

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' APPROACHES TO
CHALLENGES OF DIALOGUES ON CONTESTED SOCIOPOLITICAL ISSUES:

A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Toward an Understanding of College Students' Approaches to Challenges of Dialogues on
Contested Sociopolitical Issues: A Case Study

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This qualitative interview study examines challenges college students may experience in extracurricular dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues. It also discusses approaches that students claim support them through the challenges of contested issues dialogues.

This study found that college students encountered challenges including difficulty expressing disagreement, tensions related to their identities and group representation, and difficulty building trust and openness with peers in dialogue. Despite these difficulties, students also developed skills and capacities to bridge differences, to build community within dialogue, as well as to learn about themselves, others and sociopolitical issues. Through participants' accounts on how they perceive and negotiate these challenges, the study is intended to portray in-depth student perspectives about this critical aspect of peer dialogues on sociopolitical issues.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication.....	vi
I—INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background.....	1
Higher Education’s Civic Mission and Student Engagement of Controversial Public Issues.....	1
Defining Contested or Controversial Sociopolitical Issues.....	2
Presentation of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of Study.....	5
Research Questions.....	6
Definition of Terms.....	7
Significance and Dissertation Overview.....	7
II—LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....	9
Part I- Literature Review.....	9
Controversial Public Issues & the Civic Mission of Higher Education.....	9
Civic Outcomes of Controversial Issues Education.....	11
Deliberative Models of Controversial Issues Education.....	11
Higher Education Programs and Initiatives in Contested Issues Dialogue.....	14
National Issues Forum.....	15
Intergroup Dialogue.....	15
Structured Academic Controversy.....	16
Challenges of Contested Issues Dialogues	17
Limitations of Literature on Educational Models and Student Outcomes.....	19
Literature Review Summary.....	20
Part II – Conceptual Framework.....	21
Characteristics of Constructive Conflict.....	22
Cognitive and affective processes of conflict engagement and dialogue.....	22
Agreement.....	24
Flexible thinking.....	26
Creativity’s Role in Constructive Conflict.....	27
Characteristics of Creativity.....	27
Chapter Conclusion.....	30
III—DESIGN AND METHODS.....	32
Study Design Modifications.....	33
Site Selection	35
Features of “UNI”.....	35
Sample Identification, Access and Recruitment.....	37
Criteria for Sample Selection.....	37
Access	39
Description of Sample.....	40
Research Perspectives.....	42
Data Collection.....	44
Interview Research.....	44

Questionnaire.....	45
Data Processing.....	45
Data Analysis.....	46
Study Limitations.....	51
Generalizability.....	52
Validity, Reliability and Dependability.....	53
Reflexivity.....	56
Researcher Standpoint.....	57
Human Subjects Protection.....	58
Ongoing Informed Consent.....	59
Confidentiality and Minimizing Risk.....	59
Chapter Conclusion.....	60
IV–FINDINGS.....	61
Introduction.....	61
Section I. Students’ Challenges and Approaches to Challenges in Dialogue.....	64
Theme 1: Difficulty in Voicing Dissenting Views.....	65
Social pressure and sensitivity toward others.....	65
“Echo chamber”.....	67
Theme 2: Navigating Differences in Dialogue.....	71
Normalizing disagreement and differences.....	71
Building common ground.....	72
Reframing disagreement as an opportunity to explore the reasoning behind different or opposing views.....	73
Theme 3: Tensions Related to Identity and Group Representation.....	75
Underscoring differences between identity groups.....	76
Understanding of representation changing over time.....	78
Pressure to teach.....	79
Identity questioning: Adjustment between self-perception and group perception.....	80
Theme 4: Difficulty Establishing Trust and Openness.....	84
Defensiveness or resistance among peers in dialogue.....	85
Approaches to Resistance or Defensiveness.....	85
Difficulty in Admitting a Lack of Knowledge.....	88
Approaches to gaps in knowledge.....	89
Approaches to lack of trust: Creating a space for trust and openness.....	92
Section Conclusion.....	94
Section II. Types of Student Learning Through Difficult Dialogues.....	95
Theme 5: Developing Understanding Through Challenges In Dialogue.....	95
Learning about their role within the dialogue.....	96
Understanding oneself in relation to others.....	99
Learning about the issues themselves in new ways.....	102
Section Conclusion.....	105
Section III. Sustained Student Motivation in Difficult Dialogues.....	107
Theme 6: Sustaining Dialogue Motivation Despite Challenges.....	107
The reward of seeing community and trust build through dialogues.....	107

Drawing on their passion for the issues and commitment to making progress on the issues.....	109
A desire to understand their own conflicts.....	112
Section Conclusion.....	113
Chapter Conclusion and Propositions.....	114
V–SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	119
Overview of Issue and Aims of the Research.....	120
Propositions.....	121
Linking Research Questions to Propositions.....	122
Discussion.....	125
Personal Tensions Students Experienced in Dialogue Interactions.....	125
Revisiting the Role of Emotion.....	126
Disagreement, Concurrence and Cooperative Contexts.....	128
Motivations and Capacities to Understand and Bridge Differences.....	129
Creativity in Dialogues on Contested Sociopolitical Issues.....	132
Aspects of Creativity.....	133
“Novel and Personally Meaningful” Interpretations in Dialogue.....	135
Understanding Motivations and Attitudes in Dialogue Challenges through the Lens of Creativity.....	136
Implications.....	138
Community Through Dialogue.....	138
Sustaining Dialogue Motivation.....	141
The Case of “UNI” and Possible Limitations.....	142
Future Research.....	144
Policy Implications.....	146
Implications for Practice.....	149
Concluding Thoughts.....	151
REFERENCES.....	153
APPENDICES	
Appendix A–Participant Recruitment Email.....	168
Appendix B–Informed Consent for Participants.....	170
Appendix C–Participant Questionnaire.....	176
Appendix D–Interview Guide	179

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For my Dad—The resilience you've shown all your life and your big heart are what keep me going. This one's for you and Mom, in spirit.

Dedication

For Fat Duen and Gip Lan Angela Ho

I – INTRODUCTION

Background

Higher Education’s Civic Mission and Student Engagement of Contested Sociopolitical Issues

One of the long running purposes of higher education in the U.S. has been to educate informed, engaged citizens¹ who can take part in the decision making about the issues and policies that affect their communities (Bok, 2017; Colby et al., 2003; Colby et al., 2010; Dewey, 1927; Ehrlich, 2000; Nussbaum, 2002). U.S. educational associations, such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), identify democratic deliberation—or considered thought and/or discussion directed toward informed, reasoned problem solving—and civic engagement² as necessary for an interconnected and informed citizenry (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012).

Today, educating college students on public issues is as urgent as ever. Americans remain deeply divided on controversial social issues ranging from immigration reform, abortion, capital punishment, and same sex marriage, to name just a few³. Legislation on such issues and others remain topics of heated debate, even as data and empirical evidence might be available to support different sides to the arguments. Policymakers have not succeeded in providing acceptable solutions across opposing sides.

¹ Throughout this study, I use the terms “citizen,” “citizenry,” and “citizenship” in the sense of membership and participation in a society’s political institutions, not as a legal status (which political participation, admittedly, may be conditioned upon). See Leydet, Dominique, "Citizenship", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/citizenship/>>.

² The term “civic” engagement refers to engagement with matters that concern public social spheres that range from local community to state, national, and international contexts (Ehrlich 2000, xxvi).

³ <http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/recent-topics/2015>.

As such issues continue to sharply divide our society, I, along with many others, underscore this key reason for involving students in dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues: Guiding college students in dialogue and deliberation about contested sociopolitical issues is central to developing civic-minded members of a democracy (Avery et al., 2013; Parker 2010), who can engage in the current issues affecting individuals as well as local, national and international communities (Hess, 2001, 2002).

Defining Contested or Controversial Sociopolitical Issues

*Controversial or contested sociopolitical issues*⁴ (“CSI”) are contemporary problems that polarize public opinion and often divide political representation. Very broad categories of persistent conflict in campus dialogues include “(1) the state of our democracy, (2) race and ethnicity, (3) religion and tolerance, and (4) power” (Buie & Wright, 2010, p. 27). More specific examples include police mis-conduct, gun control, racial profiling, same sex marriage, immigration policies and Obamacare⁵. Such issues generally do not yield solutions without significant tradeoffs in social values (Carcasson, 2013), and are issues for which a public weighs competing democratic values (for instance, equality and liberty) (Hess, 2008).

Presentation of the Problem

A 2014 national survey on polarization among the American public revealed that people holding highly negative views of the opposite party--that is, seeing the other side’s policies as a “threat” to the well-being of the country--more than doubled from 1994 to 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2014). The survey concludes that this increase in Democrats and Republicans whose ideological views are diametrically opposed means growing difficulty in reaching common

⁴ As the educational literature on conflict and sociopolitical issues tends to treat the terms “contested” and “controversial” without distinction and in the same contexts, I also use these two words interchangeably throughout my study.

⁵ Pro-con.org

ground in policy debates (Pew Research Center, 2014). A 2017 Pew Research report shows the widening gaps between Democrats and Republicans on core political values, most notably in the areas of immigration, race and government aid to those in need (Pew Research Center, 2017). It is around these and other contested sociopolitical issues that polarization is heightened.

Moreover, this polarization in America is reflected among college students.

A 2016 Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) survey of full-time freshmen reported the greatest rate of polarization in the 51-year history of the survey (Eagan et al., 2017). College students who self-reported a moderate political orientation, “middle-of-the-road,” was at its lowest rate ever, at 42.3 percent. As minority undergraduate enrollment increases (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Stolzenberg et al., 2020) and students of different backgrounds and cultures enter college, institutions might be confronted with not only a diversity of student opinions, but also negotiating an array of conflicting student beliefs in a partisan landscape.

With the results of the 2016 HERI survey on polarization among college students, HERI has recommended that postsecondary institutions implement activities that help students build skills in productive discussion with peers holding different views and values (Eagan et al., 2017). There remains a need in colleges for programs that promote understanding of differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, as well as different political ideologies and socioeconomic backgrounds (Bok, 2017). Educational leaders have urged colleges to provide a space for discussion in order to mediate these conflicting views (Eagan et al., 2017).

Despite the polarized picture of college campuses above, a number of programs and initiatives represent the positive side of college students' engagement with socio-political issues. These dialogue and deliberation initiatives are designed to produce reflective and constructive

interactions around divisive topics. Educational programs based in dialogue and deliberation are skill-based programs to instill and practice positive interactions in interpersonal conflict and contested issues (Diaz & Gilchrist 2010; Gurin, Nagda, & Zuniga, 2004; Johnson & Johnson 1996 in Gurin et al. 2013).

A few examples of extensive, organized networks that facilitate dialogue across the nation include Sustained Dialogues, Intergroup Dialogues, and National Issues Forums (Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010; Gurin et al., 2013; Gurin et al., 2004; Gastil, 2004; Gastil & Dillard 1999; Zuniga et al. 2007). These initiatives and programs show ongoing efforts toward sustained civic dialogue and deliberation on certain college campuses. In contrast to the divisive picture that the statistics above depict, college students who opt to participate in such activities display involvement in structured conversations with peers holding different beliefs on contested socio-political issues.

Over the years, the connection between controversial issues discussion and development of democratic values has been proven quite consistently through educational research. Numerous studies show a link between engaging in classroom discourse on political or contested topics and future civic participation, in the form of voting, organizing or community involvement (Avery et al., 2013; Englund, 2012; Hess, 2002; Hess & McAvoy 2014; Parker 2010). Students participating in structured activity on controversial issues are also more likely to support civil liberties, to discuss politics outside the classroom, follow the news and demonstrate greater knowledge of current issues compared to counterparts who do not have such experience (Hess & McAvoy, 2014).

While these studies tell us about models and outcomes of structured dialogue in higher educational settings, there are a host of questions about students' experiential and developmental

process within these dialogues that remain. For instance, what aspects of dialogue and interactions around controversial issues do students find most difficult for them, and why? What sustains students through the conflicts? Responses to these questions can provide valuable perspectives from students who engage with their peers on controversial issues.

Purpose of Study

This qualitative interview study examines challenges college students may experience in extracurricular dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues. It also inquires into approaches that students claim support them through the challenges of contested issues dialogues. I examine how students describe their experiences in the following:

- developing capacities to engage in challenging dialogues;
- generating meaning from these challenging dialogues; and
- identifying motivations which help sustain them to persist through challenging dialogues.

By inquiring into students' thought processes during the dialogue programs—what they consider as changed perspectives, different approaches, risks and growth—I aimed to gain a sense of their development throughout challenging dialogues.

This qualitative, interview study offers narrative data which conveys students' emergent thoughts and behaviors in CSI dialogues. For instance, this might include ways students search for new information, and whether and how students integrate additional—and at times, conflicting—data. It inquires into what students think and do as they encounter the uncertainty and conflicting views within such discussions. It also investigates how students' self-reported understanding of the issues, themselves, or fellow dialogue participants emerge throughout the course of dialogues where others may challenge their views. This study on students' processes in contested issues dialogue seeks to illuminate ways that students develop their own thinking (for example, about

the issues and/or fellow dialogue participants) and behaviors (for example, in their interactions with others) throughout the course of contested issues dialogue.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided my study:

1. In discussions/dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues, how do undergraduate students describe their experiences as they engage in challenging instances of discussion/dialogue with other students?
2. What approaches do undergraduate students describe taking during these challenging instances of discussion/dialogue?
 - a. What approaches—including attitudes, modes of thinking and behaviors—do students view as contributing toward constructive dialogue?
 - b. What do students believe helps them to sustain engagement through the challenges of contested issues dialogue?
3. How do undergraduate students describe how they develop the attitudes, modes of thinking, and behaviors to engage in the challenges of contested issues discussions/dialogues?
4. In what ways do undergraduate students' descriptions reflect creative processes and practices within discussions/dialogues on contested issues?
5. How might undergraduate students' self-reported understanding of the issues, themselves, or fellow dialogue participants emerge throughout the course of such discussions/dialogues?

Definition of Terms

Sociopolitical is an adjective used in this study to describe the “differences between groups of people relating to their political beliefs, social class, etc.” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). It can relate to “a combination of social and political factors” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). As explained more fully at the beginning of the chapter, *controversial or contested sociopolitical issues*⁶ (“CSI”) are contemporary problems that polarize public opinion and often divide political representation.

Dialogue is a term meaning “an exchange of ideas and opinions” or “a discussion between representatives of parties to a conflict that is aimed at resolution” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). In this study, both versions of the definition may be applied in this inquiry of college students’ discussions of sociopolitical issues.

Constructive is a term that signifies “promoting improvement or development” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.) and “intended to help or improve something” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). The term is used in this study to refer to the quality of dialogue or people’s approaches to dialogue.

Significance and Dissertation Overview

Since discussions about contested sociopolitical issues are characterized by challenging and emotionally-charged interactions (Hess, 2009; Oulton, 2010), it is critical to understand students’ processes and practices that contribute not only to constructive exchanges, but to their own development. By attending to students’ approaches in peak moments of challenge, the

⁶ As the educational literature on conflict and sociopolitical issues tends to treat the terms “contested” and “controversial” without distinction and in the same contexts, I also use these two words interchangeably throughout my study.

study seeks to detail dimensions of students' experiential processes they engage in such contested issues dialogues.

Building on prior studies of constructive dialogue, the findings of this study may highlight student approaches within contested issues dialogue that expand educators' understanding of students' capacities to engage in difficult dialogues. By applying a lens of creativity within social conflict, I examine the study's central questions about the ways students engage perceived challenges in contested issues dialogues. This data may contribute to student development research that helps educators support the growth of students who participate in structured dialogue on sociopolitical issues. In-depth qualitative data on areas of particular challenge—and potential development amidst conflict—for student dialogue participants may inform educators as they guide students in the most sensitive, problematic aspects of dialogues.

As I conclude Chapter I, I offer an overview of the dissertation: The following chapter provides a review of extant literature and concepts that bear relevance to this study's questions. Chapter III explains the research design and methods, including study limitations. Chapter IV provides a detailed description of the findings and my claims resulting from the analysis. Finally, Chapter V presents discussion about these findings in relation to my research questions, relevant literature, and my conceptual framework. The dissertation concludes by exploring this study's implications for research, policy, and practice.

II—LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Part I – Literature Review

In order to provide relevant background to my research questions, I begin this Review of the Literature with an introduction on the civic mission of higher education and education in contested sociopolitical issues. I outline the skills and abilities that educators and scholars have widely espoused as desirable civic learning outcomes of contested sociopolitical issues engagement for students. I then discuss how these goals have been pursued in schools—via a) educational models and b) dialogue facilitation techniques. I detail the features of these models and recommended skills and techniques. I consider what these models contribute to students’ engagement in contested sociopolitical issues discussions and what we have yet to understand about the college students who participate in dialogue around controversial issues. I then explain concerns that research has raised as obstacles to constructive controversial issues discussion, as this relates to students.

Finally, I propose an alternative focus, which would attend to students’ processes of development within the challenges of contested sociopolitical issues (“CSI”) dialogue.

Controversial Sociopolitical Issues and the Civic Mission of Higher Education

Educational scholars and leaders have long espoused the benefits of student engagement in contested sociopolitical issues in schools for the health of a democracy. For instance, John Dewey (1927) viewed democracy not merely as a form of government, but as a way of living and learning together. He affirmed that the foundation of civil liberties such as freedom of expression rest in this ability to relate in a common space, wherein citizens expand understanding through an exchange of diverging opinions. Ehrlich (2000) asserts that higher

education has the “opportunity and obligation to...foster the capacities necessary for thoughtful participation in public discourse and effective participation in social enterprises” (p. xxv). In terms of higher education’s “obligation” or civic duty, guiding students in addressing contested sociopolitical issues is central to developing civic-minded⁷ members of a democracy (Avery et al., 2013; Parker, 2010). Higher education’s opportunity lies in its ability to provide students with purposeful and sustained learning environments for such discourse over public issues (Englund, 2012; Gutmann & Thompson, 1998). In their foundational work on deliberative democracy, Gutmann & Thompson (1998) assert that the educational system is the “single most important institution outside government” that is needed to make democracy more deliberative (p.359). Schools in diverse democracies are uniquely positioned to bring together students of different backgrounds and views to “reason aloud,” as Amy Gutmann claims (1999, p. 58).

Colleges with this mission to prepare students for democratic participation are attempting to develop future generations for participation--in the academic curriculum and the co-curriculum--in a modern democracy, characterized by racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity (Bergan & Harkavy, 2013; Campus Compact, 2012). There remains a need in colleges for programs that promote understanding across different political ideologies and socioeconomic backgrounds. Bok (2017) proposes that students take courses that help them understand contested problems and their link to public policy (Bok, 2017). Espousing this same aim, higher education advocacy and policy institutes, such as HERI and Campus Compact, have recommended that postsecondary institutions implement activities that help students build skills in productive discussion with peers holding different views and values (Eagan et al., 2017; Campus Compact, 2012). In taking on pressing, publicly contested issues that exist in a diverse

⁷ The term “civic” engagement refers to engagement with matters that concern public social spheres that range from local community to state, national, and international contexts (Ehrlich 2000, xxvi).

society, students are preparing to be active participants in shaping the policies and laws that affect their communities.

Civic Outcomes of Contested Issues Education: Building Capacities for a Pluralistic Society

Over the years, the connection between controversial issues discussion and development of democratic values has been proven quite consistently through educational research.

Numerous studies show a link between engaging in school discourse on political or contested topics and future civic participation, in the form of voting, organizing or community involvement (Avery et. al 2013; Englund 2012; Hess & McAvoy 2014; Hess, 2002; Parker 2010;). Students participating in structured activity on controversial issues are also more likely to support civil liberties, to discuss politics outside the classroom, follow the news and demonstrate greater knowledge of current issues compared to counterparts who do not have such experience (Hess & McAvoy, 2014).

In addition to the rationale of promoting democratic participation over public issues, scholars present a number of other educational benefits associated with structured guidance over contested issues. These benefits include the growth of skills and capacities, such as applying rational argument and evidence-based claims, improved problem-solving and decision-making (Johnson, 1997), as well as dispositions toward fairness and open-mindedness (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Martens & Gainous, 2013).

Deliberative Models of Contested Issues Education

Educational literature has primarily approached controversial issues education in two related, yet distinct ways: by formulating pedagogical models in dialogue over controversial issues and by compiling techniques. This section outlines educational efforts to organize

controversial issues discussion in schools, through these models and techniques to build students skillsets. I then identify gaps in such a focus for understanding students' process, noting what this dominant aspect of the education literature overlooks.

To examine students' educational engagement with contested issues, I first review the models which have structured such education in recent years. While various approaches exist for contested sociopolitical issues discussion, conceptions of deliberation fit closely with the vision of education that shapes learning toward civic participation in a modern democracy (Avery et al., 2013; Englund, 2012; Gutmann & Thompson, 1998; Parker, 2010). In particular, deliberation as a concept has served as the foundation for prevailing educational models and practices designed to structure controversial issues dialogue (Avery et al. 2013; Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010; Englund 2012; Gurin, Nagda, & Zuniga, 2004; Gutmann & Thompson 1998; Hess, 2002, 2005, 2009; Parker 2010). As defined in Chapter 1, deliberation is a process of considered thought about a specific question, idea, or particular issue, whereby one carefully considers the available perspectives. This encompasses both individual cognitive processes, and communication and negotiation with others around an issue or dilemma, to aid in resolving or arriving at solutions to issues (Gutmann & Thompson, 1998; Harriger, 2014; Parker, 2010).

To convey ways educational programs foster student exchange in contested sociopolitical issues, I delineate skills and capacities educational scholars have promoted across prominent deliberative pedagogical models for productive communication about contested issues. Within the civic aims of education, facilitators of dialogue are responsible for engendering an environment that allows students' opposing views to be expressed and respectfully examined (Mazer, 2018). *Deliberative communication* is a manner of communication involving skills and processes which enable dialogue participants to address underlying differences in values and

beliefs that may affect policy formation (Englund, 2011, 2012; Levine et al., 2005). The following set of activities illustrate ways to foster productive group interactions:

Deliberative communication aims to deepen learning by facilitating careful listening between students and verbalization of their knowledge, in an ongoing process of creating meaning (Englund, 2012). First, participants establish together shared norms of discourse--in other words, ground rules reached through group consensus-- to ensure open and fair participation (Michaels et al., 2008). To make decisions regarding pressing public issues, citizens need to reason together over these issues. Instead of simply “trading claims and counter claims” (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 293), effective dialogue and decision-making in a pluralistic society hinges on a citizenry’s respect for each other’s reasoning. This process of reasoning collectively is dependent on underlying factors. For instance, to communicate where discussants’ opinions differ, dialogue participants would begin with each others’ *frames of reference*--that is, the kind of assumptions, attitudes and values they operate with. Students coming from different backgrounds may draw on assumptions that those from another culture and value system do not relate to. Therefore, students practice *perspective-taking*, the act of adopting the viewpoint of another, during dialogue (Clark & Avery, 2016). Participants build through multiple stages to understand another cultural context and personal standpoint through a dialogue involving “mutual questioning”, or questioning each other, and reflection, (Levine et al. 2005, p. 9). To accomplish this, educators would, ideally, guide students toward “self-critical reason”—which involves evaluating one’s own logic, reasons and biases (Nussbaum 2002, p. 294). Critically examining one’s own frame of reference and finding common ground is crucial to progressing beyond entrenched positions.

As students from diverse backgrounds and cultures enter college, deliberative communication may serve as a framework for interactions between people of different cultures (Englund 2011, 2012). Facilitators of programs that practice a deliberative model ask participants to reflect on their own views and assumptions as they listen to and evaluate the arguments of others. As a group of people consider and arrive at a set of views on a contested topic together, the optimal result is greater “solidarity” and a “more coherent vision of the future” (Schuler, 2009, p. 92-3). Since participants can create common ground even when they do not reach full agreement, this coherence is valuable even where divergence persists.

Deliberative dialogic models have been proven to be effective in advancing civic learning (Doherty, 2008; Gurin et al., 2013; Hess & Gatti 2010, Harriger & McMillan 2008, Shaffer, 2014; Thomas, 2010; Zuniga et al., 2007). Such models have been found to produce desired learning outcomes, including deepened comprehension of public issues and cultural competence (Avery, 2013; Diaz & Gilchrist 2010; Gurin et al., 2013; McMillan & Harriger 2002; Zuniga et al., 2007).

Higher Educational Programs and Initiatives in Contested Issues Dialogues

Having detailed guiding concepts and the attributes of deliberative dialogue models that have shaped education in issues-centered dialogue, I introduce a few prominent programs and initiatives that have provided a form of deliberative dialogue over controversial issues in higher education. Educational programs based in deliberation are skill-based programs to instill and practice positive interactions in interpersonal conflict and contested issues (Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010; Gurin et al., 2004; Johnson, 1997). Describing the elements and approaches of these models provides an overview of aims and organized efforts to enact college student dialogue on

contested sociopolitical issues. Further, studies of these programs describe student outcomes of such efforts.

National Issues Forum (“NIF”)

Among the most extensive networks that organize and facilitate deliberative civic engagement in American colleges is The National Issues Forum (NIF) (Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010). NIF Issues forums start in the campus community to promote civic skills and attitudes, as they build a culture of discourse around issues of public concern (Buie & Wright, 2010). Among the organizations in the network, some are focused on integrating deliberative theory and practice into the curriculum, bringing together faculty and students from various disciplines to initiate “well-reasoned discourse” (Gastil & Dillard, 1999, p. 10). Members of these forums convene over a local or national issue, and may present the results of their meeting to elected officials or policymakers (Gastil, 2004; Gastil & Dillard, 1999). The educational method of NIF is organized as face –to-face, small group discussion of 5-20 participants. This group examines the nature of an issue, establishes values using evaluative criteria, explores policy choices and alternative solutions, evaluates the pros and cons of policy alternatives, and reaches the optimal solution. In terms of outcomes, empirical studies have shown that student participation in NIF classroom deliberation exercises have resulted in student gains in understanding political questions, awareness of possible answers and connection to their lives. Further, students exposed to the NIF model for extended periods developed public knowledge, attitudes and skills to apply to new scenarios (McMillan & Harriger 2002).

Intergroup Dialogue (“IGD”)

Another prominent model among several deliberative dialogue initiatives across U.S. college campuses is the Intergroup Dialogue model. Like the NIF, it has generally been constructed as

forums for the kinds of in depth dialogues on issues deemed too contentious to address effectively in the classroom, such as gender and racial-ethnic inequality (Zuniga et al. 2007, xi). Like other deliberative approaches, IGD is solution oriented. IGD is distinct from other forms of dialogic pedagogy in that it prioritizes critical analysis aimed at social change, especially regarding systemic gender and racial-ethnic inequalities (Gurin et al., 2013; Zuniga et al. 2007). Facilitators conducting IGD aim to promote positive intergroup relations, and through these relationships, to grow students' cultural competencies relevant to life and work in a diverse society (Maxwell et al., 2012). Notably, IGD is known more for training student peers and college staff for facilitating dialogues, since consistent faculty participation remains relatively low (Zuniga et al. 2007).

Structured Academic Controversy (“SAC”)

Johnson and Johnson (1979) have formed a structured academic controversy (SAC) model and methodology to prompt constructive and educational engagement with controversial issues. Following the deliberation skill of perspective-taking, students may adopt the views of another, competing position. One objective of this model is, through switching perspectives, to help students come to a form of understanding that they did not entertain before the exercise. As they synthesize the information they have gained from more than one standpoint, they may articulate a new conclusion together, as a group (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). SAC is contrasted to debate, which is set up for a winning and a losing side and thus solidifying one's position. Instead, it promotes finding the “best possible solution” (Avery et al., 2013, p. 108), and teaching participants conflict mediation. A key feature that distinguishes SAC from other models of deliberation is that facilitators assign positions to students, which may free them from the stigma of arguing unpopular opinions (Avery et al., 2013).

These three program models, collectively, share a conceptual framework in deliberative dialogue, as detailed previously. Applying these models of dialogic pedagogy, educators may engender various forms of deliberative capacities and skills— considering frames of reference, reasoning together, perspective taking, mutual inquiry, and critical self reflection—and guide their students to exercise a version of these in discussion. As a whole, this set of programs offer interactive, mediated dialogical approaches to guide participants in communicating across different beliefs. An aspect NIF, IGD, SAC and related deliberative dialogic programs share in common is that they direct leaders in a facilitation and moderation approach (Avery et al., 2013; Gurin et al., 2013; Zuniga et al. 2007). They stand in contrast to didactic methods, such as lectures about contested issues (Gurin et al., 2013). In a controlled setting such as a classroom or forum, interactions are intentional and sanctioned by educational authorities (Gurin et al., 2013). These programs share the common purpose of activities designed to support interaction among diverse students, rather than chance encounters or discussion.

While these educational models can be applied in classrooms, studies of major deliberation and dialogue program models mainly represent practices outside of the classroom, in forums, campus-based institutes and centers (Carcasson, 2011; Gurin et al., 2013; Zuniga et al. 2007). The existing literature on contested issues engagement in school demonstrates that structured discussion/dialogue over contested issues remains at the periphery, in extracurricular, voluntary programs and dialogue initiatives (Buie & Wright, 2010; Gastil & Dillard, 1999, 2004; Maxwell et al., 2012).

Challenges of Contested Issues Dialogue

The programs detailed above point to model approaches and techniques in structured dialogues around sociopolitical issues. Yet, how do students discuss contested topics in the face of challenges of clashing values, identities, ideologies, and cultural worldviews inherent to such topics? In this section, I lay out some obstacles that appear in research on contested issues interactions.

Students' personal values—and the diverging social and moral worldviews which they reflect—are at the core of controversial issues (Dewhurst, 1992, as cited in Oulton et al., 2004; Hess, 2001; Philpott et al., 2011;). With controversial issues, even reasonable minds can reach different conclusions (Oulton et al. (2004). Because of loaded emotions, personal stakes and experiences embedded in certain current issues for students, social psychological and educational studies find controversial issues do not often yield resolution through reasoned arguments alone (Oulton et al., 2004; Kahne & Bowyer 2017). Research on intergroup dialogue suggests that intervention on an emotional level should not be limited to the verbal-cognitive plane (Khuri, 2004), or that which is clearly conscious. Khuri (2004) dubs the affective layer as the “background” of intergroup dialogue, while content remains in the foreground (p. 600). Therefore, attention to the affective (emotional) domain of students' dialogue experience is necessary to gain a fuller picture of their experience (Khuri, 2004; Stephan & Stephan, 2001).

Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning are common in political information processing (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). Motivated reasoning compels people to seek evidence that is in line with their preexisting opinions (*confirmation bias*). Individuals diminish or reject the opposing evidence and make counter-arguments against opposing views (*disconfirmation bias*) (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006, as cited in Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). Students may shield themselves from emotional and cognitive risk by resisting or evading discussion on

sensitive public issues (King, 2009). Therefore, a question inherent to controversial issues education is, What are students' ways of not only analyzing the opposing arguments participants take on the contested topic itself—but also navigating their personal biases and emotions tied to their moral and social views?

It is natural for students to find ways to maintain the viability of their existing views (King, 2009). However, educators can steer students away from directional motivation and toward accuracy through certain interventions (Druckman, 2012, as cited in Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). For example, educators can attempt to undercut entrenched positions by requiring justification, self-reflection, and keeping an open perspective (Druckman, 2012, as cited in Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). By synthesizing arguments and evidence in the discussion, students weigh opposing evidence and evaluate arguments, while remaining open to other participants' perspectives (Wales & Clarke, 2005; Fournier-Sylvester, 2013).

Despite these educational objectives of dialogue, studies of cognitive resistance and bias indicate that achieving inclusive, civic educational goals when discussing controversial issues is not always straightforward. Entrenched rifts in social and moral attitudes can present difficulties to students' constructive dialogue or discussion. While the above literature on program techniques are valuable, these do not give adequate attention to how students make sense of complex controversial issues in discussion dynamics. Detailed accounts on the ways college students negotiate disagreement and conflict over controversial topics may provide greater clarity on this critical aspect of issues-oriented dialogue.

Limitations of Literature on Educational Models and Student Outcomes

The purposes and rationales for controversial issues discussion described at the beginning of this chapter represent aims defined by institutional and policy leaders, as well as educational

scholars. Beyond espoused institutional missions, a study of student development in controversial issues necessitates an examination of students' own reasons for and ways of engaging contested issues with peers.

The above work gives us a sense of educational *purposes* for engaging students in controversial issues discussion--and the value for doing so in terms of educational *outcomes*. Yet we still have little understanding of the kind of attitudes, modes of thinking and behaviors which students believe sustain their engagement through challenging dialogues. Such engagement is rare in practice, despite the proven beneficial student outcomes (Oulton et al., 2004; Maxwell et al., 2012; Seligsohn & Grove, 2017). Therefore, it is critical to discern not only student outcomes, but students' own attitudes, thinking and reasons that compel them to persist in these efforts, despite the significant obstacles.

Literature Review Summary

In the above sections, I have reviewed literature that helps me understand our existing knowledge of dialogue on controversial issues in education and key student outcomes (Avery et al., 2013; Diaz & Gilchrist 2010; Gurin et al., 2013; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; McMillan & Harriger, 2002; Zuniga et al., 2007). The research on educational practices has left us with primarily techniques and end goals, yet there is scant descriptive data regarding how students take on the challenges of CSI dialogue.

While these studies report the results of dialogue participation, we know far less about the *processes* of challenge, including how students sustain their engagement efforts through particular hurdles within these activities, such as the above. Specifically, the study seeks to uncover how and why students address the challenges that are associated with these dialogic exchanges.

Along with prescribed steps, features, and outcomes, efforts to improve controversial issues education could benefit from detailed student accounts of the particular challenges and opportunities these dialogues present for them. In the following section, I draw on concepts, theories and perspectives to illuminate students' processes of meeting challenges of controversial issues dialogues.

II. Conceptual Framework

As shown in the review of the literature, what we know about college students' behaviors in contested issues dialogue comes largely through descriptions of structured educational programs and models. While acknowledging the goals and interventions of such programs, this study does not seek to assess their student impact; rather it delves into the individual's experience of challenges within the context of contested issues dialogue. As a counterpart to what we understand about leading programs' objectives and outcomes, it is also critical to record and examine college students' processes by which they engage within self-reported challenges of contested sociopolitical issues (CSI) dialogues.

Since confronting opposing views may test students' mindsets, discerning how their thoughts and behaviors emerge within conflict is critical to understanding CSI dialogues. I will investigate what students regard as difficult touchpoints in these contested issues dialogues, and their personal responses to these.

To delineate this conceptual framework, I begin by drawing from social conflict theories in social psychology and the constructive conflict model (which has been applied in educational settings) to identify constructive processes, behaviors and interactions. Whereas deliberation and constructiveness—and the qualities that make it up--characterize *a form of dialogue*, how might

we characterize the ways students themselves understand and approach the challenges of CSI dialogues? Alongside the constructive conflict model, I apply a *creativity in conflict* construct as a frame to bring into view students' creative thinking and problem solving within controversial issues dialogue. I inquire into types of student approaches--including thinking processes, attitudes and behaviors--that they claim support them throughout self-reported challenges in such dialogues.

Characteristics of Constructive Conflict

Scholars have theorized and studied features of constructive (versus destructive) conflict (Deutsch, 1973; Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). "Conflict by itself is neither good nor bad. However, the manner in which conflict is handled determines whether it is constructive or destructive (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000)." The concern for educators would be how students can be educated to manage social conflict in more constructive ways (Deutsch, 1973; Johnson & Johnson 2000, as cited in Deutsch, 2002).

Tolerance of conflict is a "precursor to creativity," according to recognized theoretical arguments on social conflict (Carnevale, 2006, p, 418). Aspects of constructive conflict explain a process by which one may address challenge to existing conceptions and positions (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2000). Subsequently, I explain a subset of this research that identifies creative problem solving as a crucial part of constructive interactions where conflict exists (Carnevale, 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

Cognitive and affective processes of conflict engagement and dialogue

Essential to supporting my construct of creativity in conflict is looking at the *attitudes and processes* that allow students to have flexible and solution- oriented mind-frames within contested issues dialogue. Social psychologists and educational theorists have defined cognitive

and affective processes that produce constructive conflict dialogues. *Epistemic curiosity, perspective taking, reconceptualizing* and *reframing* are examples—in theory—of where constructive dialogue process and individuals' creative processes may interrelate.

For instance, an application of constructive conflict theory in postsecondary educational contexts is explicated in the model of Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) (Johnson and Johnson, 1994, 2000). As touched upon in my literature review, Johnson et al. highlight an instructional procedure they dub “constructive controversy,” which purposefully merges cooperative learning with “structured intellectual conflict.” This is intended to promote reasoned judgement and problem solving through pro and con arguments on different positions of an issue. Students might work in small groups cooperatively to produce a report on an assigned controversial topic. Compared to debate, individualistic efforts and concurrence seeking, academic controversy tends to increase the frequency of creative insights on issues discussed and synthesis of these different standpoints (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Johnson, Johnson & Smith 2000).

For example, individuals in a structured academic controversy (SAC) start by organizing and drawing conclusions from existing information and experiences. When an individual's positions and rationales are challenged by opposing views, she experiences a sense of disequilibrium, uncertainty and conceptual conflict. This draws out the individual's *epistemic curiosity* (Johnson & Johnson, 1985; 1995). When confronted with others' opposing conclusions and rationales stemming from their own information views and experiences, individuals may undergo a sense of uncertainty disequilibrium and conceptual conflict.

These can motivate a search for new information (and potentially reflection on one's own rationales). Epistemic curiosity involves this seeking of more adequate reasons and new

information in order to resolve the individual's conceptual conflict. Prior research suggests that controversy "promotes higher epistemic curiosity than do cooperative learning, where seeking concurrence is emphasized, or individualistic learning" (Johnson & Johnson, 1985, p. 242)

This curiosity leads to a *reconceptualization* stage, in which those involved in the structured controversy check the accuracy of their perspectives with those of different perspectives (or their accuracy of perspective-taking). This stage is also marked by an increase in the search for both content and experience and a higher cognitive reasoning level that is adequate (validity-seeking) to make sense of the opposing reasoning. This allows individuals to examine the positions of themselves and others.

The Johnson and Johnson (1995) model represents the resulting *productivity* as comprised of creativity, achievement and retention, high quality decision making, and high continuing motivation. Along these lines, individuals who possess a motivation to better understand the world--or *epistemic motives* underpinning their thinking (de Dreu and Carnevale, 2003)—will be more able to avoid biases and be creative in conflicts (Carnevale, 2006).

Related to yet distinct from Johnson and Johnson's stage of reconceptualization is *moral reframing* (Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Day, Fiske, Downing, & Trail, 2014). Moral reframing consists of framing arguments that support a political stance but basing these assertions in terms that align with the moral values of those who hold opposing political views (Voelkel & Feinberg, 2018). In this process, frames of reference from cultural or religious background are re-framed to consider the same facts from another set of possibilities, including a different set of motives and circumstances, as an alternative from that which one originally imagined.

Agreement. Behavioral research on conflict has been undertaken by social psychologists to clarify the conditions or circumstances that a) move the contentious aims in conflict to

“problem-solving processes and balanced agreement, or b) “move people from pursuit of simple compromise agreements to the more creative, integrative forms of agreement” (Carnevale, p. 426, 2006).

A set of questions that stem from prior research concern what conditions or circumstances compel people to choose a particular form of agreement (Carnevale, 2006). Conflict can result in a “freezing” of cognition Lewin’s (1951), along with later evidence in support of this. Results of a study (Carnevale and Probst, 1998) of people’s expectations in negotiation, whether contentious or cooperative, suggested that people who expected contentiousness were less likely to separate two concepts normally fixed. “...expected contentiousness can produce a narrowing of vision and a general change in cognition that extends beyond that associated with the particular items” (p. 428). They were therefore less likely to perceive creative solutions.

If individuals concur under pressure to conform to the dominant opinion, they may experience conflict between their “private and public positions” (Johnson and Johnson, 2014, p. 424), or internal viewpoints versus external positions they share in dialogue. As participants look for information that confirms the dominant position, disconfirming information is excluded, and divergent positions are discouraged or eliminated. Thus, the group’s thinking converges and narrows in focus (Johnson and Johnson, 2014).

The dual-concern model put forth by Pruitt (1981) specifies that “concern for own aspirations” along with openness to or regard for another’s offers the impetus to tolerate conflict and explore different possibilities that will meet one’s own aspirations (Pruitt, 1981 in Carnevale 2006). At the core of issues being debated are each person’s underlying interests, needs and values (Burton, 1987; Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991). Problem solving in negotiation is “any

effort to identify a formula that will satisfy both sides' aspirations" (Pruitt and Kim, 2004, p. 189 in Carnevale, 2006). Identifying these underlying interests and values is thus a key part of problem identification and problem solving. Through *integrative solutions*, both parties needs are regarded and addressed, and neither must "sacrifice anything" (Follett, 1940, p. 32 in Carnevale, 2006, p. 217). *Integrative agreements* therefore offer "...greater collective value to the parties and can be seen as the product of a process of creative thinking" (Pruitt, 1981 in Carnevale, 2006, p. 217).

Flexible thinking. Flexible thinking denotes one set of processes that is seen to promote more "information-rich, complex forms of integrative agreement" (Carnevale, 2006, p. 427). *Cognitive flexibility*—the ability to bring ideas together "in new or useful ways" (Isen 1999 on Koestler, 1964)—is a key trait in classic definitions of creativity (Koestler, 1964). In the literature on creative problem solving, *positive affect*—or positive feeling—has further been shown to support cognitive flexibility, which in turn enables creativity in problem solving (Isen, 1999). Cognitive flexibility and creativity stemming from positive affect is demonstrated not only in studies regarding things or ideas, but classification of human social groups: In social group research, induced positive affect enabled participants to perceive..."results in a tendency to integrate and perceive a socially distinct outgroup as part of a subordinate group of which the perceiver is also a member" (Dovidio, Gaertner, Isen and Lowrance 1995 in Isen, 1999 p. 4). Positive affect allows people to classify other people more flexibly, and in particular "to see potential relatedness and commonalities among them and classify them as members of the same group" (Isen, 1999, p. 4). Constructive conflict's potential is thus to generate positive social and personal change (Deutsch, 2006). Questions for continued study would inquire into forms of flexible and creative individual processes that may support such constructive conflict.

In the section below, I extend the constructive conflict model to develop on creativity in conflict as a lens for study of students' individual creative processes within contested issues dialogue. The purpose of formulating such a lens is to discern how college students may generate what they deem as new meaning and viewpoints within the relational process of dialogues involving conflict.

Creativity's Role in Constructive Conflict

A number of the qualities that are embedded in creative decision making--openness to different views, redefining problems, questioning assumptions, cognitive flexibility, and tolerance of ambiguity (see Sternberg 2006, p. 91; Koestler, 1964) are also integral to deliberative and constructive dialogue, as identified in empirical research (Hess 2009; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 2000). Yet, we lack qualitative studies investigating the potential for individual creativity and the individual's creative process to support constructive engagement in contested issues dialogue.

Building on social conflict literature that has been applied in other social contexts, this study hones in specifically on students engaging in dialogues on controversial sociopolitical issues in college. It shifts the conceptual focus from the *creative outcomes* of social conflict to the *creative process* of the individual participating in the conflict scenario. I apply a creativity construct—composed of key attributes in creative decision making and creative motivation (Amabile 1996; Sternberg 2000, 2006)—within social conflict scenarios, and further informed by creativity in conflict studies.

Characteristics of Creativity

Creativity has been characterized as multidimensional, in that it involves multiple components including behavioral, cognitive, and personality factors (Kelly, 2004; Sternberg,

2006). For instance, cognitive attributes of creativity include divergent thinking and problem solving (Kelly, 2004). Amabile's (1983,1996) componential model of creativity asserts that three variables are necessary for creativity: 1) *Domain-relevant skills* are the knowledge, technical skills and specialized talent. This relates to content knowledge; for instance, a student's understanding about the issues and articulation of knowledge.

2) *Creativity-relevant skills* are personal factors associated with creativity, such as self-discipline, ability to take moderate risks and tolerance for ambiguity.

3) *Task motivation* refers to the motivation to engage in something that is derived from an individual's passion and enjoyment. Thus, such motivation would be intrinsic, rather than tied to more extrinsic rewards, such as grades, money or praise. Further, motivation is not intrinsic; rather individuals decide to be motivated about something. Creativity is proven to be rare without love for and focus on the work (Amabile, 1983,1996; Sternberg, 2006).

The confluence model of creativity (Sternberg & Lubart 1995, 1996) acknowledges these components in individuals. While noting that creative people demonstrate certain characteristics and skills, the confluence model of creativity (Sternberg & Lubart 1995, 1996) specifies that these characteristics are not "innate abilities," but instead, based mainly on decisions and attitudes (Stenberg, 2000 in Sternberg 2005, p.18). In other words, a "creative attitude toward life" (Sternberg 2000, 2005, p.18) is reflected in the decisions individuals make over time.

Other studies examine creativity as an ongoing process of development. As a way of categorizing creativity, researchers have recently problematized the "Big-C" and "little-c" dichotomy in creativity research (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007, 2009; Runco, 2014).

Customarily, *Big-C* is a label for dissecting the creativity process of lauded "geniuses," and reserved for study of individuals who are renowned for making pivotal strides in their fields.

Little-c theories capture creativity skillsets and daily progress at work, as measured through professional accomplishments.

Studies of *Big-C*, and to some extent *little-C*, are focused on the making of products that are judged externally as creative. Yet, there are shortcomings of a product-oriented conception of creativity (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007; Runco, 2005). Namely, this often neglects to attend to the dynamic intrapersonal process of discovery and meaning making that may occur regardless of external recognition. Avoiding the creativity dichotomy is especially critical in education, where it is important to notice "...creative potential in all students, not just those who express their originality in socially-recognized products and performances." (Runco, 2014, p. 8)." Thus, it is a fundamental shift in attention to process when we examine novelty as discovery and meaning-making for an individual, and when it is not measured primarily through products.

Beyond the two poles of *little-C* and *Big-C* creativity, Beghetto and Kaufman (2007, 2009, 2013, 2014) recognize the personal creativity development of individuals in their "*mini-c*" theory. *Mini-c* differs from the other three conceptions of creativity in that it proposes to understand the process by which creativity develops. The theory highlights the personal construction of knowledge – as individuals enact processes that are defined as the "novel and personally meaningful interpretation of experiences, actions, and events" (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010, p. 195). *Mini-c* attends to the "creativity process involved in developing an understanding of a field" (p.76), as contrasted to examining only the experiences of those who have made a recognized professional contribution or breakthrough in their field.

Hence, *mini-c* is an appropriate concept to frame a study of student educational formats in which a) creativity typically goes unevaluated or is not included in an evaluative rubric and b) to examine creative formation at a certain developmental stage that may not need to be validated

through assessment. The concept of *mini-c* supports study of the process of students' developing understanding of the field. With each student's interpretations as the starting point, we may learn how they explore the novel steps and discoveries in their thinking, attitudes and behaviors as they discuss these issues with peers.

Exploring students' creative process is promising for dialogue programs on contested sociopolitical issues for a key reason: While frameworks and guidelines of dialogue programs can educate and provide a basis for students, a challenge embedded in contested issues dialogues is for participants to think and communicate about the unresolved nature of the issues. I propose that this dynamic and challenging content may call for dialogue participants to exercise dynamic approaches, which may push their own thinking, attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, I chose a creativity frame for its potential to shed light on students' approaches to ill-structured or complex sociopolitical issues, as well as the interactions which are entailed in discussion of these issues.

Chapter Conclusion

Research detailed in the above literature review and conceptual framework explicate the markers of constructive discussions of CSIs. Constructive conflict describes ideals for dialogue interactions, yet we know less about college students' experiences within such interactions. Further, there is research which explains the importance of creativity in generating agreement, understanding and solutions in conflict situations, and articulates theories and applications of such creativity in conflict situations. The majority of literature on creativity and social conflict stems from contexts of organizational behavior, interpersonal conflict or international negotiation (Deutsch, 1973; Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). Yet, in conflicts that concern dialogue over sociopolitical issues—where social values and identity politics may be central to students—creativity in the course of disagreement has been underexplored.

Therefore, this study considers creative development of college students in contested issues dialogues. By applying a lens of creativity, I examine the study's central questions about the ways students engage perceived challenges in contested issues dialogues. Building upon the concepts identified above as part of constructive conflict in dialogue and the creativity lens, my conceptual framework sets out to uncover individual modes of thinking that may generate and sustain constructive engagement in conflict. This study seeks to articulate these processes of college students in CSI dialogues. The following chapter explains the design of the study, including the methods and research traditions guiding it.

III—DESIGN AND METHODS

In this chapter, I begin by re-stating the research questions for the study. I explain design modifications since the dissertation proposal hearing. I also explain my strategy for site selection, access, sample selection and recruitment. I discuss the research methodologies and traditions that guide my design and method and offer justifications for their suitability for my study. I then explain my data collection and data analysis process and conclude by discussing the study's limitations and my efforts toward human subjects protection.

The following research questions guided my study:

1. In discussions/dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues, how do undergraduate students describe their experiences as they engage in challenging instances of discussion/dialogue with other students?
2. What approaches do undergraduate students describe taking during these challenging instances of discussion/dialogue?
 - a. What approaches—including attitudes, modes of thinking and behaviors—do students view as contributing toward constructive dialogue?
 - b. What do students believe helps them to sustain engagement through the challenges of contested issues dialogue?
3. How do undergraduate students describe how they develop the attitudes, modes of thinking, and behaviors to engage in the challenges of contested issues discussions/dialogues?
4. In what ways do undergraduate students' descriptions reflect creative processes and practices within discussions/dialogues on contested issues?

5. How might undergraduate students' self-reported understanding of the issues, themselves, or fellow dialogue participants emerge throughout the course of such discussions/dialogues?

Study Design Modifications

Certain modifications were made after the dissertation proposal, mostly in response to changing circumstances as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. In the original dissertation proposal, I had planned to identify and recruit from one program of structured dialogues within the institution. However, during the Coronavirus pandemic it became clear that dialogue activities were suspended or extremely limited. I gleaned this information from administrators and leaders of dialogue programs to whom I sent my recruitment requests.

Therefore, instead of seeking students who took part in a particular extracurricular dialogue program at the time of the study, I modified my selection criteria to undergraduate students who had participated in any purposeful or structured sociopolitical dialogues during their time in college. Instead of focusing on one structured program, these included contemporary sociopolitical dialogues in different structured settings at the site/institution.

Sample Size: Originally, I had sought a minimum of eight study participants. However, during the Coronavirus pandemic it became clear that dialogue activities—and hence, student involvement in these—was very limited. While academic courses were converted to virtual formats, extracurricular groups involving dialogue were by and large disrupted or suspended. Further, student extracurricular engagement at a broader level had been curtailed. For this reason, reaching students through associated student affairs and campus life

channels—and hence, securing the initial planned number of participants—proved difficult. After three rounds of sending and re-sending study invitations to multiple staff at UNI to forward to groups and programs, my repeated efforts yielded a total of seven participants.

Observations: In the dissertation proposal, observations were planned as a secondary part of the data collection, while interviews were planned as primary data. However, observations were directly impacted for the above reasons, too. This disruption in dialogue group meetings, especially due to the pandemic, also meant that researcher observations of dialogue were either not possible (obviated by canceled meetings) or not feasible (due to access issues).

Terminology: “Contested public issues” changed to “Contested sociopolitical issues” as the subject of the dialogues under study. I changed this because the term "sociopolitical" more specifically and intuitively captures the nature/scope of the topics discussed in the dialogues I aimed to explore. I use variations in phrasing to refer to the same dialogues of interest in my study. These phrases are “contested issues dialogue,” “sociopolitical dialogue,” or simply “dialogue” throughout the dissertation.

Although such changes were made to account for practical considerations, it is important to note that these changes did not affect the substance of my study, in that they did not impact my ability to address the research questions. The official IRB document on file with the Teachers College Institutional Review Board accurately reflects the up-to-date version of my study.

Site Selection

I conducted the study at a private, four-year postsecondary institution which I gave the pseudonym of “UNI.” I applied a purposeful, criterion-based and reputational- case sampling in

this study (Maxwell, 2005). I devised a “criterion-based selection” (LeCompte & Tesch 1993), selecting a site and participants based on characteristics that are essential to my research topic (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2013). My study focused on students who participated in dialogues on contemporary contested sociopolitical issues within a postsecondary institution. These dialogue experiences were designated as extracurricular in nature, in that they were not part of academic courses. I chose to study a single institution in order to focus my attention on a few instances of the phenomenon I sought to comprehend, and to produce descriptive analysis of this phenomenon (Merriam, 1998).

Features of “UNI”

“UNI” is a private, four-year, research university. It enrolls approximately 6,000 undergraduate students, with around 100 majors and minors. It is highly selective, with an admissions rate below 10 percent for its last admitted undergraduate Class of 2025. UNI has been ranked among the top universities in the United States in recent years (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2021). The majority of the undergraduate population is enrolled as full-time students and live on campus. I chose this site for reasons that would ground my study questions in the particular context of the university's features, as I describe here.

One reason I chose UNI as my site is its mission, which is driven by service and social impact. The university’s commitment to educating students for readiness to contribute to society is demonstrated in its general education/ liberal arts curriculum and co-curricular programs. Further, its programs and initiatives reflect its high value in civic engagement, diversity and inclusion. UNI's Diversity and Inclusion department spearheads or co-sponsors key initiatives centered around dialogue on social justice, power and identity. UNI’s campus life

groups and student affairs centers – including orientation committees, the multicultural center, the public service center, the religious life center, and the women’s center—produce programs and structured dialogues on social justice, power and identity.

UNI has reinforced its dedication to civic engagement and service in its expressed mission to offer students support and resources for these endeavors. As a well-resourced institution, it has a robust funding stream for diversity and inclusion initiatives, as well as widely-distributed funding for its students’ civic and public service extracurricular activities.

UNI provides a distinctive profile to understand undergraduate students’ experiences in contested issues dialogue. This is due to its financial, social, and academic resources, concentration of students with high academic achievement, and alumni in public service and social impact roles. I chose a specific case with a deliberate expectation that it would depict aspects that may not commonly be found (Harling, 2002). The choice of UNI as the site was not meant to illustrate college students’ dialogue experiences broadly. The study’s purpose was not to produce generalizable conclusions but, rather, to reflect ways that certain students in this highly selective, private liberal arts and service-oriented university might interpret and respond to the challenges of sociopolitical dialogues.

In contrast to common misconceptions that students at elite universities stay sequestered in an “ivory tower,” UNI’s mission emphasizes not only academic excellence but also exposure to civic engagement activities to equip students with the experience and skills to make a social impact. I chose UNI, in part, as its broader distinguishing characteristics situate the institution to foster various forms of student civic engagement, including peer dialogues that address contemporary sociopolitical issues impacting society.

The Coronavirus pandemic caused me to make study adjustments, yet it was also a moment in time that shaped the sociopolitical environment of my study. This period was characterized by social restrictions to prevent spread of the virus, accompanied by social upheaval which included ongoing protests in the streets following the murder of African American George Floyd at the hands of the police. Although not always or often directly mentioned by them, the social and political climate during which this study was conducted provided a distinct backdrop for participants.

Sample Identification, Access and Recruitment

I pursued the following strategy to identify and recruit the sample:

Criteria for Sample Selection

I chose a study sample that met the following criteria: The participants were undergraduate students who a) had participated in one or more dialogues/discussions with fellow college students about current socio-political issues since entering college, and b) had participated in such dialogues/discussions in an extracurricular context, outside of academic courses. The sample is purposefully drawn from undergraduates who have participated in peer dialogue on contemporary sociopolitical issues while they were enrolled in college. Depth of understanding by collecting “information-rich” (Patton, 2002, p. 244) data from specific participants is emphasized over breadth across a larger population.

Intergroup dialogue research has found that the greater the value undergraduate students placed on dialogue, the greater the benefits they derived (Nagda & Zuniga, 2003). I invited study participants who were involved in extracurricular sociopolitical dialogues for a key reason: The

fact that these students opted to participate in dialogues outside of academic coursework, through voluntary participation, indicates their interest and possible value in this form of engagement and in contested sociopolitical topics. This allowed me to address my study questions on students' motivation, attitudes and behaviors from the supposition that these students opted for voluntary participation outside of academic requirements –which therefore indicates interest in this form of engagement and in contemporary sociopolitical topics of discussion.

In the original dissertation proposal, I had planned to identify and recruit from one program of structured dialogues within the institution. Before the Coronavirus pandemic, I had been in touch with a network of sociopolitical dialogue programs, and a suitable program at this institution was willing to give me access. However, during the Coronavirus pandemic it became clear that dialogue activities were suspended or extremely limited. I gleaned this information from my initial administrative contacts and other administrators and leaders of dialogue programs to whom I sent my recruitment requests. As such, I changed my search criteria to undergraduate students who had participated in any purposeful or structured sociopolitical dialogues during their time in college. Instead of focusing on one structured program, these included contemporary sociopolitical dialogues in various structured settings.

Although such changes were made to account for practical considerations, it is important to note that these changes did not affect the substance of my study, in that they did not impact my ability to address my research questions. The focus of the study is the students' experiences and perspectives through contested issues dialogues. Therefore, it is not a study about any particular program. No single dialogue program was featured in this study. The dialogues that students referenced were facilitated and organized within a wide range of extracurricular

programs and groups, including but not limited to an interfaith group, women's group, an orientation committee, and a multicultural center. These dialogues were generally peer-facilitated around designated topics or issues, such as religion, race, gender, or criminal justice.

College-based dialogue programs or groups were simply a means for recruitment and an access point for identifying students who were engaged in dialogues about current sociopolitical issues. While students may learn techniques of these program guidelines and models, this study focuses on the student's personal experiences throughout the dialogues, that is—their attitudes and mental processes.

Access

I accessed these participants through dialogue program administrators and a dean. Participants—undergraduate students—were recruited from college-based dialogue programs/groups at a single postsecondary institution, “UNI.” First, I obtained IRB approval from my institution, and then site access authorization from a dean at UNI. With the agreement of authorized staff at the institution, I requested that they forward my recruitment letter to students in dialogue or discussion programs/groups.

I sent students who responded to the invitation a pre-interview questionnaire requesting information, including but not limited to the following: *academic major, age, year in school, hometown, current housing situation (on-campus or off-campus), demographic background, brief description of type and duration/frequency of participation in dialogues and activities*. This questionnaire was not intended for participant identification or recruitment purposes; rather, responses from the questionnaire provided background data for analysis. This

preliminary data also facilitated and helped make efficient use of primary data collection, that is, the interviews.

Description of Sample

Based on the pre-interview questionnaire, I gained information on study participants that helped me understand their background and to consider this within the context of UNI's characteristics and its students' demography. A review of publicly available institutional reports and data on UNI's websites provided me with information on the demographic composition of the college. My sample was composed of seven undergraduate students. In terms of grade level, four seniors, one junior, one sophomore, and one first-year student participated in the study.

Below, I describe a few distinctive features of my sample:

While this study did not intentionally target females, all seven study participants identified as female. This is striking because UNI has a nearly equal ratio of male to female-identifying undergraduates. Such an all-female sample was not intended in my research design. I advertised and recruited undergraduate students—inclusive of any gender—under the specified eligibility criteria. However, only female-identifying students opted to respond to the invitation and participate.

Five out of seven participants (around 71 percent) received a Federal Pell Grant as part of their financial aid package. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Pell Grants are awarded "only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need," as determined by their Expected Family Contribution (EFC). EFC is determined by the student's family income, assets and benefits. In contrast, approximately 20 percent of UNI's most recent entering class were eligible for Federal Pell Grants. This indicates that my study sample had a higher

proportion of students qualifying for need-based financial aid than UNI's student population in the most recently admitted class (and I extrapolate, a higher proportion than that of UNI's student body).

Three out of seven participants (around 43 percent) were first-generation college students, as defined by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): “First-generation college students are students who enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any postsecondary education experience” (2018). This contrasted with the 18 percent of first-generation undergraduates in UNI’s most recently admitted class.

The majority of my sample were racial/ethnic minorities (“students of color”) : Three participants identified as Black or African American, 1 as Asian, and 1 as Hispanic/Latino, while 2 identified as White. This proportion of minority to white students was not representative of the student body at UNI. While around 40 percent of UNI undergraduates identified as white, this study was composed of around 29 percent white participants. The fact that more study participants were students of color appears compatible with the prior intergroup dialogue research which demonstrates that college students of color view involvement in intergroup dialogue as more important than their white student peers (Nagda et. al, 2004).

In anticipation that politics may be woven into sociopolitical dialogues, my pre-interview questionnaire asked students to disclose their political affiliation. (Yet, contrary to my assumption, none of the participants raised political affiliation as a specific factor in their experiences of dialogue challenges.) Though my study did not delve into political affiliation in dialogue, each participant identified as a Democrat.

It is important to keep in mind the aforementioned characteristics of my sample as I discuss my findings throughout the study. The study was skewed toward these members of certain socioeconomic groups, although they make up a smaller proportion of students at UNI. Yet, I do not mean to make suppositions about the characteristics of others who participate in organized contested issues dialogue at UNI, as I do not have sufficient information to do so. The population reached through the recruitment channels I used could possibly have been a factor in securing this sample with such demographic features. My administrative contacts sent the invitation to their email listservs, consisting of student members of the multicultural student center, women's group, and a service group.

Research Perspectives

The methodology of this study is grounded in the traditions of *case study*, *interpretive*, and *interview* research. This section explains the basis for applying case study and interpretive research traditions, while leaving the interview research method rationale for the next section on data collection.

Case study design is defined by its investigation of a single bounded entity – here, the selected institution (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2018). This study defines the case as students at one university who have participated in various structured dialogues, during the duration of time that they have been enrolled in the university. Case study focuses on a process of discovery, instead of outcomes or confirmation (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2018). The goal, rather, is to offer rich description and to offer insight about the topic of study (Merriam, 2001). “The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (Merriam, 1998, p. 41, as cited in Van

Wynsberghe et. al., 2007). Defining the case allowed me to frame the study to focus on a particular phenomena (Yin, 2018). In the study, I investigated the phenomenon of college students engaging in difficult dialogues with peers, and through what processes they engage in these. Case study can focus on processes, as well as individual or group behaviors in a setting (Stake, 2005). Therefore, it was an appropriate method to examine possible constructive and creative processes in students' contested sociopolitical dialogue approach.

The research was guided by Merriam's (1998) three main characteristics of case study research as *particularistic, descriptive and heuristic*. I focused on the particular process of students' approaches to challenges in sociopolitical dialogue, presenting a thick, detailed description of this phenomenon. Overall, I heuristically sought to illuminate the readers' understanding of these students' approaches to challenge in such contested issues dialogues through interpretation and explanation of the processes.

An interpretivist paradigm was ideally suited to making sense of the emerging nature of experiences of challenge for dialogue participants. Epistemologically, this orientation maintains that our understanding of reality is socially constructed by human actors (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, as cited in Ponelis, 2015). Understanding the subjective viewpoint of the study participant is therefore central to the interpretivist paradigm (Ponelis, 2015). It recognizes not only what occurs in a setting (in this case, the structured dialogues), but the meaning that participants give to occurrences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This interpretivist epistemology attends to the individual and unique aspects of the phenomenon, rather than analysis that seeks consistency in the data (Crotty, 1998). Thus, the nature of these research questions as rooted in the individual viewpoint justified use of an interpretivist research paradigm.

Data Collection

In this section, I provide an overview of the type of data I collected and my methods for collecting them. This study utilized interview research methods, along with a pre-interview questionnaire.

Interview Research

The qualitative research tradition of interview research is particularly well suited to bringing to light the beliefs and personal meanings and narratives of study participants (Kvale, 1996). This format allowed me to probe participants' meanings, and describe in detail the contexts in which these participants develop. Through these interviews, I aimed to understand participants' views, especially as these apply to structured discussion of current contested topics and the meanings they derive.

Asking questions that may elicit their existing beliefs and ways of thinking about the issues and dialogue interactions, I attempted to draw out 1) their descriptions of challenging experiences discussing contemporary controversial topics, 2) their modes of behavior and thinking through the challenges, 3) reasons and motivations for engaging these, and 4) their own meaning making through these dialogue experiences.

I created a semi-structured Interview Protocol for participants. Following a questionnaire to gather preliminary data on students, I conducted semi-structured interviews. I interviewed each participant once for approximately 1.5 hours. Due to the circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic, these were all conducted virtually on the Zoom video conference platform.

The semi-structured interview focuses the interview and facilitates analysis across cases (Carson et al., 2001, as cited in Ponelis, 2015). The semi-structured format also allows for additional, relevant topics to emerge during the interview process. I obtained permission and ascertained consent to audio-record the participant interviews. As the qualitative interpretivist methodology is iterative, I allowed room in the interview process to modify, omit or explain questions while interacting with the participant (Chirban, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Maxwell, 2013). I routinely summarized or reflected participants' responses back to them during the interview, in order to ensure that I had accurately captured their statements.

Questionnaire

I sent students who responded to the invitation a pre-interview questionnaire requesting information, including but not limited to the following: *academic major, age, year in school, hometown, current housing situation (on-campus or off-campus), demographic background, brief description of type and duration/frequency of participation in dialogues and activities*. This questionnaire was not intended for participant identification or recruitment purposes; rather, responses from the questionnaire provided background data for analysis. This preliminary data also facilitated and helped make efficient use of primary data collection, that is, the interviews.

Data Processing

The collection and management of the study data was governed by procedures that demonstrated a commitment to subjects' confidentiality and privacy. I also took steps to ensure the materials maintained fidelity to participants' responses.

Upon completion of data collection, I listened to the audio recorded interviews and processed them for transcription. After obtaining the transcribed interviews, I reviewed each one, verifying that it matched the original recording for accuracy (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

I created electronic folders for each participant that included their completed questionnaire, transcript and audio recorded interview. Interview transcripts, audio files, and questionnaires were labeled by participants' pseudonyms and interview date. Only pseudonyms were used in interview data materials. Names from the questionnaire were stored on a separate, encrypted document. There is no record matching a participant's real name with their pseudonym. All study files were stored on a password-protected computer. All written materials were locked in a desk drawer in a locked office.

Data Analysis

In the constructivist epistemology, consolidating, reducing and interpreting the data allows the researcher to make sense of "what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read--it is the process of making meaning" (Merriam, 1998, p. 178, as cited in Yazan, 2015). As a distinguishing feature of qualitative research design compared to positivist traditions, data collection may occur concurrently with analysis (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). As such, I remained aware through each stage of data gathering of my preliminary analysis. I maintained a researcher's notebook in which I notate my observations and ideas. The process of writing analytic memos on my ideas from data spurred further analysis (Maxwell, 2013).

Qualitative research is a reflective and iterative process throughout the study. Throughout the analysis process, I reviewed the data to make sense of participants' responses and how they related to my research questions. I began by familiarizing myself with the interview recordings and transcripts. Upon completion of data collection, I listened to the audio recordings and read the transcripts multiple times. By revisiting data, I gained clarity on concepts and emerging patterns. I wrote notes for each individual interview transcript in order to capture ideas, questions, or insights that immediately held my attention.

Through an *inductive analysis* approach, I allowed interpretations to emerge from the data, without constraints of a pre-determined theoretical framework or analytic pre-conceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Inductive analysis is conducive to rich descriptions of the data as a whole (ibid). I employed open coding for the initial stage of my analysis. Open coding occurs when the researcher makes observations within the data itself, and not linked to theory (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2012; Yin, 2013). The researcher assigns tentative codes to data based on first impressions, though some codes can stem from/be based on the researcher's awareness of the topic.

I generated initial codes and subcodes by pulling out the data that appeared relevant to my study questions. The codes represented concepts and occurrences that appeared in the transcripts. Under these codes, I labeled descriptive subcodes from the meanings I gleaned from segments of text (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This act of coding allowed me to hone in on specific characteristics of the data (Nowell et al., 2017).

For example, I created the code "communication in dialogue" to identify data which pertained to participants' manner of communicating with peers in dialogue. I developed a related

sub-code called “active listening” to label participants’ descriptions that corresponded with this feature that emerged from the data. In particular, I attended to coded data in which participants indicated aspects of students’ self-reported challenges as well as their behaviors, attitudes and thinking around these.

My theoretical interest in aspects of creativity and constructive conflict in dialogue challenges also entailed a partially deductive approach in the coding and thematic analysis. An inductive approach was most appropriate for the initial stage of coding, but I anticipated that the creativity and constructive dialogue constructs I compiled might contribute to another layer of analysis. Therefore, I combined deductive analysis with inductive analysis in subsequent analysis phases. For instance, codes on creativity and constructive dialogue were generated deductively based on prior research and my conceptual framework (Nowell et al., 2017).

By taking key definitions and traits of constructive dialogue and creativity as concepts, I identified the features of the creative and constructive processes. In contrast to a unified theory, I drew from multiple concepts during coding—as derived from my conceptual framework in creativity and constructive conflict. This allowed me to identify and analyze aspects of data I was intent on exploring (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

During coding, I analyzed and categorized this data, sorting codes across the data set into initial themes that related to my study questions (Braun & Clarke 2006; Creswell 2007, 2014). I discerned key sections of text and assigned labels in order to index these as they related to a theme (King, 2004). After labeling information with codes, I reduced redundancies and overlap, and collapsed the reduced codes into broader themes (Creswell & Clark, 2004). A preliminary step I took to reduce my data was clustering related data into categories of text that represented

concepts relevant to my study (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Organizing these groups or categories of data also allowed me to compare across interview transcripts. I created an analytic memo to note the pieces of data that corresponded with each of my research questions.

I proceeded through the interview data in this manner, generating codes and subcodes until I reached the point where repetition and confirmation of codes and patterns already generated signaled that I had arrived at analytic saturation (Birks & Mills, 2015) or theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Recognizing this saturation point is important because it indicates that additional data would not prompt new ideas or themes (Saunders et al., 2018). As I became immersed in the transcripts, I collapsed and removed codes, renamed them, and created additional ones, in order to create coding reflective of my full data set.

I organized these codes and subcodes using the web-based application for qualitative data analysis, Dedoose. Dedoose served as a system to facilitate organization of the interview data and codes. Specifically, I used Dedoose to organize and examine my data, labeling segments of data as codes and subcodes, from which I derived patterns and themes. However, I, as the researcher, transformed this data through meaning-making, conceptualization and analysis.

I analyzed phrases, statements, and pieces of text, noting patterns in these codes. While coding began at the level of the individual transcripts, I noticed patterns that surfaced across the sample. I was attentive to what, collectively, this data from participants represents in terms of their interpretations of challenge, approaches to challenge, learning, and motivation within sociopolitical dialogue. In this way, I considered the data in view of the whole sample.

I derived patterns from noting from repetition in the coded data (Bernard et al., 2017), which helped me make sense of my questions and topic. I discerned patterns that spoke to my research questions and conceptual framework. I examined within and across transcripts the data that was congruent, and data which appeared to take the interpretation in another direction. While keeping in mind the literature from my review, I endeavored, at this point, to distinguish between my findings and the current knowledge on this topic from the existing literature (Davis, 1971). After noting repeated patterns in the data across these codes that I had formed, I generated themes based on possible relationships among data patterns that identified aspects of students' challenges and approaches in contested issues dialogue.

I generated themes by bringing together pieces of ideas and experiences into meaningful relationship with my study questions. These themes connected “substantial portions” of my data (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000; Nowell et al., 2017). The themes explain the significance/meaning of the patterns from my coded data. I further honed these themes into subthemes in order to capture what was central to my research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For instance, several themes and subthemes in my study highlight a particular aspect of challenges in dialogue, while other themes and subthemes discuss approaches to challenge. The function of the subtheme was to delineate a more specific level of detail of the different ways the theme manifests itself. For example, under the theme of “Difficulty in Voicing Dissenting Views,” the different ways the theme manifests itself were elaborated through the subthemes on “Social pressure and sensitivity toward others” and “Echo chamber.”

Using these themes and subthemes, I developed *propositions*. These propositions emerged from examining the themes that arose from the study participants' data. The

propositions attempt to distill and highlight the insights gleaned from participants regarding challenges in dialogue on contested sociopolitical issues, approaches to these challenges, as well as motivation and meaning making within these challenging dialogues. I subsequently explain these themes and propositions in Chapters IV and V.

I shared initial reports of my emerging findings with committee members and peer members of the Teachers College Doctoral Research Group. Through their feedback and my own reflexive, iterative process, I refined these themes and propositions.

Through an iterative process of analysis, I recognized ideas that weaved through portions of my findings. In the Discussion section of Chapter V, I further conceptualized my findings within relevant existing research. While this phase of the analysis endeavored to distinguish interpretation of this study's data on its own and allowed me to develop propositions in response to my research questions, the next phase of analysis allowed me to bring together findings that emerged from this data into conversation with wider research that bears relevance to my study.

I found overarching ideas throughout themes and subthemes, which I called threads, because they appeared to weave through the fabric of my findings. Discerning and articulating these broader ideas allowed me to make sense of the separate patterns and themes, towards probing the deeper dimensions of the phenomenon, i.e., of students' experiences in challenging dialogues on sociopolitical issues.

Study Limitations

I designed my study with the intent to utilize the best possible methods for a trustworthy investigation of my research questions. However, as with any study, I acknowledge that this

study is limited. The following section discusses the limitations of my study and my efforts to address these, where possible.

Generalizability

This study focuses on one institution and portrays the dialogue experiences of a small proportion of the undergraduate students at the university. The patterns and themes I describe in Chapter IV are reflective of this one case. It was not intended to be representative of the entire university or undergraduate students elsewhere.

As stated previously in this chapter, I selected a case study to enhance my understanding of the context and reality of students participating in socio political dialogues within this particular institution (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2018). The study focused on college students' perspectives, so findings highlighted particular and unique experiences of student participants, as it situated their story within their own/existing contexts. While this research was undertaken to understand such experiences, with the potential for providing insights for other contexts, the knowledge stemming from this study is fundamentally tied to the participants in this case.

Given the limited sample size and particular characteristics of participants and the specific features of UNI, the study cannot be generalized to the entire population of undergraduate students who engage in contested issues dialogues. Instead, I suggest my findings can be generalized conceptually (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in that this may serve to illuminate processes and attitudes through which college students engage in dialogue on contested sociopolitical issues. I share insights on these and conceptual lenses that may help higher

education researchers and practitioners think about the challenges college students may face in these dialogues, and their attitudes, behaviors, and approaches toward them.

Therefore, the discussion in Chapter V points to ways the findings may offer perspectives on the existing research in sociopolitical dialogues in education, as well as for dialogue practices in higher education. Higher education researchers and practitioners may draw on the ideas I discuss here to consider aspects of related college dialogues in other contexts.

Validity, Reliability, and Dependability

Dependability is based on the quality of data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which involves demonstrating the systematic manner in which the researcher conducts her proposed study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I documented my research process in order that readers may better assess the dependability of my research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). I maintained an audit trail to make evident the conceptual as well as methodological choices during my study (Koch, 1994). This consisted of raw data from interview transcripts, participants' questionnaire data, and a reflexive journal, including analytic memos.

These allowed me to cross reference the data, while contributing to my reporting of the process to create the audit trail (Halpren, 1983).

Acknowledging that my own viewpoints could influence my interpretation (Erickson, 1986), I took steps to counterbalance this concern. I paid attention to cases which might detract from or disconfirm my initial assumptions and preliminary findings that I had derived through data analysis (Creswell, 2007). Further, I accounted for discrepant data between cases. I kept track of my thinking by writing analytic memos from data collection, and from the beginning

through the final stages of data analysis. By revisiting these memos, I was able to trace the evolution of my thinking about each question and the topic (Maxwell, 2013).

I strove for self-reflexivity as a researcher by seeking alternative explanations for data and recognizing negative instances (Whittemore et al., 2001) where my emerging claims did not apply. In order to show evidence that my interpretations were grounded within the data, I employed frequent use of direct quotations from participants, to serve as examples of data from which I derived my explanations of findings.

I used multiple data sources to gain understanding of the sample, which included a background questionnaire of participants and document review of institutional data, along with the interview data. For example, the background questionnaire results provided me with data on the type and duration of prior dialogue experiences, their demographic background, as well as academic majors/minors and extracurricular involvement. I also collected and interpreted information about the institution which constituted their setting. I sought to consider study participants through the context in which they studied and lived, as well as the campus and educational setting in which they engaged in dialogues. Along with the interview data, the questionnaire, data on the institution, and my own researcher notes served to deepen my understanding of the contexts in which students experienced the dialogues.

A possible limitation of interview research is that data stems from participants reflecting on their experiences, instead of data gleaned from observation by researchers. Therefore, interview data is highly subjective, entailing mainly participants' interpretations of the dialogue events and their attitudes, behaviors, and approaches. However, for the purpose of this study's research questions, the subjectivity of participants' interpretations is not only appropriate, but

also central to the inquiry for the following reasons: a) The study investigates participants' own perceptions of challenge within sociopolitical dialogue, and their reflections on their attitudes, thinking, and behaviors toward challenge. b) It also delves into their own reasons for sustaining dialogue through difficulties, which is a question that is, by its nature, personal and subjective.

Towards greater reliability, I marked interview questions as corresponding to each Research Question, in order to ensure that I had a protocol that linked interview questions to each of my research questions. Prior to employing the interview protocol in the field, I piloted my interview protocol instrument with a college student who participated in a dialogue and a coordinator of a dialogue program.⁸ I also obtained feedback from a faculty member and researcher with expertise in dialogue studies. I did this in order ensure that questions elicited responses that would speak to my study questions and to bolster the clarity of the questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

This piloting allowed me to test the effectiveness of my instrument in terms of meeting my study objectives and accurately reflecting my Research Questions. Pilot participants' responses informed my refinement of the interview protocol, as I revised for clarity and consistency with my research questions, as well as participants' comprehension.

The value of qualitative, interpretive research results can be determined by the extent to which these reflect the participants' perspectives (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). *Credibility* refers to how closely the data reflects the participants' experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). I

⁸ I piloted my interview protocol with students and faculty who had experience with dialogue programs, but these volunteers were not part of my study.

confirmed participants' descriptions, and reiterated their experiences to them during the interviews. Through *member checking*, I ensured accuracy of accounts of interview responses by participants (Creswell and Clark, 2004). I verified with participants through their affirmative acknowledgment that I understood their response. I asked for further clarification when needed. The semi-structured interview format allows for this degree of flexibility.

With the intent of staying open to the possibilities of my findings, I presented my evolving interpretations to committee members and peer members of the Teachers College Doctoral Research Group, sharing with them my initial reports of findings. Such peer and faculty examination of my emerging findings provided me with critical appraisal of my interpretations. I incorporated the perspectives I gained from this discussion and feedback to continually refine my analysis of the data, and the themes and claims that I had developed.

Reflexivity

My reflexive journal served as a record of the methodological decisions, rationale, practices and logistics as my research progressed (Nowell et al. 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It also was a place to notate my emerging thoughts--including my values, insights and interests, as a "human instrument" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In keeping with the emergent design of qualitative methodology (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015) the initial data analysis may change in subsequent phases of research. Merriam (1998) claims that analysis intensifies as the study moves forward, and when the data collection is complete. Therefore, I was consciously open to revising my analyses from earlier stages of research, as I reviewed my researchers' notes continually.

Researcher Standpoint

Before conducting the study, I was aware that personal experiences and preconceptions researchers hold inform the research they undertake (Creswell, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). I entered the field with preconceived notions that influenced what I noticed and emphasized, as well as how I interpreted data (Erickson, 1986).

To recognize how my preformed ideas shaped the study and to mitigate potential drawbacks resulting from this, I detailed my initial assumptions, expectations and emerging thoughts throughout data collection and analysis in a reflexive journal, which included memos (Maxwell, 2013). The analytic memos allowed me to record my inquiry process, note my initial thoughts, and keep track of emergent patterns as they took shape (Saldaña, 2016). These informal written accounts further enabled me to reflect on my assumptions and think critically about my decisions and interpretations throughout my research. I continually referred to my notes to appraise how my perspective shaped my analysis, and to examine alternative possibilities.

As an Asian American woman and a daughter of immigrant parents, I acknowledged that I held particular beliefs about a range of sociopolitical issues. I stayed alert that these beliefs and opinions stemming from my background and experiences could influence my views during any stage of the study. My own experience of participating in extracurricular dialogue groups in college formed my understanding of their purposes and potential. Indeed, the influence these college-based dialogues had on my own thinking about contested sociopolitical issues and peer learning was, in part, the inspiration for this study.

From a professional standpoint, my twelve-plus years as a counselor working with a diverse population of college students provided me with the basis for understanding students' development from a wide range of backgrounds. Through years of experience in listening to and guiding college students one-on-one, I have honed my capacity to relate to and communicate with the population who were my study participants. This experience in working directly with diverse college students throughout my career also helped me better understand the scope of participants' influences and life circumstances. Furthermore, my attunement in listening and reflecting back as a counselor for college students aided me in capturing the nuances of participants' stories.

Human Subjects Protection

I conducted this study in accordance with the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB), with respect to study participants' protection. Before commencing the study, I completed the human subjects training requirements through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, obtaining IRB approvals. I obtained site access authorization from a dean at the target institution prior to sending recruitment materials to staff to forward to students. I affirmed ongoing informed consent and confidentiality of participants and protected the privacy of both participants and the host institution. I also secured and safeguarded the data I collected. As I treated human subjects protection as a continuous process, I elaborate on the steps I took below.

Ongoing Informed Consent

I obtained participants' express written and verbal consent through key stages of data collection. After the above approvals were secured and recruitment efforts yielded potential participants, I emailed research participation details—including expectations, potential risks, and confidentiality protections—to each potential participant. Each potential participant was asked to carefully read the written Informed Consent form, and then sign and return it if they agreed to participate in the study. (See IRB-approved recruitment materials and Informed Consent form in the Appendices section.)

Before recording interviews, I again obtained participants' express consent. At the interview, I reiterated that the participant would not have to answer questions or share anything they do not wish discuss. I assured them that they could stop participating in the study at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality and Minimizing Risk

I sought to protect my subjects' privacy by assigning pseudonyms to both the participants and the host institution. I created electronic folders for each participant that included their completed questionnaire, transcript and audio recorded interview. Interview transcripts, audio files, and questionnaires were labeled by participants' pseudonyms and interview date. Only pseudonyms were used in interview data materials. Associated names from the questionnaire were stored on a separate, encrypted document. There exists no record matching a participant's real name with their pseudonym. All study files were stored on a password-protected computer. All written materials were locked in a desk drawer in a locked office.

I took precautions to keep participants' information confidential and prevent discovery of participants' identities. Names of people and groups were modified or excluded to protect their privacy. Other identifying information associated with these parties were also edited or generalized, where necessary, to reduce the risk of identification. My executed plan for maintaining ongoing informed consent, confidentiality and minimizing risk has been described in detail in my IRB application on file at Teachers College.

Chapter Conclusion

In the above chapter, I delineated design and research methodologies that directed my efforts in conducting the study. I have outlined steps and my rationale for pursuing such a study design through the various stages of my research. In the following chapter, I describe the findings of my analysis and present the propositions, or claims, that highlight key aspects of my findings.

CHAPTER IV–FINDINGS

Introduction

I undertook this study with the intent to gain insights into undergraduate students' experiences of challenges and their approaches to challenges in dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues. I sought to understand what sustains or motivates them despite self-reported challenges. Furthermore, I set out to learn of the possible ways engaging in challenging sociopolitical dialogues could shape students' sense of themselves, others, and/or the issues at hand. In Chapters I and II, I described the higher educational landscape for student dialogue on contested sociopolitical issues, including the significance of such dialogue in college, as well as the related literature. I identified gaps in the literature that helped me focus my inquiry into students' meaning-making during challenges, their approaches to challenge, and the substance of their learning and motivations within challenging dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues.

In this chapter, I report the findings of my study's data. I collected interview data from seven participants. It is worth reiterating from Chapter III that—while this study was open to any gender—all seven study participants who opted to participate identified as female. I explained my data analysis process in depth in the previous chapter, which can be summarized as follows: In response to my research questions, I generated themes and subthemes based on possible relationships among data patterns that identified aspects of students' challenges and approaches in contested issues dialogue. Using these themes and subthemes, I developed *propositions*. These propositions are claims about my study that I developed from examining the themes that arose from participants' data. The propositions attempt to distill and highlight the insights gleaned from participants regarding challenges in dialogue on contested sociopolitical issues, approaches

to these challenges, as well as motivation and meaning making within these challenging dialogues. I proceed to explain these themes, subthemes and propositions below.

My findings reveal six overarching themes: The first four themes are described in Section I. These discuss the main categories of challenges that students encountered in dialogue engagement with peers outside of class, as well as how they approached the challenges. Within these themes, I describe the challenges as students understand them, and I explicate approaches students described taking during such challenges, including their behaviors, attitudes and their rationales. The fifth theme, described in Section II, presents three types of learning that students may experience while engaging in challenging dialogues with their peers. The sixth and final theme elucidates students' motivations to sustain dialogue engagement, in spite of declared difficulties. This theme is described in Section III.

Through an iterative process of analysis, I found overarching ideas throughout multiple themes and subthemes, which I called *threads*, because they appeared to weave through the fabric of my findings. Discerning and articulating these larger ideas allowed me to make sense of the separate patterns, themes, and subthemes, towards probing the deeper dimensions of the phenomenon, i.e., of students' experiences and meaning-making in challenging dialogues on sociopolitical issues. As I analyzed the student participants' interviews, I discerned several main threads which ran throughout my themes:

In the first thread, I found that undergraduate students may experience internal tensions about dialogue interactions that they do not reveal to their peers. These emotions that undergird challenges they identified offer a window into the internal state of participants within dialogue. I describe these themes on challenge in detail in this chapter.

Yet in the second thread, potentially countervailing these tensions, students also shared their motivations and capacities that help them to bridge the gap between themselves and others in dialogue. Overall, students in this study exhibited motivation to understand those who differ from or disagree with them—and the reasons for their beliefs—within the dialogue space. Finally, throughout much of my data, I saw that the community that students may build through dialogue has the potential to offer a supportive environment to learn about the issues, themselves, and others in dialogue. Identifying these three broad threads around which large portions of the data revolved helped me weave together the meaning of the themes and propositions I derived.

Having analyzed these first-hand student accounts, I proceed to explain the themes and the propositions I derived from the data in detail. Throughout this chapter, I present selected case examples from student interviews to illustrate broader patterns of meaning and noteworthy data in response to my inquiry.

My research questions are restated here:

1. In discussions/dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues, how do undergraduate students describe their experiences as they engage in challenging instances of discussion/dialogue with other students?
2. What approaches do undergraduate students describe taking during these challenging instances of discussion/dialogue?
 - a. What approaches—including attitudes, modes of thinking and behaviors—do students view as contributing toward constructive dialogue?
 - b. What do students believe helps them to sustain engagement through the challenges of contested issues dialogue?

3. How do undergraduate students describe how they develop the attitudes, modes of thinking, and behaviors to engage in the challenges of contested issues discussions/dialogues?
4. In what ways do undergraduate students' descriptions reflect creative processes and practices within discussions/dialogues on contested issues?
5. How might undergraduate students' self-reported understanding of the issues, themselves, or fellow dialogue participants emerge throughout the course of such discussions/dialogues?

Section I. Students' Challenges and Approaches to Challenges in Dialogue

In this section, I bring attention to challenges undergraduate students described when confronted with disagreement or conflicting views in dialogue. Although the pressures they communicated in the study interviews stemmed from peer interaction during dialogue, students generally indicated working through these pressures on their own. This proved another layer of difficulty as they wrestled privately with processing and revealing their true beliefs, while trying to make sense of others' beliefs.

Several themes emerged regarding students' challenges and approaches to challenges in dialogue. These were Difficulty in Voicing Dissenting Views, Navigating Differences in Dialogue, Tensions Related to Group Representation and Identity, and Difficulty Establishing Trust and Openness. My first proposition encompasses the main challenges that emerged from students' accounts, which I lay out in detail in this section:

Proposition I: College students encounter challenges during contested sociopolitical dialogues outside of class settings that include difficulty in voicing dissenting views, struggling with tensions in group representation and identity, and difficulty establishing trust and openness.

Theme 1: Difficulty in Voicing Dissenting Views

Students conveyed that expressing disagreement was a major challenge for them, even as many attempted to make sense of views that conflicted with their own. In one respect, they considered conflicting opinions as stemming from their distinct social backgrounds, using lines drawn from group identity. Staying consistent and loyal to their core social identities and political affiliations was often a struggle. They mentioned this especially when peers with whom they identified or affiliated carried dominant political beliefs about which they remain doubtful. Participants reported hesitating to express or refraining from expressing their true opinions when certain issues came into discussion. A couple key reasons emerged across participants for withholding their dissenting views from peers: social pressure and sensitivity toward others.

Social pressure and sensitivity toward others

Social pressure to conform to the more popular view within the dialogue group (or at least the opinion that had been vocalized) appeared to be a key reason for the hesitation to voice dissent. One pattern of behavior that a few students reported was refraining from speaking, in order to preempt a conflict or argument. For example, Carla indicated that she was “surprised” that she did not have the mentality to “fight back” or “debate” about human rights. She simply would stop talking in order to avoid confrontation.

So like, oh no, I might say something that's going to offend people. And I don't want to offend anyone. I want to make friends....But eventually, I learned that it's better to just say those things and kind of weed out the people that you don't. ...wouldn't want to be friends with me.

Although Carla initially held her true opinions back from fear of offending others and a desire to fit in, she ultimately realized that stating her true opinions would allow for more authentic connections. Instead of hiding her beliefs to fit in, she eventually felt more comfortable disclosing her beliefs, even if this meant it might “weed out” people who did not respect her views. This indicates her adoption of another rationale: Rather than fearing rejection or offending others, she realized that those who would be offended probably would not be compatible with her as friends.

Other students indicated it was common to not feel comfortable about sharing their true opinions, while trying to be sensitive to peers. For example, Bella noticed that she and fellow dialogue participants tended to err on the side of restraint in expressing disagreement. It had been rare that someone would object or disagree outright with a peer in dialogue:

...[V]ery rarely do you see someone like, very bluntly, object to something someone else said or completely disagree with them. ...maybe sometimes it's because we really highlight this idea of like, mutual respect and listening, and giving people the opportunity to say what they believe without invalidating their opinion. I think students take that and think, Oh, I'm not allowed to disagree or have a different view.

She surmises in this passage that people might interpret the central principles in dialogue of mutual respect and listening to mean that they are not permitted to disagree. Her supposition based on peer observations speaks to a possible tension students may have, as they internalize these principles yet desire to communicate their opinions openly. Taken a step further, it raises the question of what capacities and attitudes might aid them to navigate this fine line of

communicating disagreement openly, yet respectfully. It also raises a separate question about what conditions in dialogue are necessary for such openness and mutuality amongst students.

In a case that displayed a desire to fit in with peers, Emma sensed pressure to go along with the more “woke” opinion, in particular if she was among her friends who were passionate about a stance on an issue. She cited the example of “ban the box”:

[S]ometimes you feel pressure to say, like, oh, you should ban the box because you care about issues about race. And then sometimes after, I'll have inklings in my mind that, you know, maybe there are some doubts, maybe like, we do care about certain crimes that we should not ban the box for like...is this really effective...but, you know, don't have the words to say those opinions. And so you're kind of fearful about what that presents you as a person for having doubts about an issue that your friend or group of people is really passionate about, and you usually agree with.

In this passage, Emma conveys her ambivalence about the issue under discussion. On the one hand, she clearly cares about issues of race and racial justice, yet on other hand, is not convinced that the proposed action is effective for every crime. However, she does not “have the words” to express those opinions at the time of discussion. Emma also explained that when she feels pressured, she may be more likely to agree with people that she already feels affinity towards, though she recognized this as problematic. In addition to her ambivalence over the nuances of the issue, this further indicates Emma’s ambivalence regarding her own behavior when she disagrees with people with whom she would generally align.

“Echo chamber”

Along with Emma, Bella identified another angle of this challenge - the “echo chamber” effect where people echo essentially the same opinion or position. Bella noticed that students who tend to be aligned politically on controversial issues participate in dialogue, drawing the conclusion

that students with opposing views “don't feel even comfortable coming sometimes.” The lack of viewpoint diversity, she claimed, is a major challenge in how dialogues operate. She regarded the echo chamber as limiting in a dialogue:

[It] defeats the purpose of a dialogue, if everyone kind of sits there and agrees, or everyone shares the same experience, because then it becomes more of like, just a space to share your experiences rather than kind of enter a dialogue on well, what can we do better, or this is where we're not seeing eye to eye.

She points to the distinction between something akin to a “safe space,” in which everyone shares very similar experiences and backgrounds, and contrasts this to a dialogue space. She implies that in dialogue, the goal is to articulate and identify where conflict exists, “where we’re not seeing eye to eye.”

Bella’s and Emma’s perspectives align with the beliefs of multiple students in the study: that discussing opposing views on issues is critical to really addressing the controversial aspects of these issues. This idea of the dialogue as a process of investigating why people hold conflicting views contrasts with the notion of a space where participants simply affirm the beliefs that align with their own.

With regard to reputation, Bella’s case encapsulates more explicitly what other participants imply about the fraught territory of disclosing one’s views on contested sociopolitical issues: She has been extremely careful to choose how she articulates her views, having come of age in a political environment where what she calls “cancel culture” is prevalent. Her parents instilled in her the importance of guarding her reputation:

I've kind of brought up cancel culture....But I think my parents always emphasize to me, like, the importance of your reputation, how other people view you. And so knowing that, yeah, it's like something that I say can also be taken out of context somehow, and then used against me...made me very cautious. To make sure that like, while a) I am still

sharing my views and my opinions, like, there's also the other side of like, b) I'm also doing that in a manner that's like, not going to come back in a harmful way.

Stating one's views on such issues involves anticipating and assessing the dialogue group's reception. Bella observed that you have to trust that others would not discuss your views outside the group. She also described an example in which another student commented on a controversial issue in a manner that many group members immediately deemed inappropriate. The situation was defused as the members asked follow-up questions and the student explained their meaning further. This served as a lesson for Bella that statements in dialogue can be taken out of context, and the judgment of group members can add another layer of vulnerability to sharing openly.

Bella acknowledged that “maintaining the image that I kind of want people to have of me is important and that kind of plays out in dialogues.” Maintaining her image was not a conscious intention of hers, yet it has become “second nature,” through her fear that someone may take what she says out of context, misinterpret it, and “make it something” by circulating it to people outside the dialogue. Her hesitations of dissenting from the more popular opinion among peers in dialogue began with socially fitting in, yet she implies this may be extended to her reputation writ large, perhaps thinking about impacts on a future career. In particular, she implied that peer impressions from dialogue could have career ramifications if she sets her goals on positions in politics or public affairs.

Summary of Theme. A few reasons for students’ restraint in voicing dissenting views appear across interviews. Students may refrain from voicing dissenting views with peers in dialogue due to social pressure and sensitivity towards others. They may be wary of offending others in some circumstances due to their sensitivity to others’ feelings and concerns. Yet at other times, they may refrain from expressing disagreement from a desire to “fit in” with fellow students. This

may result in the “echo chamber” effect of concurring with expressed opinions of peers. They indicated that this behavior is often compelled by a desire to maintain their connection to peers with whom they affiliate or identify. These findings suggest that pressure to fit in or maintain a reputation among peers—and perhaps reputation beyond the peer group—could prove a barrier to the goal of open dialogue.

My findings reveal that in instances where students may not fully agree with other dialogue participants, they may nonetheless concur with expressed views or withhold their dissenting views. Specifically, my data show that college students’ reasons for withdrawing from discussion or withholding their true opinions may be rooted in social pressure to adhere to popular opinion among their peers, fear of rejection, lack of trust, and sensitivity to others. These factors may influence students’ ability and willingness to be open about their own views. However, an exception to this was Carla’s realization that she preferred to risk rejection by those who might not tolerate her beliefs than to withhold her true beliefs.

It is noteworthy that study participants disclosed the above difficulties in the interviews, yet they indicated these tensions remained primarily private, and not something they articulated to peers in dialogue. Therefore, the potentially restrictive influence these emotions could have on dialogue were generally not addressed in the context of the dialogues themselves.

Although students certainly struggled personally with expressing disagreement, I derived through students’ accounts that the broader challenge in dialogue is not disagreement itself. Instead, the fundamental challenge is the ability to express disagreement in ways that advance greater understanding of dialogue participants and the contested issues at hand. In the next theme, I discuss study participants’ approaches to dealing with disagreement and differences in just such ways.

Theme 2: Navigating Differences in Dialogue

Despite the obstacles described in the last theme, some students saw the sharing of different and opposing views as essential to the purpose of understanding the contested nature of issues in the dialogue. When students talked about confronting differences and disagreements in dialogue, they also revealed their sincere intention to bridge these differences. I derived Proposition II from my analysis that students navigated differences in the dialogue in three key ways:

Proposition II: To navigate disagreements in dialogue, college students may seek to normalize differences, build common ground, and reframe disagreement as an opportunity to understand opposing perspectives.

Students considered disagreement and differences as “normal” within dialogue. They also built upon each others’ viewpoints towards common ground, rather than engaging in debate. Finally, they reframed disagreement as an opportunity to explore the reasoning behind different or opposing views. I provide case examples below.

Normalizing disagreement and differences

One way students approach the challenge is by considering that disagreement and differences among students are a normal part of dialogue. For example, Carla acknowledged that students have different goals and experiences. She believes it is important to validate these differences:

I like to make sure to stop the conversation at a high note where we both admit that...we're gonna have different experiences; we're gonna have different goals and how to understand these things.

Here, by presenting the differences as not only normal, but a positive aspect of dialogue, Carla pushes her peers to consider how to understand each other's experiences better. Like Carla, Fiona recognized that peers come from a variety of experiences. Being open minded involves being interested in *why* those whose views differ from her own think as they do. Knowing that students come from distinct experiences, Fiona has tried to strike a balance between providing context about her background and sharing her knowledge.

Building Common Ground

Establishing the points that they agree on allows students to perceive that they are building on each others' arguments, instead of debating sides. Fiona has thought carefully about how to avoid dynamics in which students feel "bulldozed" by their peers. Seeing dialogue as "coming together" on the issues has allowed her to look for connection points between student contributions.

Fiona further worked toward constructive dialogue by finding something she and her peers agree on first. Rather than emphasizing one argument versus another argument, she articulated what the group collectively agrees was true. She looked for a "nuanced version" of the argument that may include elements of what multiple students have said. Such approaches helped her build common ground in dialogue.

A brief example of this for Fiona was a dialogue where she and her peers began with agreement on the media's unequal portrayal of men's and women's relationships. Fiona started by restating an idea that peers in the group agreed upon: that female celebrities are portrayed more harshly through their romantic relationships than male celebrities. She then expanded upon

that claim to discuss what would rationally proceed from it and what else was true, leading them into a dialogue about the unequal expectations about sex and relationships based on gender.

Reframing disagreement as an opportunity to explore the reasoning behind different or opposing views

In addition to normalizing disagreement and building upon each other's arguments, another way students navigated disagreement was by reframing it as a chance to delve more deeply into the reasons behind conflicting stances. Students reflected on why the conflicts exist, while also articulating an attitude that allowed them to engage with peers while holding conflicting views.

In a case example, Bella recognized a "hard duality": the ability to voice dissent while respecting others and preventing harm to other students. This duality calls for thoughtful consideration of the sensitive experiences that peers may come from, while being able to share a different perspective. Yet she has discovered through participating in multiple dialogues that, if you move away from judging which view or person is wrong or right, the dialogue can focus on *explaining* one's opinion:

But through the more dialogues that I participate in, the more I realize, you can be in disagreement with other people. And it doesn't mean one of you is right; you're just kind of showing your own view or your own opinion and explaining it. And hopefully, by explaining it, people can see where you're coming from.

The aim of explaining one's views to help "people...see where you're coming from," shifts the dialogue—in contrast to either an echo chamber or a debate—toward understanding the reasoning behind different, opposing views. The corollary of explaining one's own views is purposefully trying to understand another person's view which conflicts with one's own.

From another angle, Emma stepped back to consider how certain aspects of dialogue can elicit greater understanding of opposing views. Emma found that the qualities of dialogue that do not lend themselves to typical discussions are actually the hallmarks of productive dialogue. This entails "being forced to listen" to another person's views without interrupting. People are given a "forewarning" that this time is set aside to "get into the weeds of this conversation." She observed the following: "[S]ometimes I feel like when people stumble into conversations, you know, they're not prepared to be open minded....This is a specific, delineated space where you have to be open minded." Emma's comment calls up the notion that dialogue works better when students are "prepared to be open minded." She makes the point that these features of dialogue that do not naturally occur in conversation—that is, ensuring people have time to speak without interruption and being "forced to listen" to different perspectives—are what make it productive.

While Bella described a person's attitude of curiosity and openness to understanding an opposing viewpoint, Emma explained the qualities of dialogue that make it conducive to listening closely to different views and delving into perspectives one might not agree with. I derived from these and related student accounts that both the aforementioned *personal qualities* and *qualities structured into a dialogue* converge or interact to create circumstances that promote students' exploration of the reasons behind their opposing viewpoints.

Summary of Theme. Students articulated a worldview that envisioned bridging differences toward a broader understanding of the issues and saw this as the primary purpose of dialogue. Students reported navigating differences in the dialogue in three main ways. One way that students approached the challenge was by considering that disagreement and differences were a normal part of dialogue. Secondly, students form common ground in dialogue by determining

what the group can agree upon. This provided the basis for discussing issues in a way that participants can build on together, instead of debating a side. Finally, instead of avoiding the conflict, some students were able to reframe disagreement as an opportunity to explore the reasoning behind different or opposing views. These findings culminated in Proposition II: *To navigate disagreements in dialogue, college students may seek to normalize differences, build common ground, and reframe disagreement as an opportunity to understand opposing perspectives.*

Proposition II furthers our understanding of the ways college students negotiate disagreement and conflict over controversial topics. This proposition highlights the types of student approaches—including thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors—that they claim support them when they encounter disagreement and conflict. By seeing the value of facing disagreement and being attentive to the dialogue process that fosters greater exchange of the *reasons* for disagreement, students reported approaches that helped them move forward in challenging moments, especially when working with differences in dialogue.

Theme 3: Tensions Related to Identity and Group Representation

Students shared that they struggled with how to handle challenges in group representation of identity. I explain representation in this context to refer to how members of an identity group present the experiences and perspectives of their group, with respect to the issues that concern them. Several students questioned themselves as to their background and experience to speak to the sociopolitical issue at hand. Through discussions with students of their own identity group, students examined their relationships with their communities as well as the issues that affected them. During intergroup dialogues, they also looked closely at how they might relate to people of

other identities, perceiving the intersection of their experiences with those of other identity groups.

My findings show that representation and identity are at the core of the student experience in dialogue. Self-awareness of identities played a key role in the dynamics of discussing race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and first generation college student status. I discuss the various challenges related to identity and representation below, building the basis for my Proposition III:

Proposition III - Representation and identity are at the core of the student's experience in dialogue. Self-understanding related to representation of one's identity group may emerge through tensions in dialogue with peers of the same and different identities.

Underscoring differences between identity groups

A few students explained that the identity of peers they were in dialogue with affected what they said and how they engaged on a topic that may relate to peers' identity. For example, Carla was accustomed to discussing sociopolitical issues with peers of similar demographic backgrounds in her high school. In college, she also felt comfortable with her smaller IFS group in contrast with the larger college population. (IFS is a special group for first generation/low income students.) She revealed the following:

[During IFS] Nobody made me feel bad about myself, or made me feel like I had to stop saying something...because we...all have a shared identity. And it was coming from low income, first-gen backgrounds. But in this specific trip, I was finally amongst UNI students from any kind of background, and that freaked me out.

Carla has recognized her background and identity as first-generation/low-income in contrast to many of her fellow college students. The differences in background and upbringing of students outside her group made her wary, so she found it harder to discuss her views.

As mentioned in the prior theme, one reason students may refrain from expressing their views is sensitivity to other groups. For Bella, the challenge of representation was allowing space for those who possess the background in that experience to speak. She may stand back initially, trying to figure out if and when to insert herself into the discussion. She gave the example of discussing Black Lives Matter (BLM) during summer orientation, when she felt she needed to give students of color the opportunity to share their experiences and understanding of it.

One thing that kind of always scares me is like, if there's a topic that we're discussing, that I haven't really experienced firsthand...[D]uring summer orientation, we were discussing Black Lives Matter like, I felt as if that was the time to step back and give students of color like the opportunity to really voice their experiences and how they knew the situation, because I felt that wasn't my place. And...I always struggled with finding, like the right time to insert myself into the conversation as to not take away the space in the room and the time from someone who hasn't had it before.

Bella demonstrates here an awareness that her identity as a white woman means she does not possess the direct background to speak on issues related to BLM and feels it “wasn’t my place.” However, while she admits her fear of overstepping, her internal struggle is discerning where she can share her opinions.

Emma also found that she is sensitive about not offending identity groups who are participating in the dialogue: “..that might even be particularly true when the person you’re disagreeing with is like, from that background, so, I would probably be more reticent to disagree with a person of color about issues related to race or those implications.” Here, she talks about

refraining from speaking in a way that may be taken in a negative light by members of that group.

When students described why they held back their actual opinions in such circumstances, it was not entirely clear which instances were caused by social pressure and which resulted from not wanting to be insensitive to the experiences of other students. While such a distinction may warrant further investigation, I surmise from student accounts that there may be instances when these two reasons are present concurrently.

Understanding of representation changing over time

Grace, an ex-student athlete, illustrated how understanding of representation can change over time. An example of a dialogue with Grace's teammates centered around a symbolic action: kneeling during the National Anthem to demonstrate protest of police brutality. When Grace was a freshman, she opted not to kneel at athletic events when the national anthem was played. Because she had military family members, she felt compelled to honor that part of her background during the anthem.

She alluded to her ideas developing and changing with regard to police brutality and racism as she gained information and began to understand more about the issue through dialogue. She also indicated that her relationship to her country, the United States, changed during college. Through processing the history of police brutality and peer discussions on this, she formed new views related to the importance of representing her Black community. These discussions opened her eyes to the role she could play in the movement and advancing racial justice. Later in college, she felt compelled to kneel at games during the anthem as a sign of

protest. Grace's story shows the alteration of one's position on an issue through discussion and reflection, as she developed her understanding of the significance of being in solidarity with her community during the struggle against police brutality and racism.

Since Grace remained friends with her athlete teammates throughout college, even once she had left the team, they noticed the change in her position. She communicated that changing her position on the issue resulted in its own challenge:

So I think that first thing of like, just being able to change is definitely a challenge. And I guess...I guess it's even harder to do in a place that is smaller. And UNI because people remember you, and they know you, and they remember what you said about a certain thing. And so changing later...I think takes a little bit of extra work, but it's not impossible.

Grace's passage highlights the pressure of peer perception when one alters one's position, especially within the small UNI social network where people remember your stance on an issue. While Grace was cognizant of this pressure, she ultimately felt it was "not impossible" to switch her stance. As her views evolved, she felt the peer scrutiny was still worth the "bit of extra work" in order to represent her community.

Pressure to teach

In another case, the expectation to represent her community became a persistent source of stress and exhaustion for a student. Diana expressed the pressure she often feels to represent her community as a Black woman.

[A]s a Black woman, I felt pressured to kind of always have to respond to racism, or always have to speak on behalf of the entire Black community, which becomes exhausting. But a lot of times, it feels like what I'm being asked to do is to teach you why you shouldn't treat Black people certain ways...And I think it's great to have those

dialogues and conversations when you're ready to have them...when you've done the research, when you've actually shown your commitment to doing better...

Diana describes this pressure to speak for her community against racism as emotionally draining for her. She sometimes has to take on the role of teaching non-Black people about the issues that affect Black people, which gives her the sense of carrying additional burden. Showing “a commitment to doing better” entails putting in the effort to research the history of racism and oppression before participating in discussion on the topic. Diana contrasts this *pressure to teach* peers with the more productive kind of dialogue where the other person has educated themselves, to an extent, on the issues.

Identity questioning: Adjustment between self-perception and group perception

In contrast with Diana who felt the weight of her responsibility in representing her Black community, Apple experienced profound doubts about her role in representing her community. When discussing her background, Apple conveyed how her identity shifted as a biracial Black individual. She observed a major change from growing up as part of the tokenized biracial family in a small town where everyone knew her, to attending college in the northeast where people could not guess her ethnicity. At times, when Apple expressed her experience as a mixed-race, Black-identifying woman, she was faced with pushback. This disconnect between how she perceived her own identity and how others in her community perceived her caused conflict, both internal and external, when she was in dialogue with peers.

Apple experienced "exclusion" from the group in which she had considered herself a member of growing up. Through multiple instances of structured dialogues as well as personal talks throughout college, social pressure made her hesitate to state her viewpoint as a Black

woman, and made her question whether she was “Black enough” to speak on issues affecting her racial group:

Honestly, it came from a lot of...exclusion, almost. So just feeling like other people in conversation sometimes were like, not listening to what I said. And kind of being dismissive. “Like you will never know... Like you'll never know.” And it used to really hurt my feelings....Because I just used to get very defensive and be like, no, but I'm Black too....

Because Apple has realized that many in her community view her as “not Black enough,” she is hesitant to represent the Black community. She heard people say, “And you can still be Black, but you will not be the kind of Black that I'm talking about, basically.” She has experienced this resistance of other Black people to recognize her as possessing a shared experience. In dialogue, she also felt resistance and a lack of acknowledgement that she inferred through participants’ reactions toward her contributions:

..In the dialogue conversations, it was more subtle... it was just more like people not acknowledging the things that I had to say or almost like not engaging directly with me. So it was vibes from people, that what I was saying didn't have salience. But what other darker-skinned people were saying did matter.

In college dialogues, Apple started to make sense of her identity and the context in which to represent. In race-based dialogues, Apple has learned to adjust how she speaks about herself as representing the Black community or Black women, depending on who is in the room. For instance, in her STEM department, she feels confident that she represents a small minority of Black people with similar academic experiences at UNI.

It's very situational for me...one time I was in a dialogue that was...talking about Black people in STEM in the representation there, and I've done a lot of...research. I have a lot of advice to give about this, because I've done that...I very much excelled in my department research-wise. So in that situation, I was like, I've done the thing, so I can speak to them. I probably can speak to it better than anybody else in this room with STEM research.

However, Apple can now assess the situation and determine whether she's the right person in the room to represent issues affecting Black people, or if she should "leave the floor to other people" who she thinks may have more direct personal experiences.

So I've basically taught myself like, if I'm the only person who can speak to it...So if I know I can speak to it the best in this room, when I'm sure...then I'll speak to it. But if I feel like lots of other people..had similar experiences, or if I don't have expertise in it, then I don't say anything.

Here, Apple expresses that she has learned to discern when her experiences are well- suited to representing her Black community, relative to others who are present in the discussion.

Although talks with others who challenged her "blackness" caused her suffering, she took from those tumultuous encounters awareness of her identity in relation to her group. This questioning of her identity has weighed heavily on her throughout college. Yet, opening herself up to the realities of her community members and hearing how their experiences contrasted with her own led to an awareness that was more sensitive to their differences. She has taken this more nuanced understanding of her race to practice greater sensitivity in representing her identity group.

Apple has applied this changed knowledge of her identity actively, in an ongoing negotiation involving where she is and who is in the dialogue space. She has learned to discern in which contexts to represent herself as a Black woman, and when to refrain from speaking and yield the floor to members of her community who represent a set of experiences distinct from her own. This entailed Apple's gradual adjustment between self-perception and group perception, and led to a reconceived relationship with her community.

Summary of Theme. Challenges of identity and representation in dialogue appeared in multiple, distinct ways for students. In one way, this challenge manifested as some students' discomfort and lack of trust during dialogue with those who did not share their group identity. Other students became keenly aware of the importance of "giving the floor" to those who represent the identity group affected by an issue. This involved acknowledging instances when they should refrain from speaking and allow those with more direct experience and potential repercussions to represent the concerns of their community. Through this awareness, students struggled internally with deciding when and how to insert their views in dialogues on related topics. Another aspect of representational challenge emerged as the pressure to represent one's community and to teach others. Yet another dimension of representational struggle took shape as handling the changes in their understanding of representation over time. Finally, the challenge of representation in dialogue appeared in one case as transformational to a student's individual identity, as she adjusted between self- and group perceptions of her identity.

These findings led to the following Proposition III: *Representation and Identity are at the core of the undergraduates' experience in dialogue. Self-understanding related to representation of one's identity group may emerge through tensions in dialogue with peers of the same and different identities.* Overall, the challenge of representation was evinced as personal recognition of responsibility within one's identity group. This understanding evolved for several participants during the course of dialogues.

As their identities were thrown into relief by students of the same and different groups, students found themselves questioning where they fit in—including how and when to represent themselves. Yet, these moments of questioning through peer interaction in dialogues

afforded students the opportunity to re-examine embedded ideas of identity for themselves. These dialogues prompted students to understand their own group identity in more nuanced ways, as well as reflect on their responsibility for representation as a whole.

Theme 4: Difficulty Establishing Trust and Openness

My analysis of participants' interviews revealed that difficulty in being vulnerable, open, and in trusting others in the dialogue was a theme that emerged across the majority of students' descriptions of challenge. Students also expressed the related struggle of establishing enough trust to open up and contribute during a sensitive topic or to state their true beliefs. This may even help explain the difficulty of voicing dissent, as detailed in the first theme.

This lack of trust was exhibited in students' reports of defensiveness between dialogue participants. At other points, resistance was displayed by students' fixedness on a stance toward an issue. I derived the broader theme of Difficulty in Establishing Trust and Openness from a set of related subthemes: the challenges of Defensiveness or Resistance and Admitting Lack of Knowledge, as detailed below. My analysis of study participants' approaches to these particular challenges provided the basis for Proposition IV.

Proposition IV: College students may approach challenges of building trust and openness in dialogue by a) modeling openness and vulnerability through the sharing of their experiences, b) refraining from personal attacks, c) using hypotheticals, analogies, and evidence to explain their viewpoints, and d) acknowledging that they are continuing to learn about the issues.

Defensiveness or resistance among peers in dialogue

Resistance, defensiveness and difficulty admitting lack of knowledge appeared as ways that students manifested lack of trust and openness in dialogue. Students reported that dialogues can reach an impasse, particularly when participants are not willing to listen to their peers and display a stubborn refusal to budge on their arguments. Participants may begin by talking about an issue generally, then eventually bring in their own experiences. Tensions would arise when participants found that their experiences contrast and, further, are not relatable to others in dialogue. Students may then draw opposing conclusions about an issue.

In looking across student descriptions, I noted that several students expressed defensiveness in moments of dialogue, even as they observed this quality in their peers. Students exhibited defensiveness the closer the topic was to their personal identity and associated experiences. Additionally, students naturally became defensive when they felt personally criticized about their arguments or stance on an issue. For example, Emma observed that when others dispute your experiences or your conclusions drawn from your experiences, it can feel "a little insulting." Emma noticed that when a person feels criticized in a dialogue, their reflex is to become defensive. She found it best to avoid "attacking" or "scolding" others.

Approaches to Resistance or Defensiveness. Students described the approaches that helped them counter the resistance or defensiveness of peers in tense parts of dialogue. Below, I offer two case examples to illustrate such approaches. Emma's initial reaction regarding the above scenario was frustration that peers are stubborn or do not listen. Yet, she then stepped back and empathized with peers about times when she was similarly "hard-headed." She also acknowledged the need for reflection time to process new or difficult ideas:

And my second thought, trying to reflect on perhaps times where I was maybe just as hard headed, or the need that people have for reflection time between ideas, I think people sometimes, you just sleep on it...or how after multiple dialogues report, a change or see a certain viewpoint as being correct. So I've tried to be sympathetic, like, it's definitely challenging...

Emma has navigated the sense of judgment that may arise between dialogue participants in a couple distinct ways: a) switching back to the hypothetical scenario or b) subtly pointing out hypocrisy through a comparable example. She explained that people generally want to maintain integrity, and if called out on hypocrisy, might rethink their position. Depending on the circumstances, she may opt to use one of these tactics to explain her point without resorting to personal attacks.

Other students also resorted to hypothetical scenarios or analogies to explain their arguments, using examples that focused on aspects of the issue from a distanced, less personal standpoint. In another case example, Diana was met with the challenge of defensiveness from male peers, while discussing the issue of sexual assault. Her male peers would become “very, very defensive,” and refused to listen to her. In this case, Diana aimed to approach her peers with patience, seeing that, generally, their experience as males differs from females. She used facts and data to demonstrate her points and help them put the issue into perspective for women. For instance, she used an analogy about fear of shark attacks, and the statistics on chances of an attack compared to the higher statistics on sexual assault. By highlighting facts with analogy, Diana was able to convey “the legitimate reasons why women may be afraid of men.”

She found that her male peers were more receptive to engaging on the topic when she used this tactic. In these difficult dialogues on sexual assault and gender, she has built skill and comfort to address the issues. What has helped her to do this is her ability to take the perspective

of peers who grew up with a separate experience from her own. She has tried to present ways of relating her points that are less emotionally charged, yet still convey the evidence relevant to the issue. This has resulted in greater openness when dealing with peers who may feel defensive about the topic.

As students described their own and peers' resistance and defensiveness in response to challenging parts of dialogues, they underscored that entrenched opinions could not be moved by criticism or attack. Attitudes such as resistance and defensiveness displayed a larger issue of a lack of trust and openness toward others in dialogue. Yet, as students acknowledged these tendencies when confronting these loaded topics, they were able to articulate countervailing approaches to reach their peers that prevented escalation of such defensiveness or resistance. Specifically, they found it constructive to appeal to dialogue participants through a more distanced, less personal approach involving the use of hypotheticals, evidence and analogy.

The students who raised these concerns were also able to approach their peers in three constructive ways: a) They empathized with their peers even when frustrated, acknowledging that they have encountered opposition or conflict in dialogues, as well. b) They also purposefully refrained from personal attacks. c) Instead of personal attacks, they used hypotheticals, analogies and evidence to explain their position or viewpoint. Students wielded such tactics in order to address highly sensitive issues while mitigating the risk of offending or alienating their peers in the dialogue.

Difficulty in Admitting a Lack of Knowledge

Insufficiency of trust and openness in dialogue also manifested in cases where students struggled with admitting a lack of knowledge on a contested issue. Some students claimed it was hard to reveal to their peers that they did not know enough about a topic or issue. As I listened to participants' descriptions of the competitive academic and social environment of UNI, I surmised that attending a prestigious institution like UNI may make it harder to admit lack of knowledge or to suspend a sense of competition about who has the better argument. I include case examples below to highlight these points.

Having insufficient data or lacking knowledge caused some students to refrain from contributing or responding in discussions. For example, Apple characterized this as a fear of being wrong or admitting that one does not understand something:

People get really afraid...if the whole group is saying one thing, but ...like, I don't actually agree with that, but I'm afraid to say this, because I'm afraid I'm going to be wrong, people are afraid to step forward and be like, I don't understand this.

Apple's quotation shows that students may anticipate a negative perception by their peer group if they are incorrect or reveal lack of understanding. Various student accounts indicated that, if vulnerability and trust have not been established, admitting a lack of knowledge on a topic may be even more difficult.

In another example of how feeling less informed on a topic can inhibit engagement, Emma explained why she might not respond when she does not possess information on the issue:

...[H]ow do you feel when you're the less informed person? So when someone's really spewing facts that you have an instinct that maybe...these are slanted or biased in a certain way, or like, I don't really know what to do with this information, because you're just spewing statistics at me, then it's kind of hard to disagree, because you just feel like the less important person. So if you're less informed, why even share your opinion?

Here, Emma expresses her frustration when she has the impression that she is the less informed person in dialogue, believing she does not have the justification to share her opinion. Being less informed can make her feel insecure about herself and even inclined to withdraw from engagement. She further points to her uncertainty about the accuracy of information conveyed to her by the other person. In raising this question, she implies that she does not always believe information given at face value in dialogue.

Both Emma and Apple revealed feelings of fear and insecurity when they did not believe they possessed sufficient information or knowledge on the topic. This insecurity can even be tied to a sense of being “the less important person” in the discussion, which implies that comparison and possible competition may be part of the dialogue dynamics in such scenarios. I interpreted from this and related interview data that such negative feelings can prevent students from admitting lack of knowledge or understanding to their peers.

Approaches to gaps in knowledge. In contrast, some students characterized the ability to acknowledge one’s limits or gaps in knowledge as a strength. A few students explicitly recognized instances when they lacked relevant knowledge on a topic. Rather than making an argument prematurely, a couple students also took it upon themselves to research more information. For instance, Emma was able to recognize where she needed more data and conveyed this stage of seeking further information to her peers. She was able to admit that she needed to find out more about this topic before stating her opinion.

Similarly, Apple's approach to this lack of knowledge was to communicate it openly: "...but I want to learn, can you please walk me through it? So it's vulnerability in that way, of wanting to put yourself out there to learn." Here, Apple goes a step further than Emma to connect to and learn from her peers in her uncertainty. She states her willingness to learn and requests humbly for peers with knowledge or information of the topic to explain it to her.

Fiona also claimed that humility is key, to "call yourself on it and say, I don't really know about this, but I think or I would love to learn more about this...in my experience, like, you don't have to pretend you know everything." Stating that one has the desire to learn, she believes, is a helpful starting point for gaining knowledge. Fiona believes this quality of humility must be present before one can learn more about the issues in dialogue. "You can have an opinion, but also be willing to learn more. I think in some ways that's almost more valuable, because it shows that you're cognizant of your own limitations, which is so important...having conversations with other people." Fiona asserts here that it is valuable to know one's own limitations, to admit not knowing everything about an issue, or recognize that a different view might be valid. She emphasizes that holding an opinion and being willing to learn more can co-exist in a person.

Across the aforementioned cases, students exhibited an awareness of their own limits of knowledge and information about sociopolitical issues. First admitting what one does not know may allow others in dialogue to share their information and opinions, which can open up the conversation. However, multiple students in the study referred to the competitive, high pressure academic environment of UNI. Thus, I surmised that the UNI context might not always be conducive to an attitude of admitting what one does not know and learning openly from peers. In addition to the inherent vulnerability that may come from revealing one's lack of knowledge,

UNI's very competitive academic environment may compound students' unwillingness to display any deficiency in knowledge.

For instance, Fiona observed a characteristic of UNI students that she attributed to their attending a highly selective university.

I do think that's like an issue that many UNI students have just by nature of being on surface level, very high achieving because going to [this] institution is perceived as very prestigious. And so oftentimes people can have the feeling that being always right, or like, their opinion really mattering because they have this sort of internalized feeling of value.

Fiona's impression that UNI students sometimes have an "internalized feeling of value" and an inflated view of their own opinions could be interpreted as them considering themselves "better" than others, especially as it relates to intelligence. This sentiment may reflect the competitive streak that is often emphasized in excelling academically and standing out at a prestigious university. It is possible that such a sense of "being always right"—or having such a need to be right—could pose a barrier to openness to learning from peers in dialogue.

In this subtheme on Difficulty admitting lack of knowledge, I contrasted students' avoidance of recognizing lack of knowledge about contested issues with students who promoted self-awareness of their knowledge gaps. This self-awareness was described by some participants as the precursor in their capacity to learn from others. Thus, the gap sparked an impulse to seek further information and knowledge through dialogue.

As seen in the prior theme on Navigating Differences in Dialogue, students may attempt to incorporate new and different perspectives into their understanding of a contested issue. In this study, students alluded to this quality as noticing a gap in understanding or information from

their own standpoint. Some students applied this observation to actively seeking additional perspectives and information. Moreover, some students were intentional about being open to arguments and information from peers who held a different stance. These students displayed the willingness to delve into conflicting sides of the issues with peers.

Approaches to lack of trust: Creating a space for trust and openness

While students identified difficulty in establishing trust and being open as key obstacles in dialogue, they conveyed that the approach to building trust and openness could not be “forced,” by simply pushing students to share about sensitive topics. Rather they sought to cultivate a space of trust and community by offering their own experiences to the group and providing their own example of how to be open and vulnerable. Two cases below illustrate these points.

Bella observed that it is harder to build trust and sense of community in shorter dialogues, such as those that meet once. Participants may not be “ready” to be honest. She expressed that more time is necessary to establish trust within a group. This would likely influence how openly a group can communicate, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. As openness and vulnerability are not a given for dialogue participants, she describes how she contributes to creating a more accepting dialogue environment for participants:

...[Y]ou never really want to make it seem as if you're forcing the participants to share something that they don't want to share, especially if it's like a hard topic; they can be very vulnerable...don't want to kind of overstep that boundary of like, share a time where you were impacted, or something happened in relation to your race, things like that. But instead, you can really open the door for participants by offering up your own experiences.

Bella emphasizes here that “forcing” participants to share should be avoided at all costs, as she sees how “rough” it can be to formulate an opinion on a loaded topic “on the spot.” She is

attuned to the vulnerability one can feel when asked to talk about personal experiences of race, identity, religion, gender and other personal topics. By “offering up [her] own experiences,” she initiates and practices openness. She thereby models how to share personal experiences in dialogue and helps to begin the conversation.

Similarly, Emma became more receptive to different views after ongoing dialogues with a group of students in her interfaith dialogue group. She noted that when the dialogues began, students were not skilled at listening and would interrupt. Also, they were not open to different arguments in the discussion. Emma observed improvement within her Interfaith group from the beginning of the year to the end. Repeated interactions with the group of 25 students who met weekly also provided the opportunity to develop communication practices together while getting to know each other. While it was not easy for the group to be open minded or listen without interrupting, she observed progress. Like Bella, Emma believes demonstrating the ability to both listen and be open, that is, “leading by example,” made it possible to improve communication on the issues and increase trust over time.

Summary of Theme. Students observed that the capacity to establish trust and openness in dialogue hinged on factors that included sustained time and building upon contributions of peers who initiated sharing of their own experiences. Sustained engagement in a dialogue group helped students build their level of communication and trust over a period of time. Moreover, student accounts showed that the level of openness and vulnerability to express one’s views in dialogue largely depends on the group dynamic and is not automatically present.

Students described their individual approaches for contributing to more open dialogue. By relating to peers in moments of frustration or disagreement, participants were able

to engage with them even when they faced resistance, ultimately with the aim of moving the dialogue forward. This led me to Proposition IV: *College students may approach challenges of building trust and openness in dialogue by a) modeling openness and vulnerability through the sharing of their experiences, b) refraining from personal attacks, c) using hypotheticals, analogies, and evidence to explain their viewpoints, and d) acknowledging that they are continuing to learn about the issues.*

Section Conclusion

In this section, I identified a few key challenges (difficulty in voicing dissenting views, struggling with tensions in group representation and identity, and difficulty establishing trust and openness) that study participants faced in dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues, while also describing their approaches to navigating these challenges. As I examined the themes in this section and the challenges students in the study encountered, I noticed that many experienced internal tensions underlying the challenges of handling conflict in dialogue. In several instances, they conveyed their lack of openness and trust to exhibit their true beliefs. They described these difficulties with regard to peer dialogue interactions, yet they often kept these emotions private from their peers. In interviews, students divulged emotions that undergirded these internal struggles over dialogue interactions, which included fear, anxiety, pressure, insecurity and ambivalence.

From these accounts I suggest that dialogue participants' reactions and emotional patterns may operate, unexamined, during the course of conflict. Yet, participants may become more aware of their emotions and patterns of behavior after reflection, especially with the opportunity for repeated dialogue interactions. Regardless, some participants sought to model and set an

example of openness within dialogue, even where it involved emotional risk. While it is quite intuitive to empathize with people who share one's general outlook, extending this quality to those who maintain a conflicting position may be less intuitive. Based on the findings described in this section, I posit that students who attempted to relate to peers in such difficult scenarios showed inclinations toward a) understanding peers who they disagree with and b) using dialogue to probe the conflictual aspects of issues with and through their peers.

Section II. Types of Student Learning Through Difficult Dialogues

Theme 5: Developing Understanding Through Challenges In Dialogue

While the prior section addressed students' challenges and approaches to challenges in dialogue on contested sociopolitical issues, this section focuses on the kinds of learning that students portrayed as they described engaging in such dialogues. In listening to students' interviews, I characterized their learning in the context of my inquiry as a process that occurred through the practice of dialogue. It involved a) growth in understanding about their purpose and role in dialogue interactions, b) increasing understanding of themselves and others through encounters with peers, and c) their pursuit of greater understanding of the issues.

My analysis of interview data revealed that study participants were learning within three domains while engaged in challenging dialogues: Students developed their understanding by learning about their role within the dialogue, learning about themselves in relation to their peers, and learning more about issues under discussion. This resulted in Proposition V.

Proposition V: College students derive meanings through engaging in challenging sociopolitical dialogues, including learning about their role within the dialogue; learning

about themselves in relation to others; and learning about the issues themselves in new ways.

Learning about their role within the dialogue

As students reflected on their role in challenging moments of the dialogue, they named skills, qualities, and attitudes they wanted to develop. Their intention in building such qualities was to improve their handling of difficult dialogues, as well as to improve interactions as a whole within the dialogues. Students displayed learning about their role in the dialogue in two areas, which I break down into *skills for better dialogue* and *skills for self-regulation*.

They identified skills, qualities and attitudes that they were developing and/or aimed to develop to better handle such dialogues. Some of these skills were related to how to enhance the dialogue itself—for example, being able to mediate during heated exchanges, or practicing active listening. Several other examples of skills, qualities and attitudes revolved around self-regulation and self-care. These included, for example, remaining non-defensive, accepting the limits of their influence on others, and patience and empathy towards peers who hold views that do not align with their own values.

In an example of skills to handle loaded dialogues, Carla expressed her aim to build skills to mediate when arguments become heated. She hoped to learn how to voice her views, when she wants to compromise, although some people are "all or nothing." Apple, noted another quality that will help her to improve her interactions. She reminds herself to stay open and non-combative, to remain "...open minded, reminding myself throughout dialogue that my ears are open, and that I'm not combating what people say." Further, she found that practicing active listening made her more involved in the conversation than simply thinking and being "pensive"

about what others were saying. This skill would help her engage more directly with peers in dialogue.

In another example of students shaping their own dialogue behaviors, Fiona observed peers' behaviors that alert her to what she wants to avoid in her own behaviors. As she recognized unhelpful behavior such as bulldozing and interrupting, she became more aware of refraining from these herself. She still struggles with this habit, but she apologizes when she catches herself. Even if she believes what she is saying is relevant to the topic, she states, "Like, it's not more important than letting somebody else feel heard." Ensuring that other voices are heard motivates her to change her habits.

In addition to the above category of skills and qualities that students hoped to build to engender better dialogue throughout challenges, a second category of qualities and attitudes pertain to the students' awareness for their own self-regulation and satisfaction toward their role in dialogue. Apple emphasized that "self-regulation and self-care" are essential in handling herself in dialogue. The structured dialogue in which she participated taught her to plan for when she hears incendiary comments and arguments against her beliefs. Regulating her feelings and behaviors entailed reflecting on her own experience while actively listening to others. This has allowed Apple to handle conflict in ways that keep her engaged and open, rather than reactive to others' comments.

In another example, Diana came to accept what was beyond her control with regard to the conclusions others draw in such dialogues. She now believes that, after explaining the issue and the info she has, she should let others decide for themselves what they think about it:

And that's not a reflection of you or if you were actually able to break through to that person. It's a reflection...if they were open to...hearing what you have to say. So, definitely, it has been a difficult conversation to have. But I think it's still been worthwhile—whether it has had the impact that I wanted or not—I still think it's worthwhile.

Diana eventually realized that the effort she put into a difficult dialogue was worthwhile, regardless of whether or not she can “break through” to a person who does not share her views. This, she believed, was a reflection of their openness to listening to her. Making an impact on the other person was not the only reason to engage, and she implied that the communication itself was meaningful.

Similarly, Grace tried to practice patience and empathize with peers who are “complacent” about contested issues, remembering that there was a time she was like them. While she aimed to awaken social consciousness in peers, she also acknowledges that it does not help to become frustrated “when it doesn't happen all at once.” She reminded herself to offer “a mixture of grace” and patience with herself as well, if she is ever “not there all at once.” Taking the attitude of willingness to be “challenged to learn” was enough. Grace conveyed that she has developed her ability to manage the emotions of frustration and impatience and instead practice more compassion, empathy, and acceptance towards herself and others in sensitive dialogues.

In sum, through their efforts to improve their contributions in dialogue, students learned to exercise qualities, attitudes and behaviors that were within their control and helped them through difficult dialogues. Students’ ability to acknowledge the limits of their influence on peers’ views freed them to accept situations where conflicting views persisted. This recognition gave students a sense of serenity when they reflected on the dialogue—as well as the ability to

move on without blaming themselves or others. While exercising their capacity to empathize with other dialogue participants, they also showed self-care. Through this practice, they clarified the purpose of the dialogue for themselves and their role in it.

Students reinforced that the purpose of dialogue is more centered on giving each participant the chance to contribute to the discussion, rather than pushing one's own arguments and points in a forceful way. Further, students identified skills, qualities and attitudes that they were developing throughout the dialogues that could prove useful in improving how they handle future challenges of dialogue.

Understanding oneself in relation to others

As discussed in the theme on identity and representation, it is important to situate the students in relationship with their peers in dialogue. While students gather together to discuss sociopolitical issues, the issues and the positions people hold do not exist in a vacuum. Through student accounts, I discerned that learning through their peers could be viewed as a kind of *community of exploration* within the dialogue space. Their peers brought an array of backgrounds and experiences that informed their positions. This exchange of the meanings behind each others' positions was especially illuminating as students learned about and from students who may hold different beliefs.

Along with learning about their role in the dialogue, the women in this study developed understanding about themselves in relation to fellow students in dialogue. Students reported that listening to peers' experiences helped them understand both the differences and similarities between them. In addition to realizations about their identity and representation of the group as

noted above, students gained understanding about other aspects of themselves through challenges in dialogue. Two case examples illustrate this broader theme.

Through dialogues on LGBTQ rights and issues, Diana has learned about the advantages of being heterosexual in a hetero-normative society. Listening and discussing these issues with peers in dialogues helped her become aware of the types of privilege from which she benefits.

So kind of understanding ways in which I can navigate this world with certain privileges and using that to defend and stand up for those people who don't have privileges in that way. It's something that I really am committed to doing.

Before such dialogues, Diana, as a Black woman, had not thought consciously of herself as holding any type of privilege, and had not considered this based on sexual orientation. Upon her realization, she aimed to use her privilege to stand up for other people and communities. In particular, she recognized how she needed to learn more about the concerns the LGBTQ community faces. Diana has committed herself to learning about communities who have had different experiences than her own.

In another example of learning through others, Bella has learned through each person's story in the dialogues that their experience is distinct from her assumptions.

So now kind of the more dialogues I participate in, like I walk around campus, and I'm like, everyone here has a story. And we don't know about it. But we assume so much about one another because we're all like UNI students. And we think we know like, what the UNI students' stigma is.

In this passage, Bella indicates that she establishes understanding about peers in dialogue about whom she originally would have made assumptions and drawn unfounded conclusions. Further, through these interactions she realizes that many students are more like her than she had thought,

because they care about similar issues. She has extended these interactions to purposefully form relationships with students outside of the dialogue.

Bella said she learns something new about herself through the dialogues "all the time." Yet, she did not see the learning that happens in dialogue as solely about herself. She perceived it as being involved with others—"a communal thing"—rather than something that changed about herself from it.

I always see a dialogue is like a part of a bigger effort to achieve something, or to start a discussion or raise an issue that has been overlooked. And so I don't think I ever kind of think about, after a dialogue or even during it, what changed about me. It's more of like, oh, how did I grow together with a group of people? So it's definitely more of a communal thing. And I do like that, I really do.

Bella sees dialogue "as a part of a bigger effort to achieve something, or to start a discussion or raise an issue that has been overlooked." Her comment highlights a major purpose of engaging in dialogue, as seen more broadly in the study: the desire many students feel to contribute to addressing issues that matter in society. Further, this passage conveys that the growth she experiences about the issues occurs while forming a deeper relationship with her peers: "How did I grow together with a group of people?" This growth to which she refers is not only personal, but also relates to how she gauges the group's development of trust and understanding to share within dialogue.

Another major feature that students shared with regard to learning from others was the sense of feeling supported by peers. Even if dialogue participants might disagree, they are partaking together in the activity of exchanging beliefs and exploring their meaning. Bella conveyed that she is grateful she does not need to "bear the weight of...a huge realization" alone. Here, she indicates that she has realizations about the topics through dialogue participants'

collective contributions. She articulated what other students in the study allude to - that she and her peers share this process of discovery together through their dialogue experience.

Certain features stood out regarding students learning about themselves from others in dialogue. One feature was students surfacing unexamined assumptions with peers. These students were open to questioning their assumptions about others as well as examining their own positions. Secondly, learning about the different concerns and struggles peers in dialogue faced helped some students understand their own identities and how they interpret sociopolitical issues. Therefore, I gleaned that some students may perceive differences in opinion, background and experiences as a basis for learning about themselves and their peers.

This manifested as study participants reflected on their own biases and assumptions. In some discussions, they assessed their roles and that of others within societal structures, examining their power and privilege. Students described this kind of learning as something that occurred within a supportive environment, where peers were willing to develop together in the process of discussing issues that matter to them. Further, students expressed positive feelings of increasing awareness of issues while they valued developing their relationship with their peers in dialogue. Their growing appreciation and understanding of each other within the space of dialogue heightened a sense of community around a common purpose.

Learning about the issues themselves in new ways

Students portrayed instances when they were able to see sociopolitical issues in new ways through the dialogue. They revealed the ways in which they tune into new information or

arguments. They also conveyed attitudes that make them amenable to understanding the issues from new or different perspectives.

The case example of Emma illustrates how a student may learn about the issues in ways they had not considered before, and perhaps even change their perspective on it. For instance, Emma noted that someone may “alert” her to new information or a viewpoint in the dialogue. Emma may take information or a view that she had not considered and “thoughtfully reflect” upon it. This kind of reflection, she clarified, is often more in depth than “googling” the topic, or simply thinking about a topic by herself. Prompted by different or new views in dialogue, Emma may find out more about a topic or issue, which can lead to her changing her opinion.

There are certain arguments that have convinced Emma to change her mind about a topic: Hearing comparisons or analogies to things that Emma has already established as true may convince her, in that she would naturally want to maintain consistency. She would want to “rectify” the inconsistency in her thinking, if it were pointed out. A second element that has helped Emma change her mind is repeated interaction with people in dialogue, and “working with” them. While she might not be inclined to alter her stance on a topic after a single conversation, having multiple dialogues with a peer increases the possibility of grasping their viewpoint. This implies that the improved understanding and communication, and perhaps trust, gained over time has helped her accept different perspectives.

In a related example, Diana also described how she receives information she learns in dialogue and may revise her views. Diana referenced a dialogue about the “unethical” actions of a well-known corporation. She stated she gleaned enough from the arguments and information in

that talk to change her opinion about the corporation. After learning about the communities it negatively impacted, she came to the conclusion that the small fraction of the profits they donated to these communities did not justify the damage they inflicted.

[I]t's always nice when you have an initial idea about how certain things work. But you're presented new information, and you just learn more about something and therefore you want to do better, and be better based off of the information that you're being kind of given. So that's really nice.

Diana's remarks surface a couple of characteristics about an attitude conducive to learning new aspects about contested issues: When presented with information and views in dialogues with peers, Diana expresses willingness to consider it. Further, she has an overall orientation toward wanting to "do better, and be better," based on incorporating more data. In this sense, she views data provided in dialogue as broadening her understanding of issues. Hence, she readily receives and processes it to make adjustments in her thinking and behavior.

To summarize this subtheme, the study participants mainly portrayed the learning of new information pertaining to contested issues as something that occurs after building this communication over time with peers in dialogue. Following from this, I extend the idea that improved communication and trust among dialogue participants gained over time may enhance receptiveness to new and different viewpoints within dialogues.

Further, these findings reveal aspects of how students may learn about issues—specifically through dialogue interactions—in ways that they had not considered before. It presents the idea that an attitude conducive to learning about issues involves a readiness to incorporate new information and to consider different arguments than one's own. While learning new information in dialogue does not necessarily result in changed views on an issue, the groundwork for

changing opinions may be built through parallels or analogies to what students already see as true. When students were able to connect their existing knowledge to the new information and claim, they were apt to consider its salience.

Section Conclusion

This section has detailed students' learning while engaged in challenging dialogues, especially regarding their self-reported understanding of the issues, themselves, or fellow dialogue participants which emerge throughout the course of such dialogues. My inquiry into this culminated in Proposition V: *College students derive meanings through engaging in challenging sociopolitical dialogues, including learning about their role within the dialogue; learning about themselves in relation to others; and learning about the issues themselves in new ways.*

From these dialogues and the challenges they experienced, students developed understanding of their identities, viewpoints and their place in society. Further, they gained this understanding in relation to other student dialogue participants, as they explored their own experiences and reasons for their positions. Engaging in discussion about differences in opinion, background and experiences served as the basis for students to learn about themselves, their peers and the issues. I gathered that exploring the issues from the standpoints of those whose backgrounds and experiences differed from their own may illuminate new understanding about students in relation to others, and about the issues themselves.

The subtheme on students' learning about their role within the dialogue further addresses how students describe developing their attitudes, modes of thinking and behaviors to engage in

the challenges of contested issues dialogue. It does so by explicating students' manner of self-reflecting, self-regulating, and making sense of their role in challenging dialogues.

Proposition V and its related theme and subthemes correspond with a prior theme. As also seen in the theme of Navigating Differences in Dialogue, students expressed a motivation and capacity to understand differences in dialogue, which allowed them to learn from peers. Through an intent to listen carefully and relate to peers who had backgrounds and experiences distinct from their own, study participants were able to overturn their assumptions about peers, and have a clearer picture of their concerns. Further, they indicated learning something "new" about themselves and their identities and positions in society by relating to their peers in dialogue.

Students also had the motivation and capacity for expanding understanding of sociopolitical issues. In the subtheme on Learning about the Issues in New Ways, I found that students may expand their understanding of the issues when they possess attitudes that are open and primed to consider new information and arguments that differ from their own. They may behave in ways to solicit more information and communicate how to make sense of it in relation to their current notions.

Multiple students exhibited a curiosity toward understanding new information and knowledge related to contested issues. Further, they reflected purposefully on the information they heard in dialogue, conducting follow up research in some cases. Overall, students sought to broaden their scope of understanding of an issue by incorporating the additional information and knowledge into their existing frameworks.

Section III. Sustained Student Motivation in Difficult Dialogues

Theme 6: Sustaining Dialogue Motivation Despite Challenges

A variety of personal motivations, life visions and goals helped students to continue through the challenges of dialogue. Students reported sustaining themselves through challenging dialogues in distinct ways. These included forming community and trust through dialogues; drawing on their passion for the issues and commitment to improving on these issues; and an aim to understand their own conflicts. Inquiry into their motivations led to the following proposition:

Proposition VI: Students' motivations for sustaining themselves in challenging sociopolitical dialogue stem from a place of caring about the people and communities affected by the issues. Their motivations may range from a desire to understand social conflicts, passion for progress on issues, or the reward of building community.

The reward of seeing community and trust build through dialogues

The sense of developing community with their peers and gaining trust through dialogues was a rewarding experience for multiple students. For students who met continually with the same set of peers, it was possible to see growth in the level of trust throughout dialogues. Students expressed gratification in observing progress in dialogue, as members of the group built trust over time. This was the case for Emma, as she observed improvement within her Interfaith dialogue group from the beginning of the year to the end. While it took repeated meetings for her group to be open minded and listen without interrupting, she saw progress. She described this growth in their ability to communicate and share about interfaith issues as “nice and refreshing.”

As she and a group of 25 students met weekly, she felt gratified that her peers became gradually more open. This shared growth served as a motivation for her to keep attending the dialogues.

On this theme of building community and trust as a personal motivation in sustained dialogue engagement, Bella conveyed her ongoing goal is establishing a sense of trust among those who may not feel drawn to sociopolitical dialogues. It is important for her to target and bring in the types of people who have "shied away" or ignored such sociopolitical dialogues, since she asserted these topics are "very important topics, very prevalent topics, both to like, our campus and to our world. And so I'm just finding how to bring all different people on board."

She identified the drawback of dialogues that are not representative of conflicting viewpoints, since these might preclude reaching the core of the contested issues. In order to effect greater understanding in society on these critical topics, she sees dialogue as bringing in those diverse viewpoints in open and in-depth conversation with each other.

Bella added that finding out how her fellow students are all different also helped her form a sense of community and "be in community" with them. From the dialogues she felt closer to them as well because they care about similar issues, in "bonding over a similar understanding about something." She continues the conversation with some peers outside the dialogue. Her case highlights a broader pattern among participants that exchanging views on sociopolitical topics serves as a basis on which to connect with them more deeply.

Diana was also influenced by dialogues to be accountable for herself and her actions. She has acknowledged the advantage of being heterosexual in a hetero-normative society. She became aware in dialogues of the types of privilege from which she benefits. Yet, she wants to

use her privilege to stand up for other people and other communities. In particular, she recognized how she needed to learn more about what the LGBTQ+ community faces. She commits herself to learning about communities who have had different experiences than her own. She further aims to do what is necessary to understand and support communities aside from her own.

Study participants practiced building alliances with other identity groups when they made the effort to learn about the particular hardships and inequalities that groups besides their own face. A few students talked explicitly about their need to increase or deepen their understanding of other groups' concerns. These students also emphasized being accountable in their actions to support those of other identities in their struggle for rights or justice.

Relating this back to the subtheme on Understanding oneself in relation to others, some students were able to bridge understanding about other communities in dialogues, in which they learned about a separate group's concerns. Students expressed their willingness to support those outside of their communities through continued education and action about other identity groups' rights or equity concerns. Considering such ongoing interactions, they implied that community could be formed across groups through the shared process of dialogue. Thus I posit that, for some students, the alliances they may build across groups and while taking action to support each other may serve as a reward of sustained dialogue.

Drawing on their passion for the issues and commitment to making progress on the issues

Students' desire to make a positive social impact was apparent through all interviews, as they conveyed their commitment to progress on contested issues. For all of the study participants, their interest in the issues such as racial equality, interfaith issues, diversity, police

reform, gender and LGBTQ+ equality had taken root before engaging in college dialogues. While this attention to the issues had been forming throughout their lives, it was heightened and became more informed through dialogue. Several students also identified a passion for contributing to broader understanding and possible solutions on these issues as a primary motivation to sustain participation, even as they experienced challenges.

Bella's passion and commitment to sociopolitical issues—especially toward issues related to race and diversity—has sustained her through difficult dialogues. The dialogues opened her worldview and helped her understand people's differences. She spoke of attending dialogues as something “that reignited that passion... showed me that the stuff that I am involved with and the work that I am doing isn't all for nothing.” Interacting with her peers on issues she cares about allowed her to see that she is not alone, as others share in her interest and dedication to these issues.

Bella's interpretation of education in the dialogue context was that it serves to “kind of open up my worldview, to understand like, where are all these people coming from and kind of understand...that we are all different.” In contrast to her friends who go to one required dialogue per semester and “hate it,” she found that “forcing” herself to attend dialogues allowed her to see their value. She gained a good sense of what she “...should be doing, or how, like, I should be acting in the sense, or...how I can make others feel more comfortable and included.”

Bella's strong personal motivation to continue in voluntary dialogue participation even when her friends gave up was notable. She believes that one can only gain skills through experience. In continuing to attend dialogues, she has increased her comfort level each time as both a facilitator and participant in dialogue. This ongoing participation has helped her build the

skills and confidence to include and support peers in the dialogue. As conveyed above, it has been Bella's conviction that dialogue enables deeper understanding of pressing, contested topics which has kept her involved. Her intention to include more diverse perspectives in dialogues that concern issues of importance in society has compelled her to push through obstacles and continue her efforts.

Similarly, Grace felt a sense of urgency around getting people involved in sociopolitical dialogues who are "complacent" or unconcerned with the issues:

But there needs to be a combative tool for complacency in these types of like social political discussions on campus. I've been in a complacent role before, where it's like oh, this is not a big deal; this isn't what affects me; I'm not going to do anything about it; there aren't big like repercussions or anything... so I think the tool that we constantly have to like- I have to work on is getting people to want to join in on the conversation and have something to say or make a choice and action in the first place...so being involved, you know, making the personal political; making the political impact the personal life...

Grace, like Bella, reflects a conviction in the necessity of discussing sociopolitical issues which compels her to get people involved in dialogues who might not naturally be inclined to join.

However, she recognizes that showing other people how the political impacts the personal (and vice versa) requires patience and time. By recognizing that she can encourage—but not control—others' involvement, she has been learning to be realistic about her expectations, while satisfying her need to make an impact.

Carla also displayed commitment to taking accountability that she claimed starts with dialogue. She believes she and her peers should carry their new knowledge out into the world, such as in this example about human rights protests in Hong Kong:

It doesn't just stop here, you're going to take accountability for your actions, you're going to do something...to help people in Hong Kong, you're going to learn from their experiences, because these are all UNI students talking. So I like to end it on a high note and say, like, what are you going to do moving forward?

With this rallying prompt, Carla hopes to incite her peers to mobilize around what they have gained in the dialogue and take steps toward progress. She poses a direct question to spark peer action to improve the situation they just discussed. By closing dialogue on an action-oriented note, Carla shows other students that they can take what they say in dialogue and apply it now.

Throughout such case examples, students described their dedication to dialogue as growing the knowledge and understanding to make a positive impact on sociopolitical issues. A few students saw dialogue as a crucial stage of examining issues with others before taking action on these issues.

A desire to understand their own conflicts

While the following example is not representative of a pattern across multiple study participants, this single case illustrates an important aspect of motivation: how personal relationships can contribute to abiding reasons to address social and political issues in dialogue. For Apple, her past experiences of conflict with people she cared or cares about kept her motivated to stay in dialogue about sociopolitical issues. At times, personal conversations forced her to confront how friends in her community saw her as unlike themselves. This happened when some bluntly expressed to her that she did not share their experiences, and would “never get it”:

[T]his is kind of backwards, but it's the people who I feel like I've hurt who keep me going. People who I feel like I haven't been able to understand completely. For example, that friend, the friendship that ended up fizzling out has actually been a major sense of almost like motivation, because I've been, for a while....like, “What’s he saying? Like, I need to understand what he's trying to tell me.”

Apple recounted a poignant story of a close childhood friendship with a Black friend that ended mainly due to their arguments about her identity and representation. Although Apple has learned and recognized much more nuance about racial identities since entering college, the original need to understand her friend and what severed their connection has served as a highly personal motivation for continuing such dialogues. Indeed, her current relationship with her Black partner has made the issues of clarifying race and identity an ongoing topic for them both:

With my partner, there have been a few race-based things that have really hurt him that I've said, and so that serves as a source of motivation, though, because I don't want to be hurting the people who I love and care about. I want to make sure that I'm supporting them. So they're like my sources of motivation.

As a Black woman involved in personal relationships with others of her race, Apple reveals that caring in personal relationships involves the work of intentionally listening and understanding the aspects of race that her loved ones may experience differently from herself. This case demonstrates that dedication to understanding social identity issues—and working through them in dialogue—is not only rooted in the past, but may also continue as an active and vital dialogue in one's personal life.

Section Conclusion

The last proposition addresses what students believe helps them to sustain engagement through the challenges of contested issues dialogues:

Proposition VI: Students' motivations for sustaining themselves in challenging sociopolitical dialogue stem from a place of caring about the people and communities affected by the issues. Their motivations may range from a desire to understand social conflicts, passion for progress on issues, or the reward of building community.

Each student spoke about sustained engagement in dialogue as an act of caring—and sometimes a passion—about the issues and the effect these had on people. They also cared about the impact these issues had in society, as they envisioned a more just and equitable society. Students developed a sense of community in dialogue through sharing about issues of concern, which helped them feel like they were part of something larger than themselves. A few students spoke of the act of engaging in dialogue as worthwhile in and of itself, regardless of whether or not they could change the minds of peers. Even when they did not see eye to eye, some students felt reinforced in their dialogue engagement by having the conviction that these issues were important to their peers and broader society.

Chapter Conclusion and Propositions

In this chapter, I presented interview data and my analysis from seven college students who engaged in dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues with peers outside of class. By attending to students' thinking and approaches when faced with challenge, my findings showed dimensions of students' experiential process as they engage in dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues. Through explaining the above themes and subthemes, I aimed to illustrate students' capacities to address and make sense of the challenges of contested issues dialogues. I demonstrated the types of student approaches—including modes of thinking, attitudes and behaviors—that they claim support them throughout self-reported challenges in such dialogues.

First, I discussed students' *challenges in sociopolitical dialogues* and the kinds of *personal tensions students experienced in dialogue interactions*, which occurred when voicing or confronting disagreement; in wrestling with identity and representation; and in building trust and

openness with their peers in dialogue. Further, I described the emotions that undergirded these challenges, which students indicated were hard to reveal to their peers. I suggested that such findings underscore the importance of recognizing underlying tensions in order to address students' barriers to open and accepting dialogue.

Despite these challenges, students expressed both motivations and capacities for sustaining dialogue through difficulty. I claimed that study participants possessed a *motivation to understand and bridge differences*, between people and between the opposing positions they may hold. These motivations and capacities were manifested in the approaches they took to challenges in dialogues. They sought to understand the reasons for conflicting viewpoints, while also aiming to better relate to their peers' experiences. I further suggested that students' motivations and capacities to understand and bridge differences helped them to persevere in dialogues through difficulties.

Finally, I highlighted the *sense of community through dialogue* that students built over time. In the prior section on challenges in dialogue, I portrayed study participants' emotions that permeated the challenges they experienced in dialogue. However, it is also important to highlight the positive emotions many participants felt as they built community through dialogue. These feelings included connectedness, trust, and concern for fellow participants, which were reflected in the student reports of learning about themselves, others, and the issues with their peers.

The notion of community appeared particularly in themes discussing group representation and identity, learning in relation to others, and in motivation to sustain dialogue engagement. Notably, students described participation in such dialogue spaces as rewarding, even when peers' views did not align with their own. Further, community was created through connection to a

shared purpose of growing understanding of issues that students deemed important to society. I gleaned that this participation in a budding community based on a higher purpose could be rewarding enough to sustain some students through difficulties in dialogue.

Student accounts repeatedly portrayed the sense of community in dialogue as something they worked with others to build over time, and that this became a source of support, learning and/or understanding across their differences. I gathered that this sense of membership in a dialogue community may stem from a growing understanding of themselves and others around a common purpose of learning about the contested issues they deem important to society. Based on students' descriptions, I suggest that such feelings of community that the dialogue process itself can engender among its participants may be a key reason some students engage and sustain engagement in dialogue. In the following chapter's discussion, I elaborate on this notion of community in dialogue.

My findings from this study yielded 6 propositions, restated below:

Proposition I

College students encounter challenges during contested sociopolitical dialogues outside of class settings that include

- Difficulty in voicing dissenting views,
- Struggling with tensions in group representation and identity, and
- Difficulty establishing trust and openness.

Proposition II

To navigate disagreements in dialogue, college students may seek to normalize differences, build common ground, and reframe disagreement as an opportunity to understand opposing perspectives.

Proposition III

Representation and identity are at the core of college students' experiences in dialogue. Self-understanding related to representation of one's identity group may emerge through tensions in dialogue with peers of the same and different identities.

Proposition IV

College students may approach challenges of building trust and openness in dialogue by a) modeling openness and vulnerability through the sharing of their experiences, b) refraining from personal attacks, c) using hypotheticals, analogies, and evidence to explain their viewpoints, and d) acknowledging that they are continuing to learn about the issues.

Proposition V

College students derive meanings through engaging in challenging sociopolitical dialogues, including:

- Learning about their role within the dialogue,
- Learning about themselves in relation to others, and
- Learning about the issues in new ways.

Proposition VI

College students' motivations for sustaining themselves in challenging sociopolitical dialogue stem from a place of caring about the people and communities affected by the issues. Their motivations may range from a desire to understand social conflicts, passion for improving issues, and the reward of building community.

While this Chapter endeavored to interpret the study's data directly to develop themes and propositions in response to the research questions, the concluding chapter will bring the findings into conversation with wider research that relates to my study. In the concluding chapter, I summarize my findings and propositions in connection with the research questions. I juxtapose these findings alongside considerations of sociopolitical issues dialogue described throughout this dissertation. Finally, I present implications for future research, policy, and practice within higher education.

V- SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, the study's findings from Chapter IV are connected to the original Research Questions in order to synthesize them with the themes and propositions that have been derived from the data. While Chapter IV consisted of delineating the findings directly, in this chapter the results are examined in light of existing literature related to this study and selected concepts, introduced in Chapter II, including the lens of creativity.

The chapter concludes by discussing implications of the study's findings for future directions for research, policy, and practice.

The study aimed to understand the following research questions:

1. In discussions/dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues, how do undergraduate students describe their experiences as they engage in challenging instances of discussion/dialogue with other students?
2. What approaches do undergraduate students describe taking during these challenging instances of discussion/dialogue?
 - a. What approaches—including attitudes, modes of thinking and behaviors—do students view as contributing toward constructive dialogue?
 - b. What do students believe helps them to sustain engagement through the challenges of contested issues dialogue?
3. How do undergraduate students describe how they develop the attitudes, modes of thinking, and behaviors to engage in the challenges of contested issues discussions/dialogues?

4. In what ways do undergraduate students' descriptions reflect creative processes and practices within discussions/dialogues on contested issues?
5. How might undergraduate students' self-reported understanding of the issues, themselves, or fellow dialogue participants emerge throughout the course of such discussions/dialogues?

Overview of Issue and Aims of the Research

The social and political climate during which this study was conducted provided a distinct backdrop for participants. Reflecting on the events of this period, some participants referenced dialogues involving social justice movements, including Black Lives Matter protests and broader institutional responses. As certain students in the study were responding to current sociopolitical issues and social upheaval, they were also making sense of their identities among their peers.

Chapter I described the civic mission and responsibility of higher education in preparing students to address social and political issues that are currently contested. The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has recommended that postsecondary institutions advance activities that promote students' development of skills in constructive discussion with peers holding different views and values (Eagan et al., 2017). In particular, colleges are called to advance students' understanding across different political ideologies and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as differences in race, gender, and sexual orientation (Bok, 2017).

A key purpose of contested issues dialogue is communication and the exchange of diverse opinions and experiences that will contribute toward fuller understanding of the issues. Yet there are obstacles within college student engagement in such dialogues. Although research proves the educational benefits of engagement, sustained dialogue engagement is not common in

practice (Oulton et al., 2004; Maxwell et al., 2012; Seligsohn & Grove, 2017). Therefore, it is important to examine not only student outcomes but also students' own attitudes and thinking, and the reasons that compel them to persist in these efforts, in spite of the difficulties. Students who engage in these dialogues bring key perspectives, and the study has sought to delve deeper into those perspectives through their first-hand accounts. I was especially interested in understanding the ways students interpret the challenges they faced. I also hoped to gain perspective on their modes of thinking, approaches, and reported behaviors in dealing with such challenges. Further, I aimed to gain insights on potential forms of learning they may experience from participating in challenging sociopolitical dialogues. Finally, I endeavored to uncover reasons why they may sustain their engagement in dialogue, despite the challenges.

Propositions

Proposition I

College students encounter challenges during contested sociopolitical dialogues outside of class settings that include

- Difficulty in voicing dissenting views,
- Struggling with tensions in group representation and identity, and
- Difficulty establishing trust and openness.

Proposition II

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Representation and identity are at the core of college students' experiences in dialogue. Self-understanding related to representation of one's identity group may emerge through tensions in dialogue with peers of the same and different identities.

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College students may approach challenges of building trust and openness in dialogue by a) modeling openness and vulnerability through the sharing of their experiences, b) refraining from personal attacks, c) using hypotheticals, analogies, and evidence to explain their viewpoints, and d) acknowledging that they are continuing to learn about the issues.

Proposition V

College students derive meanings through engaging in challenging sociopolitical dialogues, including:

- Learning about their role within the dialogue,
- Learning about themselves in relation to others, and
- Learning about the issues in new ways.

Proposition VI

College students' motivations for sustaining themselves in challenging sociopolitical dialogue stem from a place of caring about the people and communities affected by the issues. Their motivations may range from a desire to understand social conflicts, passion for improving issues, and the reward of building community.

Linking Research Questions to Propositions

Here, the Propositions derived from the findings are connected explicitly to the study's Research Questions.

Under the first Proposition, which responds to RQ1, the main challenges that study participants faced in sociopolitical dialogues with their peers are delineated. This highlights the personal tensions that students reported in dialogue, which emerged while handling disagreements, in their difficulties with identity and representation and in establishing trust and openness with peers in dialogue.

Propositions II, III, and IV address RQ2a in describing the multiple approaches—including attitudes, modes of thinking, and behaviors—students report in dealing with the challenges they face in dialogue. Proposition II focuses specifically on the ways in which students negotiate disagreements and conflict in peer sociopolitical dialogue. This discusses participants' approaches to normalizing differences and disagreement in dialogue, and to building upon peers' arguments in moving toward common ground. In doing so, I suggest that students may incorporate these different and, at times, opposing, views into their own and their group's collective understanding of contested issues. Proposition III addresses the particular challenge of students' identity within group representation. Here I discuss the ways self-understanding may emerge both through tensions with peers of other identity groups and within their own identity groups. Students' awareness of the role they played within and among identity groups evolved through dialogues. They recognized the responsibility they played in representing their own identity, while being sensitive to representation of other groups in dialogue.

The fourth claim, Proposition IV, focuses on how students address the challenge of building trust and openness among peers in dialogue by exercising certain attitudes and behaviors that model vulnerability and sharing. This also involved applying strategies to presenting arguments in ways that refrained from personal attacks. Finally, this highlighted the

importance of students acknowledging that their understanding of issues was continuing to grow, and of tuning into such opportunities in dialogue. In so doing, students may contribute to cultivating a dialogue environment that encourages a more open exchange of different viewpoints. I suggest that such approaches are a part of a larger effort to establish trust in exchanging views between dialogue participants.

Propositions II and IV also address RQ4 on creativity, in that certain attributes of the creativity conceptual lens (as discussed in Chapter II) were reflected in the findings that comprise these propositions. As explained in the discussion below, aspects of the creative dimension intersected with other capacities to explore and understand differences. This lens contributed to understanding students' process and approaches to particular challenges by highlighting students' motivations and attitudes that allowed them to explore novel meanings and differences.

Proposition V delineates the dimensions of understanding that students may gain as they become involved in challenging sociopolitical dialogue with peers. It therefore speaks to RQ5 in that it outlines the meaning they derived from challenging sociopolitical dialogues that informed and shaped their understanding of a) their role in the dialogue b) themselves in relation to their peers and c) their understanding of the issues. Proposition V—particularly in terms of student's roles in dialogue—also speaks to RQ3 in that it encompasses the skills and attitudes students develop, and wish to develop, through dialogue. As students reflected on their roles in challenging moments of the dialogue, they also identified skills, qualities, and attitudes that they were developing and/or hoped to improve (such as mediating heated exchanges, listening actively, and regulating negative feelings) toward improving their contributions and in order to better handle such dialogues.

Proposition VI responds to RQ2b by highlighting the sources of students' motivation that sustain them throughout the challenges of dialogue. Students' motivation to sustain engagement in challenging sociopolitical dialogue came from a place of caring about the communities and individuals impacted by these issues. They were further sustained by personal factors rooted in the past, present, and future—including a need to understand their own conflicts, the rewards of building community with peers, and their own goals to affect change.

This section has aimed to summarize the findings in light of the Research Questions outlined at the beginning of the thesis and restated above. Below, I link highlights of these findings to aspects of prior literature and related concepts on constructive conflict and dialogue in order to discuss how these findings may help add to our existing understanding of college students' dialogue process. Alongside this, I present the major ideas that weave through them.

Discussion

Throughout much of the findings, a few broad ideas appeared that allowed me to make sense of the connections between these findings and the related literature. These ideas also serve as an organizational framework for the following discussion, as follows: Personal tensions students experienced in dialogue interactions; Motivations and capacities to understand and bridge differences; Creativity in dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues; and Community through dialogue. Finally, I highlight participants' capacities for sustaining motivation throughout dialogue challenges.

Personal Tensions Students Experienced in Dialogue Interactions

In looking across reports of challenges in sociopolitical dialogue, students' personal tensions appeared while facing disagreement, in struggling with identity and representation, and while reflecting on/grappling with the need for more trust and openness with peers in dialogue. The

following sections describe certain components of these tensions in more detail, and examine existing literature in order to expound where the findings of this research could contribute further to the field.

Revisiting the Role of Emotion. It was noted earlier in this chapter that students experience emotional tensions underlying the challenges of perceived conflict in dialogue. While these emotions stem from challenges of peer dialogue interaction, students were generally not open with peers about these feelings. At the root of challenges students identified in dialogues were emotions such as fear, anxiety, insecurity, pressure, and ambivalence.

From my analysis of student interviews, I posit that students' reactions and emotional patterns may operate unexamined during the course of dialogue conflict. Yet students may become more conscious of their emotions and patterns of behavior upon reflection, especially if they have the opportunity for repeated dialogue interactions.

When considering challenges of contested issues dialogue, I assert that recognizing the inner state of students in dialogue is important to understanding how to address the challenges they face. Research on intergroup dialogue suggests that intervention on an emotional level should not be limited to the verbal-cognitive plane (Khuri, 2004), or that which is clearly conscious. Khuri (2004) dubs the affective layer as the "background" of intergroup dialogue, while content remains in the foreground (p. 600). These emotions, as seen through students' reports, can affect their responses and behaviors toward fellow participants, particularly in moments of dialogue where beliefs and positions are challenged.

Ambivalence emerged as an example of one of the more complex emotions that run through participants' narratives of challenge. It is particularly present in the first and last challenge themes on Difficulty in voicing dissenting views and Difficulty in establishing trust

and openness. Ambivalence is characterized in the intergroup dialogue literature as a tension of holding two conflicting feelings while engaged in dialogue (Khuri, 2004). On the one hand, participants possess a desire to learn about oneself and others of different backgrounds and experiences. On the other hand, they are drawn to the security of that which is already known (Khuri, 2004) and their existing truths. Students exhibited an overarching desire to engage in open dialogue, yet demonstrated hesitation to express their true beliefs in the theme Difficulty in Voicing Dissenting Views, and revealed their resistance and defensiveness in the theme Difficulty in Establishing Trust and Openness. I highlight student participants' emotions such as ambivalence—and the related insecurity—in order to draw attention to these private tensions and their potentially restrictive influence on student engagement in dialogue. Specifically, I claim that ambivalence is noteworthy because it embodies the push-pull dynamics of study participants' desire to engage in exchange of different views over contested issues, which is in tension with their tendency to protect themselves from the risk of conflict—and the possible exclusion—that they fear may result from revealing their beliefs.

Although dialogue is *supposed* to involve sharing of diverse viewpoints, the data suggest that the ability to exchange conflicting views depends in part on students' level of trust, security and shared communication. In unveiling students' feelings tied to these challenges, I emphasize the importance of paying attention to the emotional domain in understanding obstacles to more open dialogue. For instance, in the Difficulty Voicing Dissent theme, students revealed the emotions that are connected to their behavior of refraining from voicing dissent or concurrence. These feelings may include anxiety, insecurity, ambivalence, and fear of rejection. As I noted the underlying beliefs and reasons for tensions in their accounts, I further analyzed what occurs through the relational process to nurture greater understanding among participants.

Disagreement, Concurrence and Cooperative Contexts. This study's findings on social pressure and participants' difficulty in disagreement aligns with dialogue research on concurrence as a way of avoiding disagreement: If individuals concur under pressure to conform to the dominant opinion, they may experience conflict between their "private and public positions" (Johnson & Johnson, 2014, p. 424), or internal viewpoints versus external positions they share in dialogue. As participants look for information that confirms the dominant position, disconfirming information is excluded, and divergent positions are discouraged or eliminated. Therefore, the group's thinking converges and narrows in focus (Johnson and Johnson, 2014). Meanwhile, some group members may privately hold opposing opinions.

The findings of this study reveal that in instances where students may not fully agree with other dialogue participants, they may nonetheless concur with expressed views or withhold their dissenting views. They indicated that this behavior is often due to a desire "to fit in" or maintain their connection to peers with whom they affiliate or identify. This data reveals nuances in acts of withholding dissenting views and concurrence in contested issues dialogue by describing possible reasons why students behave in such a way. Furthermore, the findings shed light on existing research that states students may shield themselves from emotional and cognitive risk by resisting or evading discussion on sensitive public issues (King, 2009).

Much of the prior research on contested issues recognizes the importance of participants' emotions in dialogue (see, for example, Khuri, 2004; Stephan & Stephan, 2001). This current research builds upon these claims that attention to the affective (emotional) domain of students' dialogue experience is necessary to gain a fuller picture of their experience (Khuri, 2004; Stephan & Stephan, 2001). This study offers another dimension to this existing research by describing the reasons why students may withhold dissenting views and resort to concurrence in

contested issues dialogue. Students in this study conveyed the importance of being accepted by those with whom they affiliate or share a social identity. Some expressed fear of rejection should they voice dissenting opinions. This perceived social pressure to adhere to or maintain the popular opinion of peers can lead them to anticipate and avoid conflict in dialogue.

These findings also add to prior studies by focusing on descriptions of college students' reasons—tied to their emotions—that may account for why they might hold back their views in contested issues dialogue. This study draws attention to this major aspect of challenges: that students may refrain from voicing true opinions in anticipation and/or fear of negative social (and potentially professional) ramifications. These findings suggest that pressure to be accepted or maintain a reputation among peers is an obstacle to the goal of open dialogue.

Even though students had difficulty expressing disagreement, the main challenge in moving dialogue forward was not disagreement itself. Rather, my findings suggest that the core challenge for students in dialogue was the capacity to approach disagreement and differences in ways that promote increased understanding of fellow dialogue participants, as well as contested issues.

Motivations and Capacities to Understand and Bridge Differences

While students engaged the challenges mentioned, they revealed motivations and capacities as they explained their approaches to the challenges of disagreement, representation of group identity, and building trust and openness. The previous section delineated the obstacles of disagreement and concurrence to the purpose of open dialogue. As a positive counterpoint, I now turn to the notions of cooperative and constructive contexts. While voicing disagreement proved a challenge across these cases, several students emphasized that the goal of disagreeing constructively was essential to the purpose of dialogue. For instance, in the theme of Navigating

Differences in Dialogue, students described their intention to understand peers who had experiences and backgrounds that differed from their own. In some cases, they also articulated their capacity to listen carefully to the meanings behind their peers' sociopolitical beliefs, and, in so doing, overturn assumptions about them.

As described in my conceptual framework, constructive controversy delineates the cooperative and integrative skills necessary for positive sociopolitical discourse. The benefits of a cooperative dialogue context are contrasted with a competitive context in which the participant's goal is to win over the opposing side (Deutsch, 1973; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). From an affective (i.e., emotional) standpoint, cooperative contexts engender heightened trust, and feelings of comfort in discussing opposing views. Furthermore, a cooperative dialogue also produces a more accurate understanding of others' views and their reasons for feeling the way they do, plus higher utilization of another's information (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). This process can result in more integrated positions, in which the reasoning and conclusions of different participants are synthesized.

As study participants described their efforts to incorporate dissimilar views into the group dialogue experience, they practiced such *synthesis of reasoning* (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). This was evident in the theme on Navigating Differences in Dialogue, and is represented in Proposition II. The students contributed to a cooperative dialogue environment by attempting to build common ground using peers' differing viewpoints. In contrast to the narrowed, convergent focus of concurrence mentioned above, students who displayed heightened interest when confronted with new and different information reflected an expanded attention to integrating diverse points of view into the discussion of sociopolitical issues.

Participants exhibited a curiosity toward understanding new information and diverging arguments related to contested issues, even at times when views conflicted with their own. Prior research on constructive controversy has discussed two particular concepts that encapsulate this attitude: epistemic curiosity and epistemic motivation (de Dreu & Carnevale, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 1985; 1995). When an individual's positions and rationales are challenged by opposing views, they might experience a sense of disequilibrium, uncertainty, and conceptual conflict. This draws out the individual's *epistemic curiosity* (Johnson & Johnson, 1985; 1995). This can motivate a search for new information (and potentially reflection on one's own rationales). Epistemic curiosity involves this seeking of more adequate reasons and new information in order to resolve the individual's conceptual conflict. *Epistemic motivation* refers to the inclination to gain an in-depth understanding of an experience (De Dreu, Nijstad & van Knippenberg, 2008). Through this motivation, individuals are willing to delve into unknown or diverse angles of a topic.

Through these motivations and capacities, I propose that some students are able to better understand how peers derive their views, learn more about their current roles in societal structures, and learn new aspects of the sociopolitical issues under discussion. Specifically, I suggest that students displayed epistemic curiosity and motivation in the findings on Learning about the Issues in New Ways. When confronted with different views, some students exhibited attitudes that were primed to consider new information and tried to understand arguments that were not in line with their own. Their curiosity to understand the issues more fully led them to seek information from their peers in dialogue, and to consider new information and arguments in relation to their existing knowledge.

The concepts of epistemic curiosity and motivation also resonated in my findings on students Admitting Lack of Knowledge. As study participants noticed a gap in understanding or information about an issue, they sought additional perspectives and information. In some instances they would perform further research on the issues. Furthermore, they actively considered arguments and information from peers whose views differed from their own. In contrast to accounts of avoiding conflict in dialogue, they saw opposing claims as a jumping-off point to investigating more about an argument or issue.

By emphasizing this quality that some students revealed, I draw attention to the potential role of epistemic motivation in sparking individual pursuit of understanding in contested issues dialogues. Research on constructive conflict claims that individuals who possess a motivation to better understand the world—or *epistemic motives* underpinning their thinking (de Dreu & Carnevale, 2003)—will be more able to avoid biases and be creative in conflicts (in Carnevale, 2006). These study participants displayed broad epistemic motives in their willingness to probe the conflictual aspects of issues with their peers. This finding may add further nuances of understanding to the current literature on constructive conflict processes wherein individuals confront incomplete or conflicting information on sociopolitical issues.

Creativity in Dialogues on Contested Sociopolitical Issues

Aspects of the creativity lens delineated in the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter II intersect with the motivations and capacities to understand and bridge differences above. This lens appears to support and relate to multiple concepts present in participants' approaches to seeking new and deeper understanding within sociopolitical issues dialogue. While I anticipated that the creative process would be pronounced in students' approach—that is, distinctive and straightforward to detect—I found that this was not actually the case. As I incorporated the

creativity lens, I discerned creativity in approaching challenging dialogues as a supporting feature rather than a distinct, standalone process.

While my analysis did not identify a unified way that creativity operates through participants' approaches to challenging sociopolitical dialogues, features of the creativity lens I derived from the existing literature can be found in the data. This lens of creativity within social conflict builds on studies of constructive dialogues and deliberative communication. Yet, it highlights individual exploration and meaning-making as a creative process. More specifically, the concept of creativity based on individual development of new meaning led me to consider students' processes of discovery and exploration within dialogue challenges. The following sections discuss the primary components of creativity, highlight the relevant findings from this study, and draw tentative interpretations from this data on the applicability of individuals' creative attributes and processes to dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues.

Aspects of Creativity. In Chapter II, the dissertation connected prior research on creativity characteristics to social conflict studies. This current study was guided by a creativity construct that encompasses features in creative decision making and creative motivation (Amabile 1996; Sternberg 2000, 2006).

Qualities that are embedded in creative decision making include openness to different views, redefining problems, questioning assumptions, cognitive flexibility, and tolerance of ambiguity (Sternberg 2006; Koestler, 1964). These qualities are highlighted in this study because they were also identified in empirical research as aspects of deliberative and constructive dialogue (Hess, 2009; Johnson et al., 2000). Researchers have also established that creativity is multidimensional, finding that it involves multiple components including behavioral, cognitive, and personality factors (Kelly, 2004; Sternberg, 2006). Cognitive attributes of creativity include

divergent thinking and problem solving (Kelly, 2004). Cognitive flexibility is the ability to bring ideas together “in new or useful ways” (Isen, 1999; Koestler, 1964). Along with this flexibility, an attitude of tolerance involves openness to experience and different ideas (Kelly, 2004).

My findings offer examples of students' application of creativity in dialogue that can expand on the concepts already put forward in the above literature. For example, several study participants expressed their interest in understanding those who hold different opinions, displaying the *openness to different views* outlined by Kelly (2004). In particular, a *tolerance of ambiguity* can serve students as they lack information or confront opposing arguments on sociopolitical issues. When confronted with problems with ill-defined solutions, or when lacking full information, some students conveyed their willingness to consider new information and seek additional data.

The findings of this study also illustrate that participants demonstrated a *redefining problems* aspect of creativity when they redefined conflict in dialogue as a chance to probe in greater depth about why people hold opposing views. This worked hand-in-hand with curiosity and openness as they sought to understand the experiences of peers that led to perspectives that differed from their own. Recall Emma and Bella, for example, who each redefined conflict around sociopolitical issues as an opportunity to understand the reasons behind others' contrasting positions in dialogue. At the root of this was their desire to comprehend the issue more fully, and in doing so they clearly demonstrated this particular creative approach.

Several students in the study described *questioning their unexamined assumptions* that they held about peers. A few students were also open to examining their own positions on contested issues. For instance, study participants such as Diana and Bella demonstrated their capacity for *critical reflection*, one of the communication processes identified as central in prior

research on intergroup dialogue (Gurin et al., 2012), as well as in deliberative dialogue (Nussbaum, 2002). Critical reflection occurs when students self-assess their assumptions and biases, and examine others' assumptions and biases. Critical reflection also examines the roles of socialization, power, privilege, and inequality in reinforcing the status quo.

Relatedly, “self-critical reason” involves evaluating one’s own logic, reasons, and biases (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 294) and is a hallmark of deliberative dialogue. Critically examining one’s own frame of reference and finding common ground is crucial to progressing beyond entrenched positions. Several study participants demonstrated this critical reflection and self-critical reason about their own biases and assumptions as they examined their own roles and that of others within broader societal structures.

“Novel and Personally Meaningful” Interpretations in Dialogue. One of the key concepts through which this study was viewed focused on creativity as an ongoing process of development. In the “mini-c” conception of creativity, individuals enact processes that are defined as the “novel and personally meaningful interpretation of experiences, actions, and events” (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010, p. 195). This concept was applied to this study to determine ways that the study participants could personally construct new meaning in the context of dialogues on sociopolitical issues. Taking participants’ interpretations of challenges as a starting point, the study noted the kind of thinking, attitudes, and behaviors they described as being exploratory or novel for them, in responding to such challenges.

I drew particularly on “mini-c” creativity as a lens—and *not* as a checklist, measurement, or evaluative tool—for understanding the data. I therefore broadly apply this creativity construct to encompass attention to process, as I examine creativity as discovery and meaning-making for individuals in this study. I suggest that this developmental view of creativity—along with other

features of creativity outlined above—aligns with learning concepts (such as cognitive flexibility and epistemic motivation). These have been shown to contribute to learning within dialogue (Carnevale, 2006; Hess 2009; Johnson et al., 2000; Sternberg 2006).

While this appears to intersect with the set of learning concepts associated with dialogue, it may also offer a distinct angle. That is, the developmental creativity lens may spotlight the moments when students uncover perspectives and knowledge with which they are unfamiliar. This is possible as they encounter divergent information and arguments on contested issues. Therefore, this creativity lens may offer a unique perspective on individuals' personal discovery and exploration.

Understanding Motivations and Attitudes in Dialogue Challenges through the Lens of Creativity. Through the students' accounts, the study examined their attitudes and motivations associated with engaging the challenges of contested issues dialogues, which, I assert, contribute to their process of exploration and discovery. This is compatible with the creativity construct I derived as part of the framework.

While acknowledging personal factors, the confluence model of creativity asserts that these creative characteristics are not “innate” traits, but rather take shape in people's decisions and attitudes (Sternberg, 2005, p.18). I suggest that this “creative attitude” (ibid.) may be present in participants' approach to challenging sociopolitical dialogues, particularly as they make sense of divergent arguments and new knowledge about issues in the dialogue. The chapter elaborated on such attitudes above, in connection with examples of students' openness, tolerance and flexibility.

Motivation is another component of the creativity construct, as research shows creativity is rare without passion and focus on the work (Amabile, 1983, 1996; Sternberg, 2006). Inquiry

generally starts from a “focal point” that “captures the participants’ attention, holds it, and motivates them to investigate” (Johnson & Johnson, 2014, p. 422). This resonates with the notion of epistemic curiosity and epistemic motivation I previously described, as (respectively) the attitude and drive toward uncovering new knowledge in order to deepen understanding of a topic. In considering participants’ narratives, I call this process of developing new understanding of self, others, and issues as their “intrapersonal exploration” in dialogue. Underlying this process, students conveyed their motivation toward exploration as they encountered differences in belief, knowledge, and background.

From students' accounts showing curiosity to learn from and about their peers in dialogue, I interpret that some students may experience an “interpersonal spark toward exploration” that the dialogue interaction itself can elicit. This interpersonal exchange can prompt students to think through new and different ways to comprehend contested issues. It may also prompt them to consider the experiences and rationales of those who hold divergent views. For instance, recall that some students listened closely to concerns of peers in dialogue who came from different groups and backgrounds. Listening to and exchanging views with peers of other backgrounds caused them to re-examine their notions of identities and how they perceive certain sociopolitical issues from the angle of another group/community. In contrast to closing off or resisting contrasting views, students with such attitudes and motivations may see differences in opinions and experiences as a starting point to learning more about themselves, their peers, and the contested issues discussed.

These distinct concepts on exploration emerged from this research and could be seen as an extension of having applied this creativity construct to the study of students’ approaches to challenges in dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues. Therefore, I propose that both the

internal motivation and the attitude to explore beliefs, knowledge, and experiences, along with the external exchange from interaction with peers in dialogue, may work together to contribute to this process of exploration for students.

Implications. In terms of how these observations pertaining to creativity outlined above fit into the wider field of contested issues dialogue, conceptualizing students' developing creativity may have implications for how we view personal construction of knowledge and meaning in such dialogues. I suggest that further study of individuals' creative attributes and their personal creative processes may help educational researchers examine how students understand their process of seeking and making sense of notions that are new to them in contested issues dialogues. Such qualities may prove useful as students confront challenges that arise from participants' opposing viewpoints in dialogue.

Given the unresolved nature of contested sociopolitical issues and knowledge pertaining to these issues, tapping into such a creative learning process could serve students in increasing their understanding and insights on issues. Due to the dynamic nature of dialogue over contested issues, students could grow from a discovery-oriented approach about perspectives that are new to them or divergent from their own. As students discuss sociopolitical issues with peers who hold different perspectives from their own, the quality of dialogue itself could benefit from students practicing such an attitude of discovery and exploration of new meanings in approaching the issues.

Community Through Dialogue

I suggest that a sense of growing community in dialogue can contribute to students' motivation to sustain engagement, despite the challenges. As I proposed in Chapter IV, the concept of community ran throughout this study, and in particular within the themes about

identity and group representation, learning in relation to others, and in motivation to sustain dialogue engagement.

Two facets of the concept of community emerged in participants' accounts in particular. One facet was the affiliation they had toward those who shared their social identity, including categories of race/ethnicity, gender, religion, low-income status, and more. The second facet of community emerged in students' descriptions of the increased understanding they gained during the dialogue process itself. As they learned about the issues, fellow participants, and themselves, they expressed appreciation for developing a relationship with peers around growing understanding of the contested issues.

As seen in the subtheme on Understanding oneself in relation to others for example, some students sought to bridge understanding with other communities through dialogues. While learning about another group's rights or equity concerns, they conveyed their willingness to take action to support other communities. This was echoed in the subtheme on the Reward of seeing community and trust build through dialogues. Students mainly conveyed openness to peers' different views after building communication and trust over time. Therefore, it appears worthwhile to consider the extent to which sustained dialogue enhances receptiveness to new and different viewpoints among participants.

The practice of forming alliances through dialogue is a core element in intergroup communication research (Gurin et al., 2012; Nagda, 2006). Alliance building, in the literature on intergroup dialogue, takes place when students seek common goals across identity groups and work together through conflicts (ibid.). Study participants exercised this concept of alliance building when they made the effort to learn about the rights and equity concerns faced by groups besides their own. By relating to peers of other identity groups in dialogue, they also conveyed

that they learned something “new” about their own identities and their positions in society. They implied that community could arise among different identity groups through the shared process of learning in dialogue.

In the previous section on challenges in dialogue, I described study participants’ emotions that permeated the challenges they experienced in dialogue. Yet it is also necessary to highlight the positive emotions many participants felt as they developed community through dialogue. These feelings included connectedness, trust, and concern for fellow participants, which were reflected in the student reports of learning about themselves, others, and the issues with their peers. With this second notion of community, students revealed that they understood a sense of community that researchers describe as encompassing concern that reaches across differences (Young, 1990, in Burbules, 1993). Community is characterized here by the shared feelings of “concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection, and hope” (Burbules, 1993, p. 41) which can bond people through such an endeavor. Khuri (2004) proposed that the positive interpersonal feeling that can develop toward other dialogue participants is one reason why students engage in dialogue.

Such feelings of community that the dialogue process itself can engender among its participants may be a key reason students engage in and sustain engagement in dialogue. They might be drawn to continue dialogue to experience the feelings (such as respect, concern, and appreciation) that grow out of such a community. This claim builds on Khuri’s (2004) notion that students participate in dialogue not only to increase knowledge or effect social change, but also for affective (that is, emotional) reasons stemming from a deepening sense of membership in the dialogue community. My claim that students may sustain engagement, in part, to reap the rewards of community formed through dialogue therefore extends on this notion. Students in this

study show that this sense of membership can arise from a growing understanding of themselves and others in the interaction. And it may be heightened through pursuing a common purpose of understanding the contested issues students deem important to society.

Sustaining Motivation for Dialogue

The findings in this study show that students have motivations and capacities for developing their understanding of themselves, their peers in dialogue, and contested sociopolitical issues. Thus far, researchers have not attended specifically to college students' motivations to persist through challenges of sociopolitical dialogue. There is therefore a gap in our knowledge about what motivates students to sustain engagement in such dialogue, despite the difficulties.

This study's findings indicate students' sense of developing community with their peers and gaining trust through dialogue as a substantial reward. It also highlights their passion for contributing to intergroup understanding and possible solutions on these issues as a primary motivation to sustain participation, even as they experienced difficulties in dialogue.

Another key reason students continued to engage in dialogue was their commitment to understanding the issues and making a positive social impact. Several students saw sociopolitical dialogue as a necessary stage in building understanding between different people/groups and issues, in conjunction with taking action to address the issues. This finding echoes that of Nagda et al. (2009), who found students had an increased sense of responsibility in challenging discrimination through dialogue. Some students aimed to apply the understanding they attained through dialogue to act in support of human rights/civil liberties, to redress inequalities, or to serve as an ally to other communities.

It is in this way that Proposition VI begins to address this missing piece in the existing literature on college students' sustained motivation in contested issues dialogues. More specifically, the findings of this study offer insight on the personal and social-ethical motivations that help students continue their commitments to dialogue despite its challenges.

The Case of "UNI" and Possible Limitations

Institutional characteristics shape the findings of this case study, which focused on the experiences of a small sample of undergraduate students at a highly selective, private university, dubbed "UNI." It illuminates students' challenges in dialogue and approaches to challenges from an institutional context that is academically competitive and well-resourced. Therefore, the findings of my study should be viewed in light of the features above, and their potential influence on students participating in dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues. This study exists in this particular academic and campus environment. While research was undertaken to understand such experiences, with the potential for providing insights for others, the knowledge stemming from this study is tied to the participants in the UNI case.

The choice of UNI as the site was not meant to portray college students' dialogue experiences broadly. The study's purpose was not to produce generalizable conclusions, but instead to illustrate ways that certain students in this highly selective, private liberal arts and service-oriented university might interpret and respond to the challenges of contested issues dialogues. UNI emphasizes not only academic excellence, but also fosters various forms of student civic engagement, including peer dialogues that focus on contemporary sociopolitical issues impacting society.

The study participants were not part of a single dialogue group but, rather, hailed from a variety of dialogue groups. Yet many descriptions of challenges, approaches, and motivations

within dialogue seemed congruent across my sample, regardless of their membership in different dialogue groups. Part of the findings also resonated with aspects of literature on intergroup dialogue programs and constructive conflict, as I discussed earlier in this chapter. Thus, elements of the literature on structured dialogue appear applicable to my findings, to an extent, even when examining findings of these students across various dialogue groups.

Notably, while this study was open and advertised to all genders, only female-identifying students opted to participate. Although this study did not target females specifically in the study design, this fact does narrow the sample represented. Moreover, students of color from lower-income backgrounds were overrepresented in the study relative to the student body of UNI. The fact that more study participants were students of color appears compatible with the prior intergroup dialogue research which demonstrates that students of color view involvement in intergroup dialogue as more important than their white student peers (Nagda et. al, 2004). Also, the majority of the sample received federal aid only eligible to students who demonstrated a background of high financial need. Three out of seven participants (around 43 percent of the study sample) were first-generation college students, defined by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018). This contrasted with the 18 percent of first-generation undergraduates in UNI's most recently admitted class.

The findings are thus skewed toward these members of certain socio-economic groups, even though they comprise a smaller proportion of students overall at UNI. Further, the sample was not representative of college student enrollment generally nationwide at private universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

Though my study did not delve into political affiliation in dialogue, Another element to the homogeneity of the sample was their political affiliation: they all identified as democrats. In

anticipation that politics is often woven into sociopolitical dialogues, my pre-interview questionnaire asked students to disclose their political affiliation. Yet, contrary to my assumption, none of the participants raised political affiliation as a specific factor in their experiences of dialogue challenges.

Thus, members of the sample brought their backgrounds and identities to the various issues raised and the interactions themselves, whether it was race or gender issues, political affiliation, or other issues. It is important to note that if the sample had been composed of different groups, the challenges, strategies toward challenges, as well as the learning and motivations exhibited by the group of students within dialogue may have been different.

Future Research

Although not by design, the findings associated with the characteristics of this sample might serve as a foundation for others setting out to research these particular populations in college dialogue engagement. Even though women, people of color, and lower-income populations have traditionally been in the minority at the most highly selective colleges, students who identify as such are growing in representation at various institutional types (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) and gaining visibility. Thus, further research may continue to examine their involvement in sociopolitical dialogues and their particular perspectives on the challenges they may face.

Having noted that the study sample was restricted by the limited sector of participants, future research based on this study might include a larger sample of college students in order to gauge variations in types of challenges students experience, with the potential for generating other themes. Future studies may consider including other populations—such as male or non-binary students—that are typically present within the undergraduate student body. Since all study

participants identified as female (incidentally, not by design), a study that includes male- or non-binary identifying students may result in a distinct set of challenges, approaches, and motivations. Similarly, the inclusion of a broad range of political affiliations may generate other findings.

Conducting this study at different institutional types with other demographic constitutions and college cultures may yield insights on the scope of challenges that students of other backgrounds and contexts encounter, as well as their processes in handling such challenges. Researchers could also opt to use these findings to focus on a particular structured dialogue program, informing future study of challenges that a particular program's participants face. Observation of program dialogues in real time would provide further data on discussion dynamics.

In order to address obstacles to and understand the conditions for more open and constructive dialogue dynamics, educational research may seek to increase understanding of how students' emotions and their root causes operate in challenging sociopolitical dialogues. Further inquiry into the affective layer of their reservations or difficulties is important groundwork to understanding how to create conditions necessary for a more open and accepting dialogue process. The pressures I noted from students' accounts have potential implications for the direction a dialogue takes. These findings describe how emotions such as fear, pressure, and anxiety can deter peer sharing in dialogue. Therefore, further efforts to examine their root causes and address the effects are important to overcoming obstacles in dialogue.

In addition to noting the reasons that impede dialogue and students' emotions surrounding these, researchers may also use this study's findings to further examine the positive affect (emotions) students may experience from dialogue interactions and their influence on

continued participation. In particular, this study attends to the affective layers of both challenges and the sense of community with peer participants that students report in dialogue. The fears and anxieties students expressed may clue researchers into reasons for impediments in dialogue. The positive feelings of connectedness and respect within dialogue groups offer an indication of what sustains students to continue engaging in difficult dialogues. Future studies that pay attention to emotions connected to challenges—as well as those associated with rewards—of dialogue may provide a window into how college students experience peer dialogue on contested sociopolitical issues. Studies on students’ personal perspectives may help higher education practitioners create more favorable conditions for dialogue.

Future research may also extend on this study’s findings on students’ motivations and capacities to seek knowledge and understanding in sociopolitical dialogues. These attitudes and capacities to learn within dialogue could prove critical to addressing challenges students face when discussing contested sociopolitical issues with peers.

While this study has examined individual qualities to seek greater knowledge (such as epistemic motivation) and incorporate different arguments (for instance, synthesis of reasoning), future studies might examine whether and how these qualities work in group interactions, especially through observations of dialogues. Such studies might inquire into how these and other qualities may contribute to learning among peers during sociopolitical dialogue.

My goal was to inquire into students’ internal processes. Yet, future research could pair these internal processes with the opportunity to observe students' actual experiences and in-the-moment interactions.

Policy Implications

Policy leaders have defined the aims and purposes of promoting student dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues. Higher educational policy institutions and leaders espouse implementing activities that help students build skills in productive dialogue with peers holding different viewpoints (Eagan et al. 2017; Campus Compact, 2012). In order for colleges to provide a space conducive to discussion and mediation of conflicting views, as the Higher Education Research Institute has urged (Eagan et al., 2017), educational policy leaders should be aware of the obstacles as well as the opportunities students face in discussing these issues with their peers.

Using this study's findings, higher education leaders may implement policies and allocate resources to provide campus life or student development centers with training in dialogue education for the group's or center's staff and student leaders. Part of these dialogue trainings may focus on addressing obstacles that impede students from having constructive dialogue, or that negatively affect their dialogue experiences. For instance, participants cited admitting a lack of knowledge about sociopolitical topics discussed as a difficulty in dialogue that inhibits engagement. Knowing that this is one possible obstacle, educators may consider incorporating certain constructive approaches study participants described—such as acknowledging where they need more information and/or requesting it from others with more experience—into dialogue materials and preparing students for such challenging scenarios in trainings. Such a proactive approach from leaders to identifying, normalizing, and addressing potential barriers to dialogue may help students engage more effectively. In order to ensure resources and support for this kind of dialogue training, it is up to institutional leaders to recognize its importance, and to prioritize it.

Higher education leaders may apply these findings on students' challenges, approaches, learning, and motivations within sociopolitical dialogue to make decisions on institutional strategic initiatives in campus life/student development, for instance, in attracting and retaining students in dialogue programs. Working with this data on obstacles and opportunities in dialogue, leaders can better assess factors that bear on sustained participation in dialogue.

Higher education leaders may therefore take broader steps to prioritize facilitated peer dialogue opportunities in a manner that is more accessible and integrated across campus life and student development. Getting students to participate and discuss opposing views is critical to the impact of dialogue in addressing controversial issues. Leaders may be informed from this study's findings as to how they could create dialogue through educational training and materials and activities that are geared toward attracting and retaining students from a variety of backgrounds and those holding diverse viewpoints. Through broad institutional efforts, colleges may increase the variety of voices participating in peer dialogues and prepare students for interpersonal dialogue challenges that stem from a diversity of perspectives.

Postsecondary institutions vary in their views and approaches toward student engagement in sociopolitical dialogue, including when and how they place their emphasis on extracurricular opportunities for such group interactions. While institutional priorities may differ with regard to dialogue organization, it is interesting to consider reasons for a sustainable, longer-term approach to dialogue opportunities. As certain students in the study were responding to current social upheaval, they were also making sense of their identities among their peers. For example, recall Bella's attempt to understand when and how to express her views on race issues as a white woman, and Grace's shift in representation as a Black athlete as she reflected on dialogues with peers. This and prior studies have shown that meaning making in dialogue is a process which

can be enhanced by ongoing conversations. As such, this highlights the importance of postsecondary institutions encouraging a sustained, ongoing approach rather than a reactive approach to incorporating dialogue engagement in the college co-curricular experience.

Implications for Practice

This study has revealed attitudes, modes of thinking, and behaviors of participants that they used in challenging sociopolitical dialogues with their peers. Taking the findings on challenges, along with students' meaning-making and approaches in challenging dialogues, institutional and dialogue program leaders may construct programs that target these key aspects of dialogue. For instance, facing defensiveness was a notable challenge that appeared in the findings. Educators could prepare students to address such defensiveness by incorporating activities that let students practice the approaches taken by these study participants to make others more receptive to their views, such as using hypotheticals and analogies instead of resorting to personal criticism.

Based on this study's findings about students' struggles in dialogue, I recommend that higher education practitioners design programs that account for significant challenges, including expressing opposing views, social pressure, tensions in identity representation, and building openness and trust. It is important for practitioners to incorporate into such programs the discussion or activities that recognize students' inner struggles and normalize them as a part of the process of dialogue. This is a crucial step before moving into deeper exchanges on contested issues, which by their nature can be personally loaded.

One prominent aspect of student development found within challenging dialogues was participants' ability to articulate their purpose for engagement, reinforcing this in times of challenge. Another aspect students exhibited was their awareness of skills they wished to

develop—or continue to grow—through ongoing participation in dialogues. Students displayed learning about their role in the dialogue in two areas, which I break down into *skills for better dialogue* and *skills for self-regulation or self-care*. Their intention in building such qualities was to improve their own self-care within difficult dialogues, as well as to improve interactions as a whole in the dialogues.

As my analysis has also detailed the rich meanings and understandings that students derive from such dialogues, I recommend that practitioners create explicit opportunities and activities to cultivate students' sense of purpose and their developing skills within dialogues. Overall, I suggest that practitioners incorporate ways for students to take note of their process in terms of their responses to challenges, so that they may consciously reflect on their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors throughout difficult dialogues. With these findings, educators may consider elements that may be incorporated into the training or structure of dialogue to promote students' exploration of meanings and reasons underlying their conflicting positions.

Lastly, this study's findings articulate a range of student motivations—including personal relationships, positive civic and social impact, and supporting communities' rights and liberties—for continued engagement in dialogue, despite its challenges. I therefore invite practitioners to build into dialogue programs prompts and exercises that tap into students' broader motivations to sustain them through periods of difficulty in dialogue.

One objective of this study was to highlight student approaches within contested issues dialogue that expand educators' understanding of students' capacities to engage in difficult dialogues. The intent is that staff and dialogue leaders link these findings to their own practice. The hope is that these findings offer higher education and dialogue leaders deepened understanding of students' process and meaning making in difficult dialogues on current

sociopolitical issues. Further, they may expand upon these findings of students' creative, constructive approaches and motivation to inform their strategies to support students in facing the challenges of such dialogues.

Concluding Thoughts

I pursued this study with the belief that it is necessary to look not only at the ideal outcomes of dialogue, but also to examine the challenges students may face and their process of making sense of obstacles that occur in dialogue. I therefore set out to uncover students' thinking and approaches that may contribute to their development during difficult instances of sociopolitical dialogue. I was especially struck that many participants displayed such self-reflexivity in articulating their own biases and weaknesses within dialogue. They then reflected further on the process of addressing these biases, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.

Students' exhibited awareness of skills, qualities and attitudes they wished to further develop. Yet, they also were able to acknowledge the limits of their influence on peers' views. In balancing what they could improve about their approaches to challenges and acceptance of themselves and others, students were able to reinforce the purpose of dialogue as an exchange of views (rather than a debate), and their own role in these interchanges.

I was struck by participants' ability to reaffirm their personal purpose for participating in dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues, and harnessing this to persevere through the challenges of dialogue. Their sense of inner purpose—rooted in personal relationships, supporting communities, and positive social/civic impact—served to sustain many students to continue their engagement in difficult dialogues.

My hope is that this study offers the field of postsecondary education a better understanding of the ways that college students can make sense of and sustain engagement

within challenging sociopolitical dialogues with their peers. This study aims to contribute to research on contested sociopolitical dialogue in college by illuminating students' challenges, approaches to challenge, and their learning and motivation within challenges of dialogue outside the classroom. Through analyzing participants' accounts on the ways they negotiate disagreement and conflict over controversial topics, it is intended to offer greater understanding on this critical aspect of issues-oriented dialogue.

I encourage higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to work collectively to design and implement programs that account for student concerns in dialogue detailed in this study, building upon this foundation to address the intricacies of students' challenges within dialogue. I also suggest that leaders expand on the opportunities for students to reflect on their own roles and identities that emerge through challenging dialogues, emphasizing what they can learn from conflict and differences they encounter among their peers.

Finally, I suggest that through this study's findings leaders tap into the remarkable motivation that college students have communicated to sustain themselves despite challenges, which has been under-explored in prior research. With support for expressed student challenges and promotion of their personal motivations, higher educational leaders can improve the prospect of engendering more supportive, open, and inclusive dialogue for a diversity of college students.

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Appendix A—Participant Recruitment Email

Invitation to Participate in a Paid Interview Study

Columbia University – Teachers College

To: Undergraduate Students

Please read the full message for details on participating in this paid study for a dissertation:

Eligibility:

Are you an undergraduate student who has participated in one or more

dialogues/discussions with fellow college students about **current socio-political issues** since entering college?

Have you participated in such dialogues/discussions in an extracurricular context, *outside of* academic courses?

If so, you are invited to participate in a **paid interview study** to explore undergraduate students' **experiences of challenge within dialogues/discussions on contested socio-political issues, and how students understand and engage such challenges.**

What are socio-political issues? Current sociopolitical issues are those which divide public opinion. Examples include—but are not limited to—police reform, gun control, racial profiling, same sex marriage, abortion, immigration policies, and more⁹.

Compensation: You will be compensated with a \$30 USD Amazon electronic gift card for your participation.

Study Involvement:

- **Questionnaire** - Complete an online questionnaire about your educational, extracurricular, and demographic background (approximately 15 minutes).
- **Individual Interview** - Participate in an audio-recorded, virtual interview, responding to questions asked by the primary researcher about the topic (approximately 1 to 1.5 hours). Virtual interviews will be done via an online meeting/conferencing application (such as Zoom). During the individual interview, you will be asked to discuss any experiences of challenge while participating in dialogues on socio-political issues.
- **Dialogue Observation(s) (Optional)** - The researcher may be permitted to virtually observe dialogue(s) organized by your dialogue group/program. Optional observations are intended to help the researcher understand dialogue contexts. These will not be recorded; only handwritten notes will be taken, omitting any identifying information.

It is not necessary to be a part of these optional dialogue observations to be a study participant. If you happen to be part of dialogue(s) observed by the researcher, no

⁹ Procon.org

additional action is needed, and this will not take additional time outside of your own involvement with the dialogue(s).

Total Study Involvement: Approximately 1.5 to 2 hours of study participation. (This does not include optional participation in dialogues which may be observed by the researcher, if feasible.)

Note: All data collection (questionnaire, interview, and optional dialogue observation) will be conducted **virtually**.

This study focuses on **individual experiences** and perspectives. It is not a study about any student program or group.

Confidentiality:

All information obtained from your participation in this study will be held strictly confidential. Precautions will be taken to minimize the possibility of anyone discovering or guessing a participant's identity, such as using a pseudonym or code instead of names.

Next Steps to Participate:

If you are interested in being part of this study, please email the researcher indicating your interest as soon as possible, along with any questions you may have:

Tai Yee J. Ho (she/her), email: [redacted]

You will then be contacted with further instructions.

About the researcher:

This dissertation study is being conducted by Tai Yee Ho, a doctoral candidate at Columbia University-Teachers College in the Higher and Postsecondary Education Program. She also works as Associate Director, Career Advising at the Center for Career Development at Princeton University.

Appendix B—Informed Consent For Participants

INFORMED CONSENT

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in this research study called “Towards a Developmental Understanding of College Students’ Approaches to Challenges of Contested Issues Dialogues: A Case Study.”

You may qualify to take part in this research study because:

You are an undergraduate student, at least 18 years old, who has participated in a college-based group dialogue/discussion on current sociopolitical issues since entering college.

Approximately 8 to 20 individuals will participate in this study and it will take 1.5 to 2 hours of your time to complete over the course of one to two days. This entails separate dates to complete the initial questionnaire (approximately 15 minutes) and the individual interview (approximately 1-1.5 hours).

Please note: This study focuses on individual experiences and perspectives. It is not a study about any particular program or group. Recruiting from college-based dialogue/discussion programs or groups simply helps the researcher to identify students who participate in dialogues/discussions on sociopolitical issues.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

This study is being done to explore undergraduate students’ experiences of challenge within dialogues on contested sociopolitical issues, and how students understand and engage such challenges. Contested sociopolitical issues are characterized as those which divide public opinion.¹⁰

Specifically, the study seeks to uncover a) what, if any, challenging experiences do students have with reference to such dialogues, b) how students approach challenges within such dialogues, and c) what, if any, meanings they derive from the challenging dialogic experiences.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If you decide to participate, the primary researcher will ask you to complete *a* questionnaire for biographical and demographic data and individually interview you.

All data collection (questionnaire, interview, and optional observation) will be conducted **virtually**. Due to COVID-19 guidelines/restrictions, in-person study activities are **not** permitted.

- 1) **Questionnaire.** You will be asked to fill out an electronic questionnaire about your educational, extracurricular, biographical background and demographic information. This will take about fifteen (15) minutes.

¹⁰ Examples of issues include—but are not limited to—police reform, gun control, racial profiling, same sex marriage, abortion, immigration policies, and more. – Procon.org

- 2) **Interview.** You will be asked to participate in an individual interview. Virtual interviews will be done via an online meeting/conferencing application (such as Zoom). During the individual interview you will be asked to discuss any experiences of challenge while participating in dialogues on contested issues, and how you handled the challenges.

This interview will be audio-recorded. After the audio recording is written down (transcribed) and analyzed, the audio recording will be deleted. **If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate. With your consent to be audio-recorded for the interview, the researcher will notify you when the audio-recorder is started and stopped.**

The interview will take approximately **1 to 1.5 hours**. You will be given a pseudonym or false name in order to keep your identity confidential.

- 3) **Observation(s) (Optional).** The researcher may also virtually observe 1 to 3 group dialogues that are part of the existing dialogue group, if permitted by the coordinator. It is not necessary to be part of a dialogue observed by the researcher to be part of the study.

If you happen to be in a dialogue observed by the researcher, no additional action is needed, and this will not take additional time outside of your own involvement with the dialogues.

The virtual observation(s) will serve as context for the researcher's understanding of the dialogue and dialogue program/group. The observation(s) will not be audio-recorded. Instead, the researcher will be taking notes. Notetaking during observation will not identify you or other dialogue participants. Any content that might identify a dialogue participant will be omitted. All notes will be kept in a password-protected laptop and file and will be deleted after analysis.

LOCATION, FORMAT AND TIME:

All of these procedures described above will be done **virtually**.

Questionnaire: The questionnaire will be emailed to you via a password protected Qualtrics or Google Form, and you can submit your responses online.

Interview:

To be carried out virtually, the face-to-face interview will be done via an online meeting/conferencing platform, such as Zoom.

The interview will be audio-recorded. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate.

With your consent to be audio-recorded for the virtual interview, the researcher will notify you when the audio-recorder is started and stopped. After the audio recording is written down (transcribed) and analyzed, the audio recording will be deleted.

Observation(s) (optional):

If the group's dialogues meet virtually during this period, the researcher would request the coordinator's permission to access the group dialogue event(s) via an online conferencing tool in order to observe the group. The observation(s) will not be recorded, but the researcher will be taking notes. Notetaking during observation will not identify you or other dialogue participants.

All data collection will be done at times that you deem convenient for you (for example, break times, after classes, lunchtimes) to ensure that they do not impinge on classtime or other commitments.

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life while taking routine psychological assessments.

However, there are some risks to consider: You might feel discomfort in discussing challenges that you experienced during the dialogues or through your participation in dialogues. You do not have to answer any questions or share anything you do not want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. Your information will be kept confidential.

The researcher has site permission to conduct this study. Interviews will be conducted in a safe and private location, i.e., virtually via online meeting platform, as detailed above.

The primary researcher is taking precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of your name. The researcher will keep all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Your participation may benefit the field of postsecondary education to better understand the ways that college students make sense of and sustain engagement within challenging sociopolitical dialogues with their peers.

WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?

You will be compensated with a \$30 USD Amazon gift card for your participation at the end of the study.

There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?

The study is over when you have filled out the questionnaire and completed the individual interview. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you have not finished.

If you leave the study after completing the questionnaire, but before participating in the interview, you will not be compensated.

If you participate in the interview in any way—even if you choose not to complete the interview—you will still be compensated with the \$30 USD Amazon gift card.

PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY

The primary researcher will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer

that is password protected. What is on the audio recording will be written down, and the audio recording will then be destroyed after data analysis.

The primary researcher is taking precautions to keep participants' information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing a participant's identity, such as using a pseudonym or code instead of names. There will be no record matching a participant's real name with their code or pseudonym.

For quality assurance, the study team, the study sponsor (grant agency), and/or members of the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected from you as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?

This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the primary researcher. It is possible that the results of this study might be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Only pseudonyms will be used in the study, and all data will be de-identified or removed before publication or use for educational purposes. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published.

CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND OR VIDEO RECORDING

Audio recording is part of this research study. You choose whether to give permission to be recorded. **If you decide that you don't wish to be recorded you will not be able to participate in this research study.**

_____ I give my consent to be recorded

Signature

WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

___ I consent to allow written and audio-recorded materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College, Columbia University

Signature

___ **I do not** consent to allow written and audio-recorded materials viewed outside of Teachers College, Columbia University

Signature

OPTIONAL CONSENT FOR FUTURE CONTACT

The primary researcher may wish to contact you in the future. Please initial below to indicate whether or not you give permission for future contact.

The researcher may contact me in the future for information relating to this current study:

Yes _____ No _____
Initial Initial

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the primary researcher, Tai Yee Ho, Teachers College [redacted].

You can also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Monica Christensen [redacted].

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, Box 151. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

- I have read the Informed Consent Form and have been offered the opportunity to discuss the form with the researcher.
- I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty to future student status or grades, and services that I would otherwise receive.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at their professional discretion. The researcher will notify me if this is the case.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the researcher will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- Study data will be kept for three (3) years after the completion of the study.
- My data will not be used in further research studies.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent Form document

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study:

Print name: _____

Date: _____

Signature:

Email: _____

Appendix C–Participant Questionnaire

Student Questionnaire

Please respond to the questions below.

What is your academic class standing?

- First-year
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

Which term best describes your gender identity?

- Woman
- Man
- Transgender woman
- Transgender man
- Non-binary or gender queer
- Self identify:_____

What term best describes your Race/Ethnicity?

- Hispanic/Latino
- Black or African American, Non-Hispanic
- White, Non-Hispanic
- American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic
- Asian, Non-Hispanic
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic
- Two or more races, Non-Hispanic
- Race and/or Ethnicity Unknown

Are you an International Student?

- Yes
- No

Did you receive a Federal Pell Grant as part of your financial aid package?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

What is the highest level of education completed by either of your parents (or those who raised you)?

- Did not finish high school
- High school diploma or GED
- Attended college but did not complete degree
- Associates degree (A.A., A. S., etc)
- Bachelor's degree (B.A., B. S., etc)
- Master's degree (M.A., M.S., etc)
- Doctoral or professional degree (Ph.D., J.D., M.D., etc)

Where do you consider your home town and state/country?

Do you reside on- or off- campus?

What is your major?

What is your minor, if applicable?

What were your main interests (both academic and extracurricular) in high school?

What are your main interests (both academic and extracurricular) since starting college?

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?

Have you participated in any dialogue or discussion groups about current sociopolitical issues, now or in the past?

- Yes
- No

If you have participated in any dialogue or discussion groups about current sociopolitical issues, how long has been/was your total involvement (*Indicate number of times participated, OR weeks/months/semesters/years, if applicable*):

If you have participated in such a group, please briefly describe the organization of the dialogue/discussion group(s). *For instance, who are/were they organized by? How often do/did they meet? In what format (on social media platforms/ in person, on-campus, etc.)*

Please provide brief examples of the types of topics/issues discussed in the group(s).

Appendix D–Interview Guide

Interview Guide for Participant Interview

Duration of Interview: 1.5 hours Maximum

Date and Time: _____

Participant Pseudonym: _____

INTRODUCTION

You have been invited to participate in this paid interview study to explore undergraduate students' experiences of challenge within dialogues on contested socio-political issues, and how students understand and engage such challenges.

This interview will be audio-recorded. After the audio recording is written down (transcribed) and analyzed, the audio recording will be deleted. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate. If you consent to be audio-recorded for the interview, I will notify you when the audio-recorder is started and stopped. The interview will take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours.

Please feel free to let me know if you do not wish to respond to a question(s), or have concerns. You do not have to answer any questions or share anything you do not want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. Your information will be kept confidential.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Why did you decide to join the dialogue/discussion program?

What did you expect from participation in these dialogues?

What do you like most about the dialogues?

What ideas/topics/issues have you been excited to learn about?

Why?

CHALLENGES AND MEANING-MAKING

What ideas/topics/issues have you been more concerned about discussing?

Why?

Have there been any moments from these dialogues that you have found challenging?
In what way?

[Follow up: Why do you think (Insert Here: Participant's words on their challenges) has been challenging for you?]

What were your initial impressions/reactions?

How did you approach this challenge?

Can you tell me about your thought process throughout this instance?

What do you think was most helpful in this case? What was least helpful?

What, if anything, was meaningful about this instance for you?

[Optional] INFORMATION CHALLENGES

Can you describe a time when you had incomplete or vague data presented in a dialogue?
How did you handle incomplete or vague data?

Can you describe a time when you've encountered contradictory data presented in a dialogue?
How did you handle this?

[Optional] Have you ever felt pressure to respond in a particular way in a dialogue? What was the source(s) of pressure?
How did you respond?

Why [for what reasons] have you continued participating in these dialogues, even after encountering challenges?

(Probe): What keeps you interested or engaged in the dialogues?
What, if any, are your sources of support? Of Inspiration?

Can you describe briefly a time when you felt a dialogue went particularly well?

What do you think made it a success?
(Probe): What did you do in this instance?

NEW/DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES AND CHANGED THINKING

Have there been any instances in the dialogue when you said or did something that was new for you?

What was this new experience like?

Have you ever said or done something differently in dialogue from what you would usually say or do?

Why do you think you said or did this?

During or after dialogue--have there been any instances that you changed your mind about something (e.g., a topic) or someone (a group of people, a participant)?

What made you change your mind?

What, if anything, was meaningful about this instance for you?

During or after dialogue--have there been any instances when you found out something new about yourself, or changed how you saw yourself?

What brought this on?

What, if anything, was meaningful about this instance for you?

Have you ever proposed an idea or a solution in a dialogue?
If so, please describe.

What sparked/informed this idea or solution?

How was it received?

Have you ever contributed to someone else's idea or solution?
If so, please describe.

DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS AND EXPERIENCES

In these dialogues, what other experiences and understanding, outside of the dialogue, do you believe that you draw from?

(Probe): For example, are there experiences/skills/knowledge you draw from other work, courses, family, friends, activities?

Have you ever applied something you used or learned in dialogue in other contexts in your life? Please describe.

What skill or skills do you use that you believe are the most important in these dialogues?

How have you formed these skills?

Had you used any of the current skills before you participated in the program? Which, and in what capacity/context?

What are other skills or experiences that you'd like to build further to help you in such dialogues?

How would these be helpful?

How do you think you can build these skills and experiences?