practitioners in higher education continue to wrestle with the naming of this work, the ways which students identify with the different names is crucial. Ultimately, naming is crucial when considering all of the players involved – students, community partners (including organizational staff and community members), staff and faculty, administrators and institutions, and national groups, such as Campus Compact. We can take this even further: each of those groupings also contains multiple sets of constituents. For example, which groups of students are we considering? When we think about BC and another important lever, enrolling a critical mass of students of color, does this play into this conversation as well? Do certain groups of students identify with some terms over others? Does the term “service” (ever present in the term “service-learning”) feel disempowering and thus uninteresting to folks of color and other marginalized groups? Do the terms service and service-learning feel too institutionalized, too neutral?

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41 See, for example, Hammersly, 2016.
In his book *Service-Learning in Theory and Practice*, Dan Butin (2010) focuses on these questions at length. He asks: is service-learning a movement? A discipline? A field? And what are the implications for being each one of those things? Further, what do we mean by the term “service-learning”? Butin proposes considering service-learning not as one universal concept, but one with four different perspectives:

1. Technical: This perspective focuses on technique – the *how* of service-learning. For example, a technical perspective hones in on method, outcomes, and student learning. Butin argues that the term “academic service-learning” is a reflection of this perspective.

2. Cultural: Butin describes a cultural perspective as one that “emphasizes individuals’ meaning-making within and through the context of the innovation” (p. 9). This study could be considered to be a cultural perspective of service-learning then, due to the use of in-depth interviewing and a focus on participants’ meaning-making. Importantly, cultural and technical perspectives can be side-by-side one another, as is often case in studies that analyze the effectiveness of service-learning for a range of outcomes.

3. Antifoundational: This philosophical perspective considers questions of normalcy and truth: what is true? What is known? From this perspective, service-learning isn’t inherently good or bad, but should be examined and unpacked for all of the different impacts it can have.

4. Political: The political perspective of service-learning is, according to Butin, “most concerned with issues of competing constituencies and how these issues are manifest through power (im)balances, questions of legitimacy, allowed
and/or silenced perspectives, and negotiations over neutrality/objectivity” (p. 10-11).

It is the political perspective that has the greatest implications for the findings in this study. BC as an organization views service-learning through a political perspective. With its mission centering on college access and equity, the participants in this study asked questions about power and access: who are the people in power within the university, as well as within systems of education? The BC curriculum, according to participants, focused a great deal on identity and power, and led participants to reflect on their identities, specifically their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Through this identity lens, participants thought about themselves a great deal, about their peers, about the communities in which they worked, and the power dynamics at play between and within all of these groups. While other identities – specifically class – were a part of the conversation, participants seemed to uphold race as the most significant in their learning and reflection.

Butin (2010) adds that practitioners and scholars working with a political perspective are going to question the concept of service critically and may “balk at the seemingly patronizing label of service-learning as being just that, service” (p. 11). This indeed could apply to the group of participants in this study. Again, participants were very clear that their work with BC – their long-term engagement, with an eye to policy and advocacy – was not service. It might be organizing, it might be advocacy, it might be empowerment work – but it was not service; and perhaps, then, not service-learning either.
As a mid-career community engagement professional with over 15 years of experience in the field, I have spent much of my career asking critical questions about language and naming. I have seen office names change over time. At my current institution, for example, we were once called the Service-Learning Office, then the Service Program Office, and most recently the Center for Community Engagement. At my alma mater, University of Massachusetts Amherst, I first worked for the Office of Community Service Learning; this office is now called the Office of Civic Engagement and Service-Learning. In the article Civic Engagement and Public Sociology: Two “Movements” in Search of a Mission (Morton, Dolgon, Maher, & Pennell, 2012), Corey Dolgon reflects on the naming of his office:

I direct a new office whose very title “community-based learning” (as opposed to service-learning) was chosen to provide focus on the community nature of the work. The “community” is not just the source of the student learning but also a collaborative partner in designing educational projects and the recipient of service, research, and other resources. Ultimately, however, community is also the final outcome we hope to create in the process of collaboration and mutual commitment. (p. 24, emphasis in original)

For Dolgon, and for myself, the name of our offices and centers are symbols of how our institutions view the work philosophically.

There is more at stake here than just names: there is a political and philosophical battle happening over the identity of service-learning and community engagement. Butin (2010) argues that the field of service-learning must transform, becoming more like a discipline (like we’ve seen with women’s studies and ethnic studies) so that space can be made for the four perspectives presented earlier. This wouldn’t replace service-learning pedagogy in other disciplines, per se, but would allow for service-learning to become not only a social movement but an intellectual movement. Other scholars, such as Morton,
Dolgon, Maher, & Pennell (2012), urge a return to the progressive and justice-oriented roots of service-learning. Morton et al. (2012) posit that service-learning has “drift[ed] toward the political conservatism of theoretical abstraction, professional rewards, institutional restrictions, and bureaucratic demands (as many progressive intellectual endeavors have in the past)” (p. 6). As a result, “the potential democratic (and we would argue social justice) possibilities encouraged by engagement are neutralized and sometimes undermined by the dominant institutional cultures of higher education” (p. 9).

Morton and colleagues (2012) wonder if the civic engagement (i.e., service-learning and community engagement) movement can “regain [its] progressive political mission and again become a force for social justice both within and outside of the academy” (p. 6). Based on the stories of the participants in this study, I imagine that a program like BC would push for this goal. Rooted in a political perspective, participants in BC – especially as indicated in Francesca’s story – were inspired by this mode of learning and interaction because of its revolutionary, transformative potential.

Does the name “service-learning” reflect the depth of that potential? At the start of this writing project, I grabbed on to the term “student-initiated service-learning” as a categorical marker for BC. At the time, and for much of the study, I believed this gave some legitimacy to the type of program as something authentically “academic” in the field; as a colleague would say, I aimed to adopt academic jargon in the spirit of legitimizing the program. In turn, I wished to position this research within the larger field

42 Butin would not argue against this idea. By opening up service-learning to become a discipline, there is room made for a multitude of perspectives of service-learning, but particularly the technical and antifoundational. In this way, many scholars and researchers can see themselves in the practice and discipline of service-learning, not just folks looking from a political lens.
of service-learning research, thus utilizing the term “service-learning” seemed to make sense for that purpose.

But the closer I got to finishing the project, I began to question my choices: if I have begun to move away from the term “service” in my professional role, why would I apply that label to this project? In turn, conversations with the participants of this study and the labels they used further agitated the issue. I then began to wonder: would a different name make better sense per the participants’ word choices? Should I adopt the name used by Maldonado (2010), student-initiated retention project (SIRP)? The primary goal of the SIRP focuses on college students themselves and their retention and persistence to graduation. But for BC, the primary goal is around engaging with youth in the community and promoting their college-going. Yes, retention of college students is important, but not the primary goal as it is for the SIRP. So, BC doesn’t exactly feel in the same category. Should I instead have used the name “student-initiated outreach program”? Outreach is in fact a term used by the program itself. I feared though that that title could be too narrow.

Ultimately, I chose to revise this manuscript in full, replacing “student-initiated service-learning” with “student-initiated community engagement.” Part of me thinks that no matter how we philosophize about service and service-learning, the term “service” is simply too loaded. Nadinne Cruz (1989), long-considered a pioneer in the field, wrote the following reflection over 25 years ago, as a warning to her colleagues in experiential education:

I challenge us to talk about the possibility that our social realities as well as the history and practice of the notion of service makes it more problematic than than its currently popularity might suggest. I think that, in the context of a history of dominance of one group over others, there is an incipient racism in the practice of
service that cannot be avoided even if the conceptualization of it includes values and ideals we can respect and the virtues of people who practice it are above question. That is different from saying that reciprocal learning is impossible, even when the partners-in-learning are not equal in power and resources. I am suggesting that reciprocal learning may be more possible if it is not tied to a notion of service. Odd as it may sound, perhaps the common good might be better served in certain situations if we emphasized learning as the primary goal and “service,” as we commonly think of it, as not involved at all.

Importantly, many folks in the field see there to be a marked difference between the terms service and service-learning. Various articles espouse the power of the hyphen as a bridge between service and learning, indicative of the reflection that is crucial for the pedagogy. 43 Perhaps it is out of habit, but I’m not sure I’m ready to completely abandon the term “service-learning.” Yet, I am beginning to feel more and more troubled using it.

This conversation broaches the topic of rhetoric, and my research led me to an article about rhetoric theory and service-learning, entitled “Rhetorical Criticism, History and Theory and the Institutionalization of Community Service Learning in Higher Education,” by Tania Smith. Smith (2009) wrestles with a range of questions around service-learning institutionalization and she explores the rhetoric (persuasive speaking) common in the field. While her article does not specifically wrestle with questions about whether or not we should use the term “service-learning,” her article introduced me to the concepts within rhetoric theory of “god terms” and “devil terms.” Such questions feel appropriate to this conversation. In that regard, I suspect that participants might ascribe “service” as a devil term, and “advocacy” and “activism” as “god terms.” Interestingly, a marker of devil and god terms is that they hold significant power and yet their meaning and definitions can be somewhat murky.

43 See, for example, Sigmon, 1997.
As I continue to reflect on the implications of this work and naming, I believe we must remain open to the ways language and its power may shift over time. This is true for many terms and concepts in this field.\(^{44}\) I find myself returning often to Patti Clayton’s (2010) reflection about language. In the essay “The Power of Little Words,” she writes:

> I am playing with the notion that some of the most powerful levers for hindering or advancing paradigm shift are to be found in some of the smallest words. “Which community partners are you going to use this semester?” The difference between asking “what are your students doing for your community partners this semester” and asking “what are your students doing with your community partners this semester.” Between doing research on our students and doing research with our students. (p.1, emphasis in original)

Words matter, every single one. They convey power. I do not have decisive recommendations, although I will explore some implications in the next section. Just as Patti Clayton, “I want to listen for the little words. I want to choose them and use them carefully, mindful of what I am sending out in the world with them. I want to explore their power together” (p. 1).\(^{45}\)

**Confessions of a Community Engagement Professional**

At the start of this research, I was eager to explore how student-initiated programs like BC could provide unique experiences for students. What lessons could a model like this offer the broader field of community engagement? Although I began this research when I was an insider in the program, I continue to have a vested interest in the model and in community engagement more broadly. In 2012, I became the director of a

\(^{44}\) See, for example, Hammersley’s (2016) chapter on the term “reciprocity,” and Garvin et al.’s (in press) conversation on concepts including community, partnership, co-creation, social justice, and democratic. 

\(^{45}\) Related to this conversation is the work of a group of scholar-practitioners in North Carolina who are currently undertaking an analysis of key concepts in the field of service-learning and community engagement as way to “unmuddy” the waters of our work. The Community of Practice, Inquiry, and Learning (COPIL) group recently drafted an article capturing some of their conversations – see Garvin et al., in press.
community engagement leadership program at a small private liberal arts college. This program, part of a national network of student leadership programs, calls on students to take on significant leadership responsibilities and grow their capacities as community-engaged students and leaders. But as the distance grew between my days at BC and my work as a community engagement practitioner, I began to wonder to what extent are students truly allowed to take on authentic leadership opportunities in spaces like this. In this study, participants described taking on leadership in important and significant administrative ways – budget development and management, supervision, planning, writing annual reports, participating in and facilitating advisory meetings, meeting with college administrators, and more. One participant described her job as promoting agency, for herself and other BC staff. She didn’t want BC to settle for the “feel good” aspect of the community engagement work; she wanted to make the work political and see the cracks in the foundation of systems of education. To see the fault lines and the deep injustice in the system and to want to fix it. To want to, as another student said, be “on the frontlines of the war” and work for change on a range of levels. So here I sit, over seven years after leaving BC, and I wonder: how often are students in more traditional college and university programs provided the opportunity to go deeper? How often are they allowed to flex their political muscle, to unravel systemic issues and actually sit around the table with campus decision-makers so that they can be a part of change?

46 The Bonner Foundation has supported a network of Bonner Scholar and Bonner Leader programs at over 60 colleges and universities around the country for over 20 years. These programs, although not necessarily student-led, provide important pathways for college students to develop themselves as community-oriented and community-engaged leaders. To learn more about these programs, visit the Foundation’s website, www.bonner.org.
As I reflect on these questions, I think back to Butin’s (2010) characterization of service-learning as coming from a range of perspectives. If I lean into the political perspective of service-learning, I would yearn for service-learning and community engagement work – be it a program like BC which is student-led, or a program like Bonner which heavily relies on student leadership – to give students the tools to analyze and unravel systems of oppression and privilege. And one type of this privilege would certainly be adultism – that is, folks like myself who have worked in higher education for some time, telling traditional-aged college students what to do and how to do it. With all types of oppression in mind, community engagement practitioners should reflect on and analyze their own practice: not just in our work with community organizations and schools, but with the student leaders in our programs and offices.

**Implications for Practice**

In the spirit of encouraging myself and others to be reflective practitioners, what follows is a list of implications for practitioners of community engagement to consider. This set of questions can be a useful tool in helping us reflect on our work and on the ways community-engaged student leadership is designed on campuses both large and small.

1. *When we invite students to take on leadership roles within community engagement programs, what kind of leadership opportunities are they offered?*

   Are students offered opportunities to take risks and to be self-directed in their decision-making, or are they merely tasked with projects that professional staff and faculty dictate? Here is an example from my own practice: in the leadership program I direct, senior students held the position of “senior intern,” a title giving
them a sense of responsibility and leadership in relation to other students in the program. Just as Atabex’s title gave her a sense of importance, the title “senior intern” is meant to signify a particular level of leadership. And yet, these student leaders were often tasked with projects that could have been seen as mundane, as Jessica mentioned: for 10-15 hours a week, senior interns were expected to staff our center, check other students’ time cards, and monitor our cleaning and chore system. For a smaller fraction of their hours, 3-5, they were asked to complete a project with a community partner.

A few years into my work with this program, I decided to flip the paradigm, asking senior interns to spend the majority of their hours on a project with a community organization and a smaller fraction of their time on office duties. This was and continues to be a complicated balancing act. The administrative tasks of the center are essential to our functioning, and yet for some students led to many days of boredom. Ultimately, then, the shift to more hours working with community organizations led senior interns to greater opportunities for growth and challenge in their work. While professional staff in the center continue to feel challenged with balancing the needs of our day-to-day operations with the potential for our students’ leadership development, this is a challenge I urge us all to continuously interrogate. These roles should also be developed in relationship with our students, so they can direct their learning as well.

2. *How do community engagement centers support student-initiated programs?* The student-initiated community engagement program in focus here was resourced primarily through student fees, with some smaller pockets of funds emanating
from other budget lines within the university. Should our centers and/or academic
departments provide financial support and other resources for student-initiated
community engagement? What does that look like? Who holds the power in this
scenario? With BC, students in the Student Government Association were the
ultimate decision-makers, not the university administrators.

Offices focused on community engagement and service-learning should
consider what avenues are possible for student-initiated programs and student-
initiated resource allocation. The Bonner Community Fund is an excellent
example of this: many Bonner Scholar and Leader programs use this resource to
fund student-initiated projects and/or community programs. Students submit
requests but are urged to do so in conversation with community partners. In turn,
a committee of students reviews and awards requests. While the amount of money
in discussion here is significantly smaller than the budget for a program like BC,
this fund still allows for students to have a say for independent decision-making,
with the ultimate direction of a staff member. Examples like the Community Fund
provide us ideas for ways to develop agency with students and at the same time
leverage campus resources for community partners and organizations.

3. *How do community engagement centers support opportunities for students of
color?* Service-learning courses often center learning around the experiences of
white students (Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012). What happens if
students of color become the center and white students are at the margins? Such a
strategy is very much in line with that advocated for by Kumashiro (2001) – that

47 To learn more about this resource, visit the Bonner Network internal page, [http://bonner.pbworks.com](http://bonner.pbworks.com).
we shape educational experiences and conversations with the expectation that the “marginalized” are actually at the center of the lesson.

The stories shared by the participants in this manuscript show that centering identities of color had significant impacts for all students in Bridging Communities. For participants of color, their sense of belonging increased, their awareness was impacted, and ultimately their sense of agency – their capacity to take action and to see themselves as capable of working for change – was enhanced. Miller (1997) found that students, particularly students of color and men of color, were humbled by service-learning, leaving with a less idealistic view of their place in society. But here, we see something very different: participants left BC feeling empowered. Participants left feeling, in Atabex’s words, “ready to bust down the government doors and create a voice for [their] people.” White students were profoundly impacted through the BC experience as well, developing empathy after being in the minority in the classroom and community. White students critically examined their previous notions of normality, which centered white experiences.

There were important implications for relationships across identities as well. BC participants spoke at length about learning to trust white people. Francesca and Nia went from being suspicious of white people to seeing them as genuinely committed to dismantling systems of injustice. After BC, Francesca felt hopeful that white people could transform into allies and advocates.
What was it about BC that made this happen? A former instructor of Bridging Communities helped me to see something unique here. If students of color were in the minority, they may have never felt safe enough to build authentic relationships with their white peers. Being in the majority created a sense of community and a sense of comfort, which then allowed for deeper relationships to develop.

Finally, community engagement programs with a critical mass of students of color can connect with the community in powerful ways. Bridging Communities partnered with schools and organizations that served youth of color. For some, this created an immediate sense of connection and a feeling of home, making participants even more committed to the work. This also created opportunities for mentoring relationships with youth where the mentor’s identity matched that of the youth. Seeing people “like me” helps youth envision college as a path that is possible for them.

Community engagement centers then have multiple reasons to invest in programs centered for students of color, both for the college students and for the communities they partner with.

4. When are students in non-student-initiated programs given room for full self-direction, even at risk of error? One of Francesca’s biggest takeaways from her years with BC was the opportunity to have full responsibility for decision-making. Her motto, “do your own work”, illustrates her independent decision-making and self-reliance. She believes her years with BC developed her confidence in this

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48 Thanks to Beth Mattison for this important insight about the BC experience.
area. As I reflect on my work with students, I wonder: when are student leaders given space to make decisions independently, without having to run them by professional staff and faculty? When are we, community engagement professionals, willing to step back and let students drive the process?

And when do we not? There can be compelling reasons to step in: oftentimes, staff and faculty are the folks who work with community partners for extended periods of time. Ideally, we are able to develop strong and lasting relationships with both staff and members in the communities with which we work. Hopefully this leads to a greater understanding of the history of our institutional relationships in the community. We know when things have gone well, and when things have gone very wrong.  

Ultimately, in projects that are not purely student-run, administrators and faculty can never fully yield their power to students. Epstein (2010) writes, “Teachers can aim to offer students opportunities to use their voices, yet they should continuously examine the remaining, and strong, systems of power that will invariably impact classroom life and limit student voice” (p. 180). Knowing, then, that we cannot fully release power (and should never imagine that to be possible), staff and faculty are obligated to keep in mind best practices and support our students in not only learning them but implementing them in their work.

An example of when service goes wrong: in a statewide day of service, an elementary school principal begs a very large group of AmeriCorps members to “STOP!” all cleaning tasks. Turns out the group used the wrong concentration of cleaning products and damaged the exterior paint. Chances are just about every community partner has a story of such an experience. For more on this topic, see Crabtree, 2013; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009.
5. *What is in the best interest of community partners?* This study has illuminated the various impacts that student-initiated community engagement can have for students, but there are crucial voices missing here: those of the teachers, principals, counselors, families, and youth that the BC students worked with. Would they attest to the same powerful outcomes, not just witnessing them in the BC students, but for the youth themselves who were mentored? A considerable challenge of any student-initiated program is a steady turnover of leadership, due to the transitional nature of a college environment. In terms of the management and oversight of such initiatives, does that leadership turnover work for relationship-building and partnership management? These questions were not the focus of this study, but should certainly be at the forefront of planning and implementation of any student-initiated (or even non-student-initiated) endeavor. BC put safeguards in place to train and orient new staff annually; this, however, may not be enough to satisfy the long-term relationship building that many community organizations seek out with their college partners.

6. *What names do we use? Who is included and excluded by those choices?* Naming is a dynamic process. We must continuously re-evaluate the words we use and the many meanings behind them. I will not elaborate on this beyond the discussion presented earlier in this chapter, except to say that I believe we should ask ourselves this question regularly – annually, for certain, but perhaps more frequently than that. Inspired by this project, I look forward to raising questions about names with all of the constituents we work with: other administrators, staff and faculty, students, community organizations, and community members. In the
end, we may find we use different names in different spaces – I believe that is okay. What is not okay, however, is to continue push specific terms just for the sake of history and alignment with a set of literature or our individual preferences. I aspire to be open to change and to continuous interrogation of what I say, when I say it, and to whom I say it.

This set of questions is by no means exhaustive. I hope it can provide community engagement professionals, including faculty and staff, with useful reflections as they continue to shape community engagement programs. I also hope the list can provide students involved in community engagement programs with things to consider as they aim to explore their own leadership, be it in programs that are administered by staff and faculty, or programs that are student-run.

**Now What? A Conclusion of Sorts**

At one point, I was an insider in a student-initiated community engagement program. For two impactful years, I served as a staff member of Bridging Communities. In that time, I was inspired to imagine ways that community engagement and service-learning programs could not only engage students, particularly students of color, but that students could drive the process. As a graduate student staff member, I constantly sought the collegiality and insights of the undergraduate students I worked with. Although at that point in my career I had been a community engagement professional for almost 10 years, the undergraduate staff at BC were my guides, my experts. They were also my inspiration and, dare I say, my friends. I look back on that period of my life with extreme gratitude, not only for the people I was able to work with, but for the unique perspective I was taught about what was possible when a group of invested and passionate students took the
lead. As Theo’s quote – the title of this manuscript – indicates, no one could tell us our work, our goals, our dreams were impossible. We collectively developed a sense of agency. Don’t get me wrong: it wasn’t always pretty. There were days when people struggled to complete projects. There were days when we disappointed each other. But more often, there were moments of great joy, of inspiration, of challenge, and of celebration.

I look back on my BC years with pride. I hope that this manuscript can be a testament to the power and potential of student-initiated community engagement projects. Give students the wheel. But give students the resources to really be able to make an impact. Trust students to do good work and to exercise the practices advocated for in critical service-learning. Faculty, staff, and administrators are still important – we have a great deal of wisdom and experience to offer. But student-initiated projects should hold an important place within the field of community engagement and service-learning, for, as the stories here attest, the opportunities for learning and for the development of agency cannot be underestimated.
APPENDIX A

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION

My name is Shuli Arieh Archer and I am a doctoral student in Educational Policy and Leadership at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. For my doctoral dissertation I will be doing a case study of student leaders from the [Bridging Communities] program at [your institution]. More specifically, I am exploring the experiences of student leaders and their development of a sense of agency, or the ability to work for change, as a result of their involvement with [Bridging Communities]. This consent form clarifies all of the items that you are agreeing to as a participant in this project. I deeply appreciate your willingness to participate in this study.

When signing this form I, ___ (NAME OF PARTICIPANT) ___, voluntarily consent to participate in this study and agree to the following:

1. Shuli Arieh Archer will interview me three (3) times during the interview process and each interview will last 90 minutes. The dates and times of the interviews will be decided upon by myself and the interviewer and will occur in a setting that is comfortable for both of us. The interviews may need to occur via telephone or a video chat program such as Skype.

2. The questions I will be answering will focus on my involvement in service-learning, social justice, and Bridging Communities, including my experience before and after participating in Bridging Communities. I will be candid in sharing my own experiences and perspectives about these topics. In turn, I may decline to answer any questions I do not feel comfortable answering.

3. The findings will be used in the researcher’s doctoral dissertation and may also be used in conference presentations and/or manuscripts prepared for publication.

4. The interviews will be audio recorded to facilitate analysis of the data. The researcher (and, if possible, a professional transcriber) will transcribe all interviews. All transcription files will be stored in a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher. I will decide on a pseudonym and all files will be stored under this name.

5. My name will not be used in relation to the project and any details that might disclose my identity will be disguised in the researcher’s final report. There is always, however, a small risk that the other people in Bridging Communities may link the things I share with what they already know about me. I am aware that the interviewer will be using my language extensively in her final report.
6. I have the right to withdraw at any point during the process and can do so without fear of prejudice. If I do plan to withdraw, I will let the researcher know as soon as possible.

7. If I am unable to make one of the scheduled interviews, I will try to let my interviewer know by phone and will work to reschedule.

8. I have the right to review any material prior to the researcher’s completion of her final report. This includes transcription files as well as drafts of findings and other pieces of the written report.

9. I can contact Shuli Arieh Archer at [phone number] or [email address] to discuss any concerns I have about this consent form, the research project, or the interviews at any time during my participation. I can also contact the project’s director, Dr. Ryan Wells, at [email address].

10. I will be given a copy of this form to keep for my records.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study and I have received a copy of this form.

Participant’s Signature ___________________________ Date __________

Researcher’s Signature ___________________________ Date __________
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Overview

• Three interviews that are anywhere from a few days to a week apart (ideally)
• 90 minutes each
• Use open-ended questions; “task is to build upon and explore… participants’ responses to the questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” (Seidman, 2006, p. 14)

Interview One (life history): How did the participant come to be involved in Bridging Communities (BC)? A review of the participant’s life history up to the time he or she became involved in BC, with a focus on agency.

Interview Two (contemporary experience): What was it like for the participant to be in BC (class, site, work, etc.)? What are the details of the participant’s work as a BC participant?

Interview Three: What does it mean to the participant to have been involved in BC? Given what the participant has said in interviews one and two, how does he or she make sense of his or her experience in BC? How does his/her experience in BC relate to his/her sense of agency?

Interview One – Be sure to ask for concrete details (before attitudes/opinions)

• Ask about past lives, up until entry in BC (class or work)
• Reconstruct their early experiences in their families, in school, with friends, in their neighborhood, and at work (if applicable).
• Focus on their experiences in school and communities, and in situations involving mentoring, tutoring, working with youth.
• Ask questions about identities – families, community; understanding of their social and personal identities
• Ask about times that participants felt a sense of agency (DESCRIBE)
• Ask about times where participants felt powerless or incapable of acting for change
• Ask HOW rather than WHY (how did you become involved rather than WHY) – because we hope to reconstruct a range of constitutive events in their past, family, school, and work experience that place their participation in BC in the context of their lives

Interview Two - Be sure to ask for concrete details (before attitudes/opinions)

• Reconstruct the details of the experience – not opinions but the details of the experience
• What did you actually do in BC (describe each component)?
• The BC class
  o What did you do in the class? Examples: Topics, discussions, projects, papers
  o What did you do at site? How often did you go?
Reconstruct a day/week in the BC course experience.

• BC Staff
  o What was your role(s) on staff? What did you do?
• Could you tell me as much as possible about the details of your experience at ____?
• Are there aspects of your experiences with BC that were designed for you to increase your sense of agency?

Interview Three

• Reflect on the meaning of your experience. Note: “Meaning” has to do with the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life.
• Given what you have said about your life before you became involved in BC and given what you said about your involvement in the course and staff, how do you understand the role of BC in your life? What sense does it make to you? Where have you gone since, where do you see yourself going?
• How has your involvement in BC impacted your sense of agency? (DEFINE)
• How has involved in BC impacted your life since?
• Reflect on your life now

Words to Clarify/Expand Upon
Fascinate Challenge Adventure Interesting

Interview Tips
Listen More, Talk Less
Follow-up: Ask for clarification, details, and stories
Ask Questions When You Do Not Understand – Can you tell me again when that happened?
Grand Tour Questions – Take me through a day...
Mini Tour – Take me through a tutoring session...
Follow up, don’t interrupt (take notes!)
Ask them to talk to you as if you are someone else – “If I were your friend what would you say?”
Share experiences on occasion

Interview prompts:
Can you give me an example of _______?
Can you tell me a story about _______?
What was _______ like?
What did _______ feel like?
What else could you say about _______?
Could you tell me more about that?
You’ve already talked about _____, but I’d like to ask you more directly about _____.
Is there anything more that comes to your mind about _______?

For negative responses:
What was it like not to _______?
Why do you think you didn’t _______?
How did it feel not to _______?
APPENDIX C

LIST OF CODES

Code Names
AGENCY-TRICHORDAL
  • AGENCY- TRICHORDAL -PAST
  • AGENCY- TRICHORDAL -FUTURE
  • AGENCY- TRICHORDAL -PRESENT
AGENCY-PERCEPT
  • AGENCY-PERCEPT-PREBC
    o AGENCY-PERCEPT-PREBC-EX
  • AGENCY-PERCEPT-BCCHANGE
    o AGENCY-PERCEPT-AGENCYvSTRUCTURE
  • AGENCY-PERCEPT-FUTURE
    o AGENCY-PERCEPT-FUTURE-QUALITY
    o AGENCY-PERCEPT-FUTURE-JOB
  • AGENCY-PERCEPT-POWERLESS
FACTORS
  • FACTORS-REL
  • FACTORS-COURSE
  • FACTORS-JOB
  • FACTORS-STRUCTURE
  • FACTORS-POWER
  • FACTORS-SENSEOFBELONGING
DESCRIPOFBC
  • DESCRIPOFBC-SL
  • DESCRIPOFBC-ACT
  • DESCRIPOFBC-COMORG
  • DESCRIPOFBC-OTHER
SELFCONNECTTOLARGER

Code Descriptions

QUESTION ONE
How did involvement in BC influence participants’ understandings of agency (i.e., the capacity to take action and to work for social change)?
Note: Agency is not action – “social action will never be completely determined … [but] there is no hypothetical moment in which agency actually gets ‘free’ of structure” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1004)

Factors that Influenced (FACTORS)
  Relationships (FACTORS-REL): Social connections students made within the organization
    - Peers: connections students had with other members of the organization
    - “Allies” – a feeling that others in the organization were there to support a student and what they were going through
    - Relationships across “difference”
    - Sense of family: Students describing a familial tie to members of the organization and feelings of connection and belonging
Critical Mass – a significant percentage of students of color, in order to increase feelings of comfort and belonging

Sense of Belonging – “relating to student’s social adjustment to college and involved ‘finding a role in relation to others which will make him [or her] feel valued, will contribute to his [or her] feeling of self-worth, and will contribute to a feeling of kinship with an increasing number of persons’ (American Council on Education, 1949/1987, pp. 22-23)” (quoted in Johnson, 2007, p. 5)

Course-elements (FACTORS-COURSE)
- Participatory Action Research (PAR)
- Discussion-based
- Instructor

Job responsibilities (FACTORS-JOB)
- Site coordinator
- Program coordinator
- COCA
- Office role

Structure of Organization (FACTORS-STRUCTURE)
- Communication
- Meetings

Access to People in Positions of Power (FACTORS-POWER)

Agency Codes
AGENCY-ORIENT-PAST: routines, dispositions, habits that shape a person’s expectations of self
AGENCY-ORIENT-FUTURE: how we imagine new or modified ways of responding to conflicts and challenges
AGENCY-ORIENT-PRESENT: how we make decisions, by identifying problems, considering options, and choosing an option

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do student leaders describe what their sense of agency was like before they joined BC?</th>
<th>How did their sense of their agency change over the course the program?</th>
<th>How do the student leaders see their future roles in community and political life?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREBCAGENCY Description of one’s capacity to work for change prior to enrolled in SB course</td>
<td>BCAgencyChange Students’ understanding of how participation in BC enhanced his/her capacity to work for change</td>
<td>BCAgencyFuture Ways one describes what they are doing next, roles in community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-categories Examples – PREBCAGENCY-EX - when a student references a time where they felt the capacity to take action</td>
<td>BCAgencyVsStructure Examples of times where student steps outside of a prescribed notion of what they were expected to do or thought they would do</td>
<td>Quality Qualities or characteristics student sees his/herself as possessing in public life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Career aspirations student has</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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QUESTION TWO
How do student leaders describe their work – as service-learning, as activism, or as something else?

Description (DESCRIP)
Service-learning (DESCRIP-SL)
Activism (DESCRIP-ACT)
Community Organizing (DESCRIP-COMORG)
Social Justice Work (DESCRIP-SJWORK)
Other (DESCRIP-OTHER)

QUESTION THREE
How do students see themselves connected to a larger service-learning effort, institutionally, regionally, and/or nationally?

CONNECTTOLARGER
Code when a student describes seeing their work connected to a larger effort outside of the program.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


