THE INQUIRY EXPERIENCE: ENGAGING SEMINARS FOR FIRST AND SECOND YEAR STUDENTS

by

ELIZABETH WHITTAKER HUGGINS

(Under the Direction of Laura Dean)

ABSTRACT

Academic engagement plays an integral role in both student learning and student retention. Institutional initiatives, such as “High-Impact Practices” (HIPs), can foster student engagement, increase retention and create deep learning experiences (Kuh, 2008). National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) assesses the extent to which students are engaged in educationally purposeful activities; however, students’ experiences of engagement are also relevant. To benefit fully, students should participate in at least two high impact practices (Gonyea et al., 2008); however, many students do not have access to this opportunity, especially those who are historically underrepresented (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the extent to which engagement in a required high-impact Inquiry course, designed for first or second year students, affected students’ academic engagement. The following questions guided the study: How do students describe their engagement experiences in a high impact course (Inquiry) related specifically to peer and faculty interaction? How does the experience affect engagement in upper division courses? Using a priori coding, this confirmatory,
phenomenological study explored engagement using pre-determined NSSE Engagement Indicators: Learning with Peers and Experiences with Faculty. Using five focus groups to collect the data, 17 upper division participants (who had completed Inquiry in their first two years of college), shared engagement experiences. The results indicated that Inquiry participation enhanced engagement skills with both faculty and peers and provided skills to successfully transition into upper division. Because Inquiry is only one credit hour, and student decisions are affected by multiple factors, there was no specific evidence to support that the course influenced retention or major selection; however, it does appear to have enhanced communication with faculty and encouraged peer interaction. Therefore, implementing an Inquiry model for lower division engagement improves both faculty and peer interaction throughout the college experience. This project-based course benefits student success by requiring students to integrate ideas with diverse perspectives, engage with faculty, and participate in collaborative learning. Participants also provided recommendations for improving the course design, reflecting the Inquiry process of asking questions, sharing diverse perspectives and discussing potential solutions.

INDEX WORDS: Engagement, Faculty Interaction, First Year Experience, High Impact Practices (HIPs), Inquiry, NSSE, Peer Collaboration, Problem-Based Learning, Sophomores
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DEDICATION

I would like to take this opportunity to dedicate my work to the following:

First, and foremost, to God, with whom all things are possible, even returning to school at this point in my life. I have cherished our “conversations” on Henry Street and subsequently, your answered prayers. I learned firsthand that “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” Philippians 4:13.

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To my students who make my work an absolute joy and privilege.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Nearly two decades ago, higher education experts scrutinized the quality of undergraduate education, suggesting that institutions should reconsider those practices and activities that impact student learning on college campuses (AAC&U, 2002; Boyer Commission, 1998). While student learning is undoubtedly important, it is often measured using institutional persistence and retention rates (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). It is true that first and second year students are continuing to leave our universities and colleges at an alarming rate. Of all students who started college in fall 2015, 73.4% returned to college in fall 2016, but only 61.1% remained at their starting institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017). Thus, nearly one in eight students who start college in any fall term transfer to a different institution by the following fall (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017). Often colleges use the terms retention and persistence interchangeably; however, this creates confusion for institutional policymakers. Renn and Reason (2012) clarified the terms, stating that retention is what the organization does to retain students, but persistence is what the individual student does to remain goal-focused. The term institutions use to describe attrition may affect their programming and policies. In either case, the fact that students leave an institution prematurely results in an economic cost for schools and governments and a quality of life cost for students (Renn & Reason, 2012).
While one might assume that the retention concern is exclusive to freshmen students, it seems that second year students also depart institutions at an alarming rate (Schaller, 2010). The most important predictor of retention into the second year is an academically successful first year experience (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008). First year students are more likely to return if they feel they have successfully navigated their collegiate waters. However, the second year also remains tenuous for students, especially for underserved populations. In fact, sophomores who are first generation students might face the highest risk (Ishanti, 2006). This may be explained by the apparent lack of attention given to second year students by their institutions. There seems to be a frontloading of educational practices targeting first year students, but little institutional effort within the sophomore year (Cuseo, 2015; Young, Schriener, McIntosh, & National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2015). Currently, there exists little academic support specifically for second year students that serves to backload, bridge, and prepare students for transition into their second and third years (Cuseo, 2015). Understanding that persistence in first and second year is problematic, the challenge for educators now is to identify institutional practices that support student persistence and success.

The term “student success” must include not only the quantitative data related to retention and persistence rates, but also qualitative research in appreciating student learning outcomes (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). Understanding these outcomes will allow educators to understand how and what students learn from their college experience (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). In 2005, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) initiated the Liberal Education and America’s
Promise (LEAP) project in order to “align the goals for college learning with the needs of the new global century” (p. v). As a result, Kuh (2008) listed ten promising “high-impact” activities including: First-Year Experiences, Common Intellectual Experiences, Learning Communities, Writing-Intensive Courses, Collaborative Assignments and Projects, Undergraduate Research, Diversity/Global Learning, Service Learning, Community-Based Learning, Internships, and Capstone Courses/Projects. Kuh (2008) further explained that high impact practices (HIPs) are those activities which require six attributes: a) considerable time and effort on purposeful tasks; b) interaction with faculty and peers about “substantive matters”; c) discussions with diverse others; d) frequent and timely feedback from faculty; e) integration of knowledge, and f) active and collaborative learning strategies (Kuh, 2008, pp. 14-17).

Institutions which purposefully design HIPs throughout the college experience exhibit positive and lasting results on student learning, student engagement, and retention (Kuh, 2008). In fact, students who participate in a HIP during their first or second year are more likely to be retained (Provencher & Kassel, 2017). However, many students do not participate in HIPs until their third or fourth years, when retention issues are not as pressing; therefore, offering HIPs in the first two years provides additional benefits in terms of retention (Provencher & Kassel, 2017).

High impact practices include a variety of activities, such as first year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service or community-based learning, internships, and senior capstone projects (Kuh, 2008). Some are designed for first year students; most are
tailored for upper division students; very few are offered in the sophomore year (Provencher & Kassel, 2017).

One type of high impact pedagogy that seems particularly effective for student-faculty engagement and peer interaction is Inquiry. Inquiry-based methodology uses collaborative learning to promote discovery of knowledge, which not only improves learning, but also shows positive effects in terms of persistence (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Huh, Kuh, & Gayles, 2007; Hu, Kuh, & Li, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This type of structure moves students from reproductive learning to reconstructive learning, such that “students are taught how to think rather than what to think” (Marienau & Fiddler, 2002, p. 19). However, the question remains, how do students experience these academic strategies designed to encourage engagement through inquiry, particularly in their upper division years?

Quantitative data obtained through national surveys, such as the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE), may provide information about the degree to which students engage within the college setting. NSSE (2017) is used by many institutions to collect data about first-year and senior students' participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development.

Kuh identified particular engagement indicators imbedded within the survey. These indicators identify “distinct aspects of student engagement by summarizing students’ responses to sets of related survey questions” (NSSE, 2016, p. 14). For this study, I reviewed the engagement indicators regarding Experiences with Faculty (student-faculty interaction and effective teaching practices) and Learning with Peers.
(Collaborative Learning and Discussions with Diverse Others) both nationally and on this study’s research site (NSSE, 2016).

NSSE provides data about how and where engagement is implemented on a campus. However, there seems to be little information exploring students’ own thoughts about why those experiences presumably encourage engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). From a student’s perspective, what interests and excites them about their own learning? Quantitative data determines to what extent and where engagement exists on campus, but qualitative data may shed additional light on the student engagement experience. Therefore, a qualitative approach to data collection about engagement might provide a more complete view about the how and why engagement affects lower division students as they move into their upper division courses.

**Statement of Problem**

Good institutional planning, such as implementing High Impact Practices (HIPs), can positively affect academic engagement, learning, and persistence (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2008), and yet despite good intentions, first and second year students continue to prematurely depart from college. This may be due in part to the front loading (first year) and back loading (senior year) of HIPs. Some HIPs only highlight the needs of first year students, such as freshmen seminars and living/learning communities, and institutions often ignore the needs of the second year student (Schaller, 2010). As a result, institutions that provide only first year interventions may simply be delaying retention issues into the sophomore year (Gump, 2007).

On the other hand, most HIPs are centered in the last year of a student’s college experience, such as such as internships, undergraduate research, senior capstone courses,
or major-related study abroad experiences (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010). If the student
prematurely departs the institution their first or second year, the availability of upper
division HIPs is inconsequential. Ironically, the very practices designed to support
student success throughout college are often offered to students only in the later years of
their college experience.

Another concern in offering HIPs to upper division students is that they may miss
an opportunity to appropriately engage with faculty during their early years of college.
All too often, first year students are placed in core courses with large numbers of peers in
an overwhelming lecture hall and may not experience small group or one-on-one
interactions with faculty until their junior or senior year (Barefoot, 2005; Schreiner,
2010b). In postponing opportunities for students to interact positively with their faculty,
students may be unprepared for professional engagement in their upper division.
Ironically, it is student-faculty interaction that research has shown to be significant in
predicting student success (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993),
especially within the sophomore year (Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Jullierat, 2000;
Schaller, 2005; Schreiner, 2010a). Therefore, offering smaller seminar courses in the
first two years of college might increase student engagement and increase persistence,
offsetting the cost savings assumed with large lecture style courses (Barefoot, 2005).

However, the type of seminar courses also matters. If the seminar course is
simply lecture-style with regurgitation of information, it might not elicit the desirable
level of engagement with faculty, with peers, or with the topic. An inquiry-based
seminar, which uses collaborative learning to promote discovery of knowledge in small
group settings, might be more effective.
As far back as 1998, the Boyer Commission proposed that colleges and universities begin to introduce undergraduate students to the “knowledge discovery process by creating an inquiry-based learning experience for students” (Hu, Ku & Li 2008). In 2007, AAC&U recognized that “fundamental change is needed, at all levels of education, to help students develop the intellectual and practical skills basic to inquiry, innovation, and effective communication” (p. 31). The National Leadership Council recommended that quality-driven first year and second year programs place strong emphasis on inquiry and project-based learning that requires working collaboratively, integrating “knowledge with skills in analysis, discovery, problem solving, and communication” (AAC&U, 2007, p. 34). Therefore, it seems that inquiry as a pedagogy offers a high impact learning opportunity for students, especially in their first two years of college. However, inquiry and project-based learning requires interaction not only with faculty, but also with peers in class, which is another important piece of this study.

In addition to faculty interaction and inquiry-based learning, the final element of engagement for purposes of this study is positive collaboration with peers. Discussing topics with others of diverse backgrounds and learning to work with peers to solve problems creates an enriching environment of engagement that often leads to positive outcomes (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2005). Therefore, deferring opportunities for faculty interaction and peer collaboration until later years may also affect a student’s academic experience and sense of belonging on the front end of college.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the effect of an Inquiry course, offered to first and second year students at this study’s research site. Five years ago, the liberal arts
institution used as the setting for this investigation had consolidated with a primarily graduate level institution, creating a large research-focused university. As a result of this merger, Academic Affairs identified one credit hour in the core curriculum to be used in creating a new opportunity for student engagement. Twenty-four undergraduate academic departments collaborated to create a unique course, Inquiry 1000, reflecting the new institution’s research focus. Inquiry was designed as a project-based, lower division academic seminar core course, required for first or second year students. It was discussed that the ideal time to offer the course was between second term freshman year and end of sophomore year, in an effort to increase academic engagement and persistence. The Inquiry faculty met with students 1.25 hours a week for 10 weeks, for a total of 750 minutes of contact time. The course, taught by faculty from all disciplines, focused on topics of faculty research or interest. However, it was a student-driven course, where the faculty were trained to guide student learning, not provide it. Inquiry students grappled with topics, usually of their choice, and learned to discuss differences of opinion respectfully with diverse others. In teams, students then collaborated to create a research question about the topic, find answers to the question, and then present their findings at the end of semester Inquiry EXPO. Students were provided feedback by not only their professor, but other students and faculty who attended the EXPO.

I suggest that Inquiry is “high impact” for students because it meets the six characteristics of HIPs as defined by Kuh (2008). Students must 1) apply what they have learned, 2) receive feedback for improvement, 3) build relationships with faculty and peers, 4) be open to diverse perspectives, 5) publicly demonstrate their learning, and then
6) reflect on this experience (Kuh, 2008). The basic intent of Inquiry is to encourage engagement through peer collaboration and student faculty interaction.

To understand the foundation of engagement in the setting of my study, I structured my investigation around the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) and its Engagement Indicators. According to NSSE (2017), Engagement Indicators offer valuable information about various attributes of student engagement using particular questions found on the NSSE survey. NSSE provides four engagement indicators with two attributes for each indicator. I used two of the four Engagement Indicators to frame this study: Engagement with Peers (collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others) and Engagement with Faculty (student-faculty interaction and effective teaching practices). These indicators played an integral role in structuring the interview/focus group protocol. Focus group questions for this study were developed using NSSE engagement indicators to encourage reflection on the impact that lower division faculty and peer interactions had on academic engagement in upper division college courses.

**Research Questions**

In order to explore the effects of student engagement, the following questions guided the study:

**RQ1:** How do students describe their engagement experiences in a high impact course (Inquiry 1000) related specifically to peer and faculty interaction?

**RQ2:** How does the experience of participating in a lower division high impact course affect engagement in upper division courses in terms of peer and faculty interaction?
Philosophical Worldview

The worldview is the philosophy that the researcher uses to describe how knowledge is constructed during the research process (Guido, Chavez, & Lincoln, 2010). This study assumes the methodology of constructivism to underpin its research and provide a philosophical framework. Constructivists believe that people are continually trying to understand the world in which they live and while doing this, they develop “subjective meanings of their experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 8). The philosophical perspective of constructivism proposes that there are many realities and truths in explaining a student’s engagement experience (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Therefore, the researcher’s goal is to obtain, as accurately as possible, the participant’s view of a particular situation – in this case, the experience of student engagement. The goal is to ask a variety of broad-based questions about faculty and peer interaction, such that participants feel comfortable to share their multiple and complex viewpoints. In this study, participants shared these views with diverse others in a focus group setting, so that the interaction with others (also a social construction of experiences) could take into account a variety of realities and truths (Creswell, 2013). Merriam and Tisdale (2016) discussed that the creation of meaning is a social process; therefore, collecting data within the confines of a focus group honors the constructivist worldview.

Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is the approach to thinking about and then doing the research (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). There are three strategies for collecting data: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods (Creswell, 2013; Johnson &
Christensen, 2014). In this study, I focused on the qualitative research paradigm, using a confirmatory, rather than exploratory method of collecting data. While there are many types of qualitative research methods commonly used, this study explored student engagement from a phenomenological stance. Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research where the researcher’s goal is to understand how people experience a particular phenomenon or situation from each person’s own viewpoint (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In other words, phenomenology explores the lived experiences of the participants such that the resulting data provides a deeper understanding about the situation, in this case, student engagement (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016) In collecting the data, the researcher is the primary instrument, deciding what data is salient and should be coded (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As such, the researcher must play a role in the data collection, depending on how the data is to be elicited. In this study, I was an observer-as-participant, spending time with students in a focus group, but keeping a more objective stance (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). However, the NSSE engagement indicators served as a framework for the types of questions asked of the participants. NSSE data provided a foundation of engagement data to create context for a more extensive qualitative approach to researching student experience. As a result, the current study is a confirmatory phenomenological qualitative study using a priori coding of NSSE engagement indicators.

**Theoretical Framework**

In the 1960s, student development theories emerged in response to the pressures of higher education to respond to college students more holistically (Jones & Abes, 2013). Theory provided a foundation from which the practice of student affairs began to
operate and focus, not only on the “affective and behavioral changes” during college but also intellectual growth (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 7). Student development theories offer ways to view the challenges experienced by college students during transition. Two theories are particularly helpful in explaining the developmental challenges for first and second year students: Chickering and Reisser’s *Vectors of Identity Development* and Schaller’s *Developmental Stages* for sophomores.

Because students differ vastly in their “age related developmental tasks,” they provide a plethora of opportunities and challenges for educators (Strange, 1994, p. 20). This is especially relevant when applying Chickering and Reisser’s Vectors of Identity Development. Chickering and Reisser (1993) described a student’s path of development in terms of phases, or vectors, through differentiation and integration of experiences. The vectors are like “major highways for journeying toward individuation” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 139). Chickering and Reisser identified seven vectors that occur during the college years: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Black, 2014; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). These vectors are not always sequential or linear in nature; however, most often they do occur in the order listed above (Evans, et al., 2010).

Schaller (2010) also explored developmental changes facing college students, but focused her attention mainly on second year students. Schaller indicated that, in comparison to first year students, the second year presents a more critical time for identity development, as sophomores may experience increases in both academic and interpersonal challenges at the same time that institutional support decreases (Schaller,
Similar to Chickering & Reisser’s model using vectors, Schaller also espoused the transition through stages, stating that the first stage, *random exploration*, occurs primarily during the first year of college. The second stage, *focused exploration*, occurs when students question the choices they have made. The third stage, *tentative choices*, often occurs during the sophomore or junior year and finally, the *commitment stage* is evident when students exhibit confidence in their decisions (Black, 2014; Schaller, 2005). Schaller (2005) stated that educators should “encourage students to take responsibility for their learning” during their sophomore year and help them “negotiate the expectations held by others in their lives” (p. 24). All students, but particularly sophomores, need to have opportunities “for self-reflection, and encourage exploration of their social identities” (Provencher & Kassel, 2017, p. 3). High impact practices are uniquely positioned to offer opportunities to meet these outcomes (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015; Provencher & Kassel, 2017).

This study describes the influence of high impact *inquiry* course on a student’s perception of engagement in their upper division years. Inquiry-oriented activities do reflect the good practices implemented in higher education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), but effects of student engagement in inquiry-oriented activities are more often reported in terms of *cognitive* outcomes rather than personal development (Astin, 1993; Hu, Kuh, & Li, 2008). Therefore, models that explore student engagement and retention strategies, rather than student development theory, were primarily used in this study to better understand the effect that High Impact Practices (HIPs) have on first and second year students.
**Conceptual Framework**

Beyond student development theory, there are models that describe student interactions with their environment that also help educators to identify influential variables that affect student success (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). Two models that explore student engagement include Astin’s (1993) theory of involvement, which asserted the value of students being involved with purposefully educational activities, and Tinto’s (1993) model of student departure, which explored retention strategies associated with classroom activities (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). However, Astin’s (1993) theory of Inputs-Environment-Outputs (I-E-O) most aptly defines the effect of institutional environment (e.g., faculty interactions and peer collaborations) with resulting outcomes (e.g., student engagement). All of these models shed light on the importance of faculty and peer interaction (environment) but Astin’s I-E-O model provides the most valuable insight into understanding how students experience engagement (student outcomes).

**Critiques of Using Student Development Theory in Understanding the Student Experience**

Jones and Abes (2011) cautioned that student development theories are socially constructed and as such “do not capture the diversity of all stories” (p. 5). In fact, early concepts of student involvement ignored the increasingly diverse student populations and thus were criticized for being outdated (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). For example, Chickering and Reisser’s theory (1993) provides a comprehensive vision of traditional-aged developmental tasks; however, their theory may ignore the motivational levels of
individual students (Evans, et al., 2010) and may also ignore diverse populations and variations of age, gender sexual orientation, race, culture, and other identities (Reisser, 1995). In response to the argument that developmental theory may not capture the diversity of ideas, Perry (1981) cautioned that students are always larger than the categories we use to describe them. In fact, it has been suggested that student affairs practitioners should “forgo the use of labels altogether and talk about individual’s behavior” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 37). This idea reflects the very tenets of constructivism, which proposes that every person understands their world differently.

As our college students evolve and change, our charge should be to continually critique our current frameworks, acknowledge the limitation of existing theories, and generate new understandings to drive our need to challenge and support our students (Jones & Abes, 2011). One way to keep up with the “rapidly changing landscape” is to develop more opportunities for reflection and understanding (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013, p. 35). Thus, it makes sense to collect data from a qualitative constructivist perspective, which can more aptly explore student experiences especially reflecting back on their first two years of college.

**Operational Definitions**

The terms listed below were used throughout this study. These are the more common understandings of the concepts investigated. The following definitions which guided my research, were grouped by concept:

- **First Year Students/Freshmen** - Those students who are enrolled in college for the first time, regardless of pre-earned credit hours.
• **First Year Experience (FYE)** – Institutional policies and decisions which create classrooms, programs, curricula, and services that enhance first year student success (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005).

• **Second Year/Sophomores** – Those students who are enrolled in their second academic year of college, regardless of credit hour accrual.

• **Second Year Experience (SYE)** - The approaches, programs, and initiatives institutions use to benefit the success of second year students (Gardner, Pattengale, Tobolowsky, & Hunter, 2010).

• **Persistence** – An individual’s goal to remain within the institution (Renn & Reason, 2013).

• **Retention** – An organizational effort to retain students within the institution (Renn & Reason, 2013).

• **Student Engagement** – The time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities that lead to outcomes that constitute student success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005).

• **Engaged Learning** – A positive energy invested in learning, resulting in meaningful processing, attention, and involvement (Schreiner, 2010a).

• **National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)** – A survey used by institutions to collect data about first-year and senior students' participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. Over 1,600 institutions representing over 5.5 million students have completed the survey since 2000 (NSSE, 2017).
• **High Impact Practices (HIPs)** -- Due to their positive associations with student learning and retention, certain undergraduate opportunities are designated "high-impact.” High-Impact Practices (HIPs) share several traits. They demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and students, and encourage collaboration with diverse others, providing frequent and substantive feedback (NSSE, 2017).

• **Engagement Indicators** - NSSE uses the data from 47 core items to measure the dimensions of student engagement on 10 Engagement Indicators. The indicators are grouped within four themes: a) Academic Challenge, b) Learning with Peers, c) Experiences with Faculty, and d) Campus Environment. Each of these indicator themes, include two specific engagement indicators. For this study, I explored two of the NSSE themes: Learning with Peers (which I called Engagement with Peers) and Experiences with Faculty (which I labeled Engagement with Faculty). For purposes of this study, engagement terms are synonymous with the NSSE engagement language (NSSE, 2017) (see Appendix A).

• **Inquiry-Based Pedagogy** - Course activities that begin with a question, followed by investigation and gathering of information, then analyzing the data, constructing possible solutions, or constructing new knowledge (Savery, 2006).

• **Inquiry 1000 Seminar** – A required seminar course for first or second year students at the research site which uses inquiry-based pedagogy to explore topics using a problem-based learning strategy and encouraging faculty interaction and peer collaboration.
• *Chickering and Reisser’s Vectors of Identity Development* - seven vectors that normally occur during the college years: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

• *Schaller’s Developmental Stages for sophomores* - the transition of college students through four stages: random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, and commitment stage (Schaller, 2005).

• *Upper Division* – A student’s third (junior) or fourth (senior) year of college.

• *Lower Division* – A student’s first (freshman) or second (sophomore) year of college.

**Assumptions and Delimitations of the Study**

**Delimitations of Course**

• This study explores the impact of an undergraduate inquiry seminar that meets only one time per week for ten weeks, which may not provide enough time on task to ensure significant changes in student engagement behavior.

• The Inquiry seminar is taught by faculty across a variety of disciplines. While faculty receive training and supportive information, each professor may choose to teach the course differently, with different levels of engagement, which may affect students’ perceptions.

**Delimitations of Target Population**

• Some of the students are first year, and some are second year, so there may be a wide variety of developmental vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) represented
and several transitional stages (Schaller, 2010) exhibited among the student population.

- Studies that include no controls for confounding background characteristics or precollege experiences may introduce bias (Padgett, Keup, & Pascerella, 2013).

**Delimitations of Site**

- Studies that rely upon single institution findings significantly reduce generalizability and application of findings (Padgett, Keup, & Pascerella, 2013). In fact, with qualitative research methods, generalizability is not possible (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016), but using a single site might also affect transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or extrapolations to other conditions (Patton, 2015).

**Delimitations of the Instruments**

- The NSSE provides survey results that while extremely useful, are property of the institution and so factual details (beyond the aerial view of public information) are not under the purview of this researcher.

**Benefits**

HIPs are also often dependent upon student attributes, such as major selection, internal motivation, or financial resources. In other words, HIPs such as undergraduate research with departmental faculty may be inaccessible for incoming students who may not have attached to their major. HIPs that are not required by the institution might not be selected by students who either lack internal motivation or have difficulty identifying and incorporating those practices which lead to academic success. Finally, some HIPs are dependent upon a student’s financial resources, such as study abroad, or availably of time, such as service learning. These HIP practices, while important to student success,
may take valuable resources of time and money from student reserves and thus may be inaccessible those students who would benefit most from HIP engagement (Koopman, 2014).

However, an Inquiry seminar is a High Impact Practice that has institutional support and is required. In other words, this HIP is not limited due to personal funding concerns (study abroad), major area of study (undergraduate research), lack of cultural capital in negotiating opportunities for HIP (first generation students), student motivation (internships/ or job shadowing), or extensive time out side of the classroom (service learning).

**Significance of the Study**

It is possible that after reviewing the data, institutions will want to offer an inquiry-based, topic-driven seminar course for their first and/or second year students. At the institutional site I researched, this HIP is required of all students, not just the few who are motivated or mandated (at risk students) to enroll. As such, this particular HIP does not preclude students who may not have resources (time, money, cultural capital) to take advantage of the opportunity. Offering this HIP to second term freshmen or sophomores may enhance communication with faculty, encourage connections with peers, affect persistence, and increase engagement with the college experience for all students in their upper division years.

**Summary of the Chapter**

For the last 20 years, institutions have been increasing the number and types of high impact practices (HIP) in order to engage students academically. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) states that these practices should be
offered to every student (Kuh, 2007) because they are designed to foster deeper learning and positively affect retention/persistence rates. The Boyer Commission (1998) encouraged institutions introduce undergraduate students to the strategies of inquiry-based learning as a solution to increasing academic engagement and overall quality of learning.

Inquiry-oriented practices offer students experiential learning and problem-based learning and are considered “good practices” in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Hu, et al., 2008). An inquiry-based, topic-driven seminar targeting first and second year students may enhance communication with faculty and encourage peer interaction on the front end of college, affecting engagement experiences even through their upper division years. The literature on the effects of student engagement in inquiry-oriented activities is usually about cognitive outcomes and often ignores the impact on student experience, such as engagement or intention to persist (Astin, 1993; Hu, et al., 2008). This study used the framework of constructivism and the methodology of focus groups to ascertain the experiences of students who have taken the HIP course Inquiry 1000 and examined what affect this has had on peer and faculty interaction in later coursework.

In the next chapter, I review the literature about NSSE, high impact practices (HIPs), and inquiry-based pedagogy, as it relates to peer/faculty engagement and retention. I also look at the current first and second year practices that impact engagement and retention. I then outline the methodology for my study in chapter three and provide the findings from the qualitative focus groups in chapter four. Finally, in chapter five, I discuss the implications, recommendations, and limitations for this study.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter one presented a rationale for exploring student perceptions of peer and faculty engagement in a high impact inquiry-based seminar. It also suggested how this course might affect student engagement in the upper division years. Chapter two offers a review of literature relevant to the study and is presented as follows: a) theoretical frameworks, b) persistence and retention, c) the undergraduate experience – first and second years, d) good practices for student engagement - faculty interaction and peer collaboration, and finally, e) high impact practices and the inquiry course.

Theoretical Frameworks

The methodology of constructivism provides a philosophical framework for this study. For this study, I have explored the “subjective meanings of their experiences” that students shared regarding their engagement experiences (Creswell, 2013, p. 8). The constructive perspective proposes that there are many realities and truths in explaining a student’s engagement experience (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). There are two types of theories that can be used when understanding student experience: Student development and student environmental theories.

Student Development Theories

Student developmental theorists have addressed student psychosocial growth since the 1960s (Higbee, 2005). Sanford (1962) was the first to describe student development in terms of challenge and support, but it was Chickering (1969) who
described “students’ academic development into a context of their personal development” (Higbee, 2005, p. 295). Chickering and Schlossberg (2001) also discussed the areas of development during college and identified the key factors that assist students in structuring their learning environment: relationships with faculty, active learning strategies, and collaboration with other students.

Chickering (1969), and later Chickering and Reisser (1993), described student development in terms of vectors, reviewing psychosocial growth during the college years. While students move through the vectors at different rates, oftentimes the vectors interact with each other, and students may even recycle back through vectors experienced earlier. The vectors can build on each other, leading to “greater complexity, stability and integration” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 66). Of the seven vectors described, three of them are used for this study to understand the growth and development of first and second year students: developing competence, including intellectual competence; developing mature interpersonal relationships, including those with faculty and peers; and developing purpose, including students’ search for their academic major.

Developing competence includes not only intellectual confidence, but also a mastery of other skills as well, including critical thinking and interpersonal skills (Evans et al., 2010). Navigating the waters of an institutional setting requires students to develop new frames of reference along with communication, listening, and collaboration skills (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As students develop this competency, they learn to trust themselves and receive feedback from others (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Kuh (2009a) suggested that active and collaborative learning assists with competence, but working with groups may affect peer relationships as well.
Developing relationships is similar to developing competence, in that this vector also involves learning skill sets of communication, but additionally, it includes appreciation of differences and increasing tolerance for others (Evans, et al., 2010). This development encourages a shift from narcissism into an increased empathy, and thus students may be more likely to develop friendships and relationships with others within the small group setting of an Inquiry class (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). One of the high impact practices encouraged by Kuh (2009a) is the opportunity to discuss and relate to diverse others. This study researched the reality of whether students in Inquiry understand and implement this construct.

Finally, developing purpose is key for college students who are seeking answers to life’s more challenging questions. They learn to make plans, overcome obstacles, and clarify goals (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Overcoming obstacles may require students to consider changing their perspectives about certain life-styles, family members, and educational talents (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This stage may challenge a student’s identity as they learn what skills they possess and what skills they do not (and may never) possess. The Inquiry course, in particular, offers diverse perspectives in conversations with both faculty and peer groups. The focus of developing purpose for most second year students is mastering the decision about career and major (Schaller, 2010). In fact, those students who remain without purpose at the end of the second year are at risk for departure from the university (Schaller, 2010). Situated in the end of first and beginning of second year, Inquiry may offer students the opportunities to consider the various majors available in a timely manner.
Chickering and Reisser (1993) also argued that the educational environment greatly affects student development and outlined seven categories of key influences. Three of the key influences speak directly to the classroom environment: student-faculty relationships, teaching, and curriculum (Evans et al., 2010). Chickering and Reisser (1993) identified those attributes that create positive student-faculty interactions (accessibility, authenticity, knowledge about and communication with students).

Chickering and Reisser also suggested that teaching should be active (collaborative), incorporate feedback, set high expectations, and respect individual student differences (Evans, et al., 2010). Classroom activities that actively engage students with the content and each other increase the chances for deep learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Schreiner, 2005). Inquiry is a project-based, active learning course, and collaboration is expected among students. Groccia, Nickson, Wang, and Hardin (2014) suggested that pedagogy which uses “student-created-and-acquired knowledge” creates “constructivist classrooms” so that the connections that students make between the ideas expressed in the classroom affect their personal experiences outside of class (p. 37). The focus groups used in this study in a way also honor the student-centered process, in using the constructivist framework to emphasize student connections with their own engagement experiences and with each other. But the constructivist classroom does not ignore faculty input. Instructor feedback that is timely and appropriate also affects active and student-centered learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh et al., 2005). Feedback tells students that their instructor is responsive to their learning needs, engages them in the learning process, and provides a “clear path for reaching their goals” (Schreiner, 2010b, p. 141).
Finally, the curriculum must be perceived as being relevant and offering diverse perspectives that may reflect students’ backgrounds and prior experiences (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Schreiner (2010) suggested this is particularly important for sophomores who need to see the connections between what they are learning and what they want to do in life and often, “they expect the connections to be immediate and concrete” (p. 139). Providing activities that “integrate diverse perspectives” will help students make sense of what and why they are learning (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 367).

Understanding student development theories is one way to view an undergraduate inquiry seminar, which encourages collaboration, faculty feedback, discussion of diverse perspectives, and active learning. Another way is to look at the classroom environment and consider its effects on student learning.

**Student Environmental Theories**

The learning environment plays a large role in shaping student learning and influencing academic growth (Kinzie, 2014). The concept that learning should be student-centered began with the interactionist theories - theories which explained behavior as a function of the person and the environment (Evans, et al., 2010). These models of learning explained that student development was greatly impacted by the challenge and support (Sanford, 1962) that students perceived in the college environment (Evans, et al., 2010). Although Sanford originally used challenge and support in explaining individual student success, it can also be used to design institutional efforts maximizing student learning (Upcraft, et al., 2005). One of the interactionist theories highlighting the environmental impact on student success was Astin’s (1993) Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) model (Ishler, 2005).
Astin’s (1993) model is helpful in outlining those environmental factors that affect student persistence (Ishler, 2005). Astin (1993) asserted that students enter college with a pre-established set of characteristics (Inputs), such as high school GPA, gender, race, ethnicity, and age. He then hypothesized that variables (Environment) within the college setting affect student success, for example institutional characteristics, peer groups, faculty interaction, curriculum, and student involvement in the classroom (Astin, 1993; Ishler, 2005). Finally, Astin (1993) identified particular effects of college (Outcomes), including satisfaction, academic achievement, and retention that are affected by the college environment (Ishler, 2005).

For this study, the I-E-O model is particularly helpful in identifying those particular inputs that contribute to student’s engagement in an inquiry class (such as year in school, first generation status, race, and gender). While pre-existing characteristics of students are important, they were not the main focus of this study. The inquiry classroom environment also affects student learning (such as faculty interaction, or peer collaboration). Finally, the student outcomes can be quantitatively measured (such as retention and persistence) or qualitatively measured (such as the student’s perception of engagement). In this study, the qualitative measure of engagement was viewed as a constructive process, where students discussed their connections (or not) to faculty and peers within the Inquiry class and in later years of college. Therefore, the I-E-O model provides a useful “wraparound” for examining student engagement (Renn & Reason, 2013). However, there are some weaknesses to using this model.

Reason and Gansemer-Topf (2013) extolled Astin’s model as the “most influential model used to study college student outcomes” (p. 28); however, Umbach and
Wawrzynski (2005) criticized the use of Astin’s theory, stating that the theory ignored faculty behaviors, attitudes, and motivations, which was a “missing piece” in Astin’s understanding of student learning and student engagement (p. 175). Schreiner (2010) provided another perspective about faculty attitudes, stating that lower division courses can be challenging to teach. Students, particularly sophomores, may have “little intrinsic interest” in the topic, and the wide variation in student preparation, abilities, and class levels can be daunting for instructors (Schreiner, 2010b, p. 130). This is relevant information for this study, which explored student-faculty interactions and their effect on engagement. Faculty behaviors and attitudes, which are important in the process of student learning, are impacted by the students’ attitudes and their willingness to be involved.

Astin’s theory of student involvement (1999) is one that also emphasizes students’ effort, or involvement, with their own learning environment. Students who dedicate their time and energy to “educationally purposeful activities” such as studying with others or interacting with faculty positively affect their own learning outcomes (Kinzie, 2014, p. 17). As one of the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), the time on task, both in and out of the classroom, can foster learning. With the Inquiry course, students are required to spend time on project-based activities, encouraging engagement with the task (topic), the faculty, and classroom peers.

When combined together, active learning strategies and classroom environment intensify the likelihood of student development, student learning, and persistence (Kinzie, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In other words, student engagement is the lynchpin
connecting student development and institutional environment for purposes of student success and persistence.

**Persistence and Retention in the First Two Years**

University retention rates are often viewed as an institutional and strategic priority. The majority of colleges and universities use retention and graduation rates as an indicator of student success (Kuh, 2008). The largest percentage of students leave an institution during their first year, with only two-thirds of students on average returning for their second year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017). There is evidence to suggest that what creates persistence into the second year is a student’s experience in their first year of college and before that, their experience with success in high school (Allen, et al., 2008; Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Persistence remains an important conversation during the second year of college. Not only do students choose to leave an institution at alarming rates during their first year, but there is also a retention concern for second year students (Gardner, Pattengale, & Schreiner, 2000; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007). Little attention is given to sophomore-specific programming, which may account for this second retention leak (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007). While 96.4% of four-year public institutions nationwide provide programs to address first year students, only 20% do so for students in their second year (Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, 2015). Yet Keup, Gahagan, and Goodwin (2010) found that institutions with sophomore success initiatives exhibited higher rates of retention than those without second year programs.

In a biennial report from Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015), colleges and universities were asked to compare persistence, progression, and retention rates for student
populations. Benchmark comparisons were made of term-to-term persistence rates, progression rates, and retention for first-year students and second-year students. The report is based on a web-based poll of campus officials in the fall of 2014 in which respondents reported official census data from the 2013-14 academic year and fall 2014. Many institutions had mixed interpretations of programs designed specifically for second year students, with some stating sophomore programs were “promising” while others indicating they seemed ineffective (Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, 2015). In addition, the number of second year programs appears to be declining. Today, only 20% of four-year public institutions reported offering second year programs (Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, 2015), which is a decrease from 37.9% in 2011 (Noel-Levitz, 2011).

Although the research about class size and retention is somewhat conflicting, there is evidence that large classroom environments cause frustration for both students (in terms of boredom and poor attendance) and faculty (in terms of frustration and dissatisfaction) (Barefoot, 2005). Freshman to sophomore persistence was positively affected by the frequency of faculty interaction, especially in their discussions of “intellectual matters” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 394).

Persistence and retention should not be an institution’s only focus. Additionally, universities should desire students to develop and integrate into institutions (Astin, 1993, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Cook and Pullaro (2012) added that there needs to be a more comprehensive definition of degree attainment. The term student success should be measured by not only retention and graduation rates, but also student learning and developmental outcomes that will ultimately prepare them for society (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013; Upcraft, et al., 2005). One way to
enhance student success is to design intentional undergraduate experiences that implement involvement strategies with high impact practices early in college – year one and two.

**The Undergraduate Experience**

Prior to the 1960s, higher education historically provided very few institutional supports specifically for student success (Upcraft, et al., 2005). Since that time, many factors have come together to reform the collegiate community in order to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student populations, with many of those supports directed toward the first year student. In addition to the numerous studies researching first year students, colleges also developed courses and programs designed to improve their success. The First Year Seminar (FYS) was created as a result of researchers who demonstrated its success in terms of desired first year outcomes (Upcraft, et al., 2005).

**First Year Experience**

Upcraft, et al., (2005) discussed that First Year programming should incorporate Sanford’s (1962) philosophy -- for students to succeed, they must be both challenged and supported. In addition to this ideology, foundational student development research on involvement (Astin, 1993) and student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) underpin theory for FYS. Researchers such as Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Kuh (2008) have also provided insight about how students learn and what type of environments enhance student learning (Upcraft, et al., 2005).

First Year Seminars (FYS) provide a curricular support for the first year, linking students to effective practices on campus, such as living-learning communities or service learning designed for first year students (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013). In the
recent National Survey of First Year Seminars, 89.7% of the 896 institutions that responded to the survey provided at least one seminar (Young & Hopp, 2014). This number seems to be increasing, as only 68% of institutions offered an FYS in 1988 (Young & Hopp, 2014). Those institutions who did not offer FYS cited lack of faculty/staff, facility resources, or funding as reasons for not offering the course – not that it lacked merit (Young & Hopp, 2014).

Some seminars are academic/topic driven in nature, while others serve as an extended orientation, providing college success skills, campus resources, and relationship building (Young & Hopp, 2014). Still other seminars are discipline-linked, introducing student to demands of the field of study (Browell & Swanner, 2009). The most common form of an FYS is extended orientation, designed to assist students in their initial transition to college (Swing, 2002). However, an Inquiry seminar does not use transition to college as its primary focus; instead, its focus is on engagement with project-based learning. This seminar can be construed as another type of FYS: the academic seminar with variable content.

**Academic Seminar with Variable Content**

Skipper (2017) identified the four most common FYS seminar types: (a) extended orientation, (b) academic seminar with uniform content, (c) academic seminar with variable content, and (d) hybrid. While these seminars vary across content, they all have the following characteristics:

- Performance expectations set at appropriately high levels
- Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time
• Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters
• Experiences with diversity
• Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback
• Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect on and integrate learning
• Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications
• Public demonstration of competence (Skipper, 2017, p. 8-9)

The Inquiry course most closely aligns with the *academic seminar with variable content*. These courses focus on variable topics and emphasize academic skills in an interdisciplinary context (Skipper, 2017). Additionally, the individual sections often reflect the instructor’s discipline or research interest. The Inquiry course, however, does not reflect Skipper’s description in two ways: credit hours and frequent feedback. Skipper (2017) found that academic seminars with variable content were the least likely FYS to be offered for one credit hour and in fact often have “more weekly contact hours than students enrolled other seminar types” (p. 12). She also suggested that this FYS usually places strong emphasis on writing instruction, but the Inquiry course is more project-based and as such, places more emphasis on the public demonstration of competence at the end of the course.

Perhaps the writing instruction is not as robust within the Inquiry course, but the oral communication skills and problem-based learning do account for the other attributes, namely performance expectations, significant time, interactions with faculty and peers, experiences with diversity, integrated learning, real-world applications, and public demonstration of competence. In response to this apparent weakness, Skipper (2017) stated, “the presence of more educationally effective practices would lead to higher
student engagement, yet there is nothing to suggest that all need to be present in order for an experience to be high impact” (p. 15).

The National Survey of FYS found that over 90% of institutions offer high impact opportunities, with 76% of these connected to the institution’s FYS course (Young & Hopp, 2014). McNair & Albertine (2012) also found that particular educational practices have an impact on student learning outcomes and progress toward graduation and specifically that participation in a required FYS may increase confidence in the students’ academic practices (Koopman, 2014). First year seminars provide one example of a high impact practice for undergraduate students.

Typically, institutions do not offer specific high impact seminars designed to engage sophomore students, although Kuh (2008) asserted that participation in certain high-impact practices leads to gains in first to second year retention and that undergraduates should participate in one of these activities in their first two years of college. Indeed, there seems to be a frontloading of educational practices targeting first year students, but little institutional effort provided for students in their sophomore year (Cuseo, 2015; Young, et al., 2015). It would seem that looking at persistence and retention data for the second year, academic support specifically for sophomores would better prepare students for transition into their upper division years (Cuseo, 2015).

Second Year Experience

While a first year student’s main focus is connecting with the institution, a second year student’s challenge is to connect with their major or discipline (Graunke & Woosley, 2005). Second year students, who are still in transition, may experience what is commonly known as the sophomore slump (Gardner et al., 2000; Pattengale & Schreiner,
As the collegiate middle children, second years have also been labeled forgotten, invisible, disillusioned, and dispirited (Boyer Commission, 1998; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000; Tobolowsky, 2008). Graunke and Woosley (2005) cautioned that we should not assume that what we know about first year student persistence holds true for students in their second year of college. Often second year students feel lost, have not found a disciplinary home, and have not connected to the campus (Gardner, et al., 2010). First generation sophomores are at the greatest risk for premature departure, as are students who remain undeclared or who have lower academic performance (Ishitani, 2006; Leppel, 2001; Schaller, 2005).

Sophomores have fewer opportunities to participate in high-impact programs compared with other collegiate years (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012). Barefoot et al. (2012) found that colleges tend to front-load the college experience with summer bridge programs, orientation, and first-year seminars, and then finish college life with internships, undergraduate research prospects, and senior capstone experiences. Consequently, sophomores receive less attention, may experience less faculty interaction, and often receive less support from student affairs programing than first, third, or fourth year students (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). The tide may be turning, as recently, initiatives designed for second-year students have been increasingly evident in both literature and campus programming (Young, et al., 2015).

One reason that educators have a difficult time addressing the programming needs of sophomore students is that this transition occurs at varying times (Gardner, et al., 2010). Many students now enter college with pre-existing academic credit and as such, may already be sophomores by credit their first full term of college (Gardner, et al., 2010).
Another reason institutions have difficulty providing sophomore experiences is the wide variety of pre-college experiences. While some students possess the cultural capital and confidence to navigate the waters of a college campus, others are “academically adrift” (Arum & Roksa, 2011). This refers back to Chickering and Reissers’ findings that the vectors of development are fluid for college students and student identity development is an ongoing process (Schaller, 2010).

Despite the apparent lack of interest on the part of some institutions, educators still need to address the needs of sophomore students who, according to Schaller and Chickering and Riesser, are searching for purpose and focused exploration of major/careers. Therefore, it is imperative to continue to provide meaningful practices that enhance student learning and motivation to persist in college (Schaller, 2010).

While it is widely assumed that faculty interaction and active learning positively impact student success, Kuh and Hu (2001) discovered that sophomores had statistically lower scores than first year students on these two indicators. This may imply that second year students need more, not less, intentional support with academic engagement. Cuseo (2015) suggested that back-loading the first year experience would provide support bridging into the student’s sophomore year. In other words, reserving some of the supports given to first term freshmen until their second term (back-loading) or even first term sophomore year might provide structure for otherwise ignored sophomores. This transition practice may result in providing “the seamless synergy needed to stem the tide of student attrition” (Cuseo, 2015, p. 1).

DeAngelo (2014) suggested that reviewing those practices that retain students into their second year, institutions should consider curricula that are “integrated and central to
the fabric of the institution” (p. 66). Graunke & Woosley (2005) surveyed more than 1000 sophomores and discovered correlations between student GPA and two factors: their commitment to major and positive interactions with faculty. Provencher and Kassel (2017) found that participation in high impact practices during the sophomore year “uniquely predicts retention at the end of that year” (p.12). They then suggested that if institutions care about their sophomores’ retention rate, then encouraging participation in high impact practices, such as an Inquiry seminar, may be an effective way to accomplish this goal (Provencher & Kassel, 2017). The literature continues to circle back to the importance of faculty in creating high impact, engaging environments for students. A course designed to connect students with faculty and content within a student’s intended major might satisfy the needs of the slumping sophomore.

**Good Practices for Student Engagement**

First articulated in the 1980s, good practices are those conditions that promote student learning and development (Goodman, 2014). Chickering and Gamson (1987) introduced *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*, which included faculty-student interaction, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents or ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). These practices were positively received by educators in the field and “guided inquiry” into educational settings nationwide (Chickering & Gamson, 1999, p. 79). Most importantly, these seven principles inspired other researchers to explore the extent to which students experience good practices with educational outcomes (Chickering & Gamson, 1999; Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, & Pascarella, 2014) or increased collaboration with peers and increased faculty-student interaction.
(Kuh, 2008; Upcraft, et al., 2005). The practices discussed below are those that particularly affect the first and second year inquiry based seminar: peer collaboration, faculty interaction, and high impact practices.

**Peer Collaboration**

Active participation within the learning environment encourages collaboration among peers (Astin, 1993). These environments that encourage greater involvement yield greater results in terms of learning and development (Astin, 1999). Historically, it was assumed that engagement in the classroom meant face to face presence, but this has been challenged with the speculation that engagement can now be effective with online practices (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). While it is may be assumed that today’s generation of college students is more connected to each other on social media with their virtual tribes, they may still experience loneliness and isolation (Levine & Dean, 2012). Reason and Gansemer-Topf (2013) considered the effects of social media and texting and questioned whether students consider virtual relationships as true connections of engagement. The concept of “engagement” may need to be reconsidered. Engagement (based on Astin’s concept of involvement) is historically defined as the “psychological and physical energy students put into educationally purposeful activities” (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013, p. 30). Perhaps this definition no longer fits as students, who live face to face and online, have contexts that are “less place-bound” (p. 30). Consequently, are these virtual connections influencing the transition to college and face to face interactions with faculty and peers? Perhaps more, not less, practice with collaboration in and out of the classroom will enhance academic engagement.
Schaller (2010) discussed peer engagement in the developmental stages of the first two years of college. During the random exploration stage, students form relationships that are superficial at best and potentially harmful to a student’s success. During the next stage, focused exploration, students question their initial collegiate friendships and recognize that developing peer groups that are more supportive of academic interests is key for success. Ideally, course design should encourage a learner-centered approach, foster peer collaboration, and embolden students to reevaluate relationships (Schaller, 2010). DeAngelo (2014) supported the idea, stating that academic engagement with peers outside of class is associated with retention into the second year.

**Faculty Interaction**

Numerous studies have espoused the importance of good interaction between students and faculty. Tinto (1993) stated that interactions with faculty are the most important factor in determining student success. Cokley (2000) found that students with positive perceptions of faculty encouragement exhibited significant differences in both academic self-concept and academic motivation. Fowler and Boylan (2010) indicated that good interaction university faculty can be the single most important characteristic of student success and retention. Goodman and Pascarella (2006) noted an increase more frequent and meaningful interaction with faculty results in increased likeliness to graduate in four years, more involvement in co-curricular activities, and an increased level of satisfaction with the college experience. In discussion of sophomore-specific research, Jullierat (2000) found that sophomores, more than any other class of student, rated relationships with faculty as significantly important. Graunke and Woosley (2005)
also found that sophomore success was dependent upon faculty interaction. De Angelo (2014) cautioned educators to actively search for students who refrain from academic engagement, indicating these students are at significant risk for attrition.

However, most first and second year students enroll in general education courses with large class sizes often taught by part-time faculty (Schaller, 2010). For the institution, it may make economic sense to design curriculum in this way. The traditional and cost-effective method of collegiate learning occurs when faculty deliver knowledge through lecture (Erickson & Strommer, 2005). However, Erickson and Strommer (1991) argued that collegiate instruction also must include consistency, activities, and evaluation, and contain goals that address knowing, understanding, and thinking. Alternatives to lecture may include small group discussions, writing to learn activities, problem-based learning, case studies, and experiential learning (Erickson & Strommer, 2005). In order to implement these strategies successfully, faculty development is imperative.

Evenbeck and Jackson (2005) asserted that for some faculty, research, not teaching, is the priority, but that teaching first year students can be marketed as a “safe zone” for trying new ideas in teaching (p. 258). In fact, teaching first year seminars encourages a “rethinking of traditional approaches” and then faculty can transfer new teaching techniques to their discipline-based courses (Hunter & Linder, 2005). Viewing first year students as fresh slates, rather than underprepared or unmotivated, may encourage faculty to establish both challenging expectations and foundational support, reflecting Sanford’s theory (Evenbeck & Jackson, 2005). Therefore, teaching an
undergraduate inquiry seminar course might be refreshing for faculty and create more opportunities for engaging conversations with fresh slates.

One way to achieve better interaction is to encourage students to share in the function of teaching, actually allowing students to have ownership of course outcomes (Gibson, 2011). By relinquishing some control and allowing students to direct some of the content, faculty can foster an active learning community and two-way communication (Hunter & Linder, 2005). Gibson (2011) defined this type of course as student-directed and stated that overall, students appreciate faculty who allow input in the design of the courses, making them more relevant to future careers. Unfortunately, Mihans, Long, and Felton (2008) found that faculty prefer course content to be theory-based, whereas students preferred content to be practical and concrete. Therefore, a shared design may not be possible in all areas. Schaller (2010) discussed the importance of designing educational experiences that provide students with pathways to explore the world and then “place the decision making on the student” (p. 22). She stated that students in random exploration (first year) should be encouraged to examine the reason behind their decisions. Students in focused exploration (second year) should engage in what Kuh (2008) would define as high impact practices, such as study abroad, internships and service learning. Schaller (2010) added that faculty should then help “sophomores make connections through application of their learning” (p. 24).

**High Impact Practices**

George D. Kuh is the founding director of the widely used National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). He has written extensively about student engagement, assessment, institutional improvement, and college and university cultures. Kuh coined
the term high-impact practices (2008) as part of the AAC&U’s LEAP initiative and asserted that they are powerful and effective for six reasons.

- First, Kuh argued that HIPs require students to assign considerable amounts of time and effort to purposeful tasks and that these tasks tend to “deepen students’ investment in the activity as well as their commitment to their academic program and the college” (p. 14).

- Second, the very nature of these activities puts students in situations that demand they interact with faculty and peers over extended periods of time.

- Third, participating in one or more of these activities increases the opportunity for students to experience diversity through contact with people who are different from themselves, which challenges students to develop new ways of thinking. Student can then respond more effectively “novel circumstances” as they work alongside with peers, faculty, and future co-workers and employers (Kuh, 2008, p. 15).

- Fourth, feedback is essential to developmental growth and the structures and settings of high-impact activities typically yield frequent feedback. In fact, the NSSE 2007 results indicated that students who receive feedback from faculty while working on a research project are more likely to feel that faculty are friendly or supportive (Kuh, 2008).

- Fifth, HIPs offer opportunities to assimilate, create, and then apply knowledge that results in experiences that are more meaningful and transfer readily to out of class or out of college environments (Kuh, 2008).
Finally, HIPs encourage those connections that allow students to understand themselves in relation to others, understand their larger world, and then utilize the intellectual tools “to act with confidence for the betterment of the human condition” (Kuh, 2008, p. 17).

There are many who agree with Kuh in his assessment the importance of HIPs in higher educational settings. In their 2011 report, Noel-Levitz attested to institutions across the country reporting that higher retention rates occur for those students participating in these high-impact practices. Institutional practices that are “high impact” are designed to improve learning outcomes (Kuh, 2008). High impact practices for first year students may demonstrate a positive effect on student academic success (Kuh, 2008; Upcraft, et al., 2005). Provencher and Kassel (2017) found that it was not just first year students, but also second year students who participate in HIPs who are more likely to persist. However, they cautioned that “most students do not participate in a HIP until their third year at the college, when retention concerns are minimal” (Provencher & Kassel, 2017, p. 16).

In their 2007 report College Learning for a New Global Century, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) defined particular institutional initiatives that enhance student learning, stating that participating in these “effective educational practices” leads to particular outcomes (AAC&U, 2007, p. 5). AAC&U defined these learning outcomes for student success as the knowledge, skills, capacities, and competences to engage locally and globally, to solve significant problems, and to interact with diverse others (AAC&U, 2007; Kilgo, et al., 2015). AAC&U (2007) listed 10 effective practices including 1) first-year seminars and experiences, 2) common
intellectual experiences, 3) learning communities, 4) writing-intensive courses, 5) collaborative assignments and projects, 6) undergraduate research, 7) diversity/global learning, 8) service learning and community based learning, 9) internships, and 10) capstone courses and projects (AAC&U, 2007; Kilgo, et al., 2015). This study explored an undergraduate inquiry-based seminar as a combination of several of these practices: a first-year course, a common intellectual experience, and the beginnings of undergraduate research.

Some practices are more impactful for first year students, such as active/collaborative learning and undergraduate research (Kilgo, et al., 2015). Students who participate in these practices often indicate gains in deep learning (Kuh, 2008). In contrast to surface-level learning, deep learning emphasizes acquiring new information and understanding the meaning of the information (Kuh, 2008). Deep approaches to learning are important because students who use these approaches tend to earn higher grades; retain, integrate, and transfer information at higher rates; increase their first year GPA; and increase the likelihood of retention from first to second year (Kuh, 2008). The goal of active or collaborative learning is to create an environment where “students’ interaction with content is dynamic and leads to deeper engagement with course topics” (Collier, 2014, p. 117). Thus, creating a seminar course which encouraged collaborative learning paired with research would seem to reflect a more inquiry-based or problem-based design.

**Inquiry-Based Learning**

Inquiry-based learning usually begins with a question, followed by investigation and gathering of information, then analyzing the data, constructing possible solutions, or
constructing new knowledge (Savery, 2006). It is a “student-centered, active learning approach focuses on questioning, critical thinking and problem solving” (Savery, 2006, p. 16). Inquiry-based learning was often utilized by progressive educators, such as John Dewey, who believed that learning begins with the curiosity of the learner (Jones, 2015; Melles, Anderson, Barrett, & Thompson-Whiteside, 2015). Inquiry practices were advocated by the Boyer Commission (1998), stating that such practices can enhance overall student learning outcomes. In addition, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) also supports this finding, showing students benefit more when they receive feedback from faculty while collaborating on an inquiry activity (Hu, et al., 2008). In fact, the goal of inquiry is to engage students with content (topic), asking them to make sense of it (Collier, 2014). In this approach, faculty act as facilitators of knowledge; they do not simply provide it. Generally, this may be frustrating for first year students, who often seek concrete answers to questions and struggle with exploration of ideas (Erickson & Strommer, 2005; Perry, 1970). However, inquiry based learning is not without faculty involvement. On the contrary, instructors must provide timely feedback to student groups, help them navigate “dead-ends,” and closely monitor progress as they scaffold their exploration of the course content (Collier, 2014, p. 118).

One type of inquiry course, problem-based learning (PBL), can enhance the classroom experience and increase student interest in learning (Andersen & Heilesen, 2015). PBL courses can be university wide and multi-disciplinary; however, they require specialized faculty training and if administered improperly can result in a negative outcome (Chapman, Keller, & Fournier 2002). Students in problem-based first-year seminars have reported significant increases in levels of skill development compared to
their peers in small seminars or in conventional lecture courses (Hu, et al., 2008; Summerlee & Murray, 2007). This study will specifically ask students about their perception of skill development in group work and faculty engagement. More importantly, the skills and abilities developed using PBL are often transferable to other educational settings and seem to persist throughout subsequent years (Summerlee & Murray, 2007). This was of particular interest in this study, as the research questions explored not only the engagement of students while taking inquiry, but also its after-effects.

Certain student learning outcomes seem to vary depending on student academic performance and the type of outcome measured (Hu, et al., 2008), perhaps reflecting Astin’s model of I-E-O. Students may report differences due to their varying inputs, which may be more pronounced during their first year of college than in their upper division (Erickson & Strommer, 2005). In other words, the positive effects of inquiry-based learning appear to be conditional and may depend on the developmental level of a student. Diversity in student age, socioeconomic background, and academic preparation all affect student “readiness for higher education” in general and their participation in inquiry-based courses in particular (Erickson & Strommer, 2005, p. 243). This was of particular interest for this study, as the inquiry course under review enrolls both freshmen and sophomores. Therefore, in this case, a student in their first year may experience engagement differently than a student in their second year of college. However, as a required lower division course, Inquiry must be taken before a student finishes 60 hours of instruction. While some students take advantage of this course as soon as possible,
others defer until the last possible minute, perhaps reflecting a student’s perception of course effectiveness.

Engagement in Required Courses

There has been debate about the effectiveness of required courses as some students, mandated to take a particular course, may be reticent to engage or participate. Kuh (2009a) suggested that “engagement is a two way street” (p. 697), and as such, universities must balance the institutional need to require engaging opportunities and the students choice to take advantage of these opportunities. Jones (2010) cautioned against courses that create a Creepy Treehouse Effect, stating that students are less likely to learn in an environment that they perceive to be forced or inauthentic. While normally used for digital, online environments, this term can also apply to classroom environments where faculty insert themselves and then are perceived as too personal (Reis, 2012). Jared Stein (as cited in McBride, 2008) defined the creepy treehouse as the practice of creating classrooms that are “artificial in their construction and usage” (para. 5). Institutions can prevent the treehouse effect by designing courses that encourage transparency and foster genuine interest (Landy, 2015). McBride (2008) cautioned that “there is very BIG difference between being ‘lured’ (false pretenses) and being requested specifically for the purpose of learning – defined and clarified on educational/professional terms” (p. 1).

An argument to support requiring participation in high impact practices is that some students would not position themselves for experiences beyond what is absolutely required and as such, might miss opportunities to engage with faculty and peers (Kuh, 2008). This is one reason that the Inquiry course is required for all students at the study’s site. It is designed to provide a unique opportunity for academic engagement for all
students in the first two years of college. Currently, only 42% of institutions participating in the National Survey for FYS indicated that all students were required to take an FYS. This is a concern, because as Kuh (2008) stated, unless required, the majority of college students, such as first generation students, are less likely to participate in a HIP, despite its connection with student success.

Interestingly, historically underserved students seem to benefit more from engaging in educational purposeful activities than majority students (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Koopmann (2014) found that requiring first-generation students to participate in a HIP increased their overall academic confidence. Participation in a HIP tends to expose students to behaviors that are success-oriented; however, first generation students are less likely to participate in high-impact practices, unless they are mandatory (Koopmann, 2014). This suggests that first generation students may not realize the importance of engagement or how to be engaged (Pike & Kuh, 2005). In this study, students were asked to identify if they are or are not first generation. Their stories reflected varying degrees of this input and its importance for engagement in the classroom. Pike and Kuh (2005) suggested that while a university cannot “change the lineage of its students,” institutions can implement those strategies to “increase the odds that first generation students get ready, get in and get through” (p. 292).

For all students, personally relevant academic experiences are more likely to increase meaningful engagement and content knowledge (Landy, 2015). This seems to be the challenge of the inquiry course offered at this institution – how to make this active
learning course more appealing such that students receive the full benefit of its engagement, both with faculty and with peers.

**Summary of the Chapter**

The review of the literature discussed several student development and student environmental theories which support the importance of engagement in the first and second year of college, including those of Astin (1993), Chickering and Reisser (1993), and Schaller (2010). In addition, Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Schaller (2010) pointed out the fluidity of the development process and the differing supports needed for first year students as compared with those in their second year. While high impact practices seem to benefit all students, an inquiry course situated strategically in the lower division may provide collaborative, experiential learning that many first or second year students need to develop intellectual competence, interpersonal relationships, and purpose (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and at the same time encourage random and focused exploration (Schaller, 2010).

Offering the inquiry course to both freshmen and sophomores creates a synergistic effect with varying degrees of college experience in one classroom environment, but still maintains a developmentally appropriate atmosphere. In addition to engagement with course content and other undergraduate peers, opportunities for intentional faculty interaction can also impact student learning, which can be particularly effective in the first or second year. Finally, understanding that student engagement should be measured beyond simply persistence or retention rates, a qualitative design framed with a constructivist approach provided a broader perspective of the impact of student engagement. Chapter three will review the methodology of the study, outlining
the details of the constructivist approach using a phenomenological grounding for the focus group process.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of the qualitative study exploring the student experiences of academic engagement. The chapter describes the research design, including the theoretical framework, the rationale for the design, the setting of the study, the participants, the data collection procedures (including participant protection procedures), the data analysis, and finally, the trustworthiness of the process used and positionality of the researcher. The objective of the study was to gather information about the two research questions:

RQ1: *How do students describe their engagement experiences in a high impact course (Inquiry 1000) related specifically to peer and faculty interaction?*

RQ2: *How does the experience of participating in a lower division high impact course affect engagement in upper division courses in terms of peer and faculty interaction?*

In this study, I attempted to answer the two research questions using a qualitative, constructivist approach, assuming that the participant experiences are socially constructed and that they provide multiple interpretations of their Inquiry experience (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). I used the *phenomenological* methodology to frame the experiences of students and used *focus groups* as the data collection method.
Philosophical Perspective

Research is defined as a “systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging in the process” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 5). Research is often categorized into either quantitative or qualitative where the first seeks to extend knowledge often by attributing cause and effect and the latter seeks to improve understanding by asking questions about how people interpret their experiences (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Research exploring student engagement may be based on quantitative research, such as that provided by the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE, 2017). In general, survey research provides a “description of trends, attitudes or options of a population” with the intent to generalize findings from a sample to a larger population (Creswell, 2013, p 13). However, some researchers have questioned the value of using only this perspective in that it ignores the “lived experiences of students” (Wong, 2015, p. 61). Using quantitative NSSE data alone might identify institutional weaknesses and strengths, but it may not define solutions (Wong, 2015). Therefore, another perspective to consider is using a qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon of engagement through the memories and words of those involved (Schaller, 2007; Wong, 2015).

Rather than trying to determine cause and effect (what makes student engage), this study attempts to uncover the meaning of engagement (how do students understand engagement). Using a qualitative approach with a priori coding from NSSE engagement indicators provided additional insights into the experience of student engagement.

This qualitative study was framed using the philosophical perspective of constructivism (sometimes known as interpretivism) which proposes that there are many
realities and truths in explaining a student’s engagement experience (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Constructivists believe that most people are seeking to understand their world in which they live and that they develop, over time, “subjective meanings of their experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 8). The researcher then seeks to find understandings that go beyond the narrowness of particular categories, such as those identified within the NSSE survey data.

Student engagement is a multi-faceted experience; therefore, using the lens of constructivism is helpful because it assumes that there is “no single, observable reality” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 9). While constructivism “underlies” the basic tenets of qualitative study, an “additional dimension” of this type of research would include the phenomenological understanding about the essence of engagement (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 24). In other words, the philosophy of phenomenology underpins my research, because its goal is basic - understanding how people make sense of their world (student engagement) using socially constructed data (words) to explain their lived experiences (with the inquiry course) (Van Manen, 1990).

**Research Design**

Phenomenology explores the *lived experiences* of the participants in order to provide a deeper understanding about the “essence and the underlying structure of the phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 24). In this study, participants were asked to explore their how the influence of Inquiry affected their own student engagement in upper division courses.

In the early twentieth century, based on the research of Husserl, phenomenology was first presented as a new way to view social science (Patton, 2015). The basic
understanding was that we only know what we experience and that this is always influenced by the subjective interpretation of the experience (Patton, 2015).

In this study, understanding the essence of engagement is congruent with my own experience of active learning in a classroom setting. Because I have taught Inquiry, my personal experience provides a lens for the process of collecting and interpreting data.

My personal experience with teaching Inquiry, with faculty and peer interaction, and with student success, makes this method of collecting data ideal for this study. The advantage to using phenomenological interviewing is that it “permits an explicit focus on the researcher’s personal experience combined with those of the interview partners” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 153). However, the interviewing method still requires very descriptive responses. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that data must provide thick rich descriptions to ensure transferability and adequate evidence to support the findings.

I was able to address the challenge of providing thick and rich descriptions by limiting the scope to two engagement categories identified by NSSE, namely peer collaboration and student-faculty interaction. Establishing a limited scope ensured a convergent design for this confirmatory phenomenological study using a priori coding of NSSE engagement indicators (Creswell, 2013).

**Focus Group Method**

In this study, I sought to understand the meaning of engagement using the words and memories of participants, rather than numeric data (Moustakas, 1994). This phenomenological framework fits well in exploring the many facets of academic engagement, such as student discussion with faculty or group work with peers. I used the
focus group method to collect data about individual student experiences, explored within a socially constructed setting.

Focus groups, in particular, are most beneficial when trying to determine factors that are influenced by opinion or motivation, not easily captured by survey data (Kruger & Casey, 2009). The advantage of using focus groups is that they can provide insight into topics or opinions that cannot be communicated by using scores or percentages (Wong, 2015). Data supplied by the student focus groups often “provide a richer description of their experiences” than quantitative data (Wong, 2015, p. 62). Additionally, some data elicited through focus group conversations may not have been accessible through individual interviewing. Hennink explained that by using a focus group “participants share views, hear the views of others and perhaps refine their own views” as a result considering what was discussed (2014, p.3). Finally, there is a certain level of energy which is usually not often found with individual interviews. “It is this dynamic nature which is at the heart of focus groups and which endows them with the power to generate insight often negated by other methods” (Parker & Tritter, 2006, p. 34).

In my study, focus group questions were designed to encourage participant interaction about student engagement during their inquiry course and to explore whether this affected their academic engagement in the upper division years.

Setting

I conducted this study at a mid-sized public, research university (PRU) in the southeastern United States. I accessed the demographic data on student population from the Office of Institutional Research (IR). In fall 2016, PRU enrolled 8,532 students, of which 788 were first year freshmen. PRU is located in a suburban area and draws most
of its students from mid to major sized city areas with 41.4% attending from the local area. Approximately 61.6% of the students identify as White, 20.4% identify as Black/African-American, 7.4% as Asian, 6.2% as Hispanic/Latino and 4.4% as other. Women and men make up 61.5% and 38.5% of the campus population, respectively. Approximately 10.4% of the students identify as first-generation and 2.1% identify as international.

This study’s site, PRU (2017), uses the NSSE survey to measure engagement practices for its first year students and its seniors. First year students at PRU have reported strong engagement scores which were significantly higher than that of their peer institutions (p < .05) with an effect size at least .3 in magnitude in the area of discussions with diverse others (PRU, 2017). The average was significantly higher (p < .05) with an effect size less than .3 in magnitude in the areas of effective teaching practices, reflective and integrative learning, and quality of interactions (PRU, 2017).

However, there was no significant difference between PRU and their peer institutions in the areas of collaborative learning and student-faculty interactions. Furthermore, when students responded to questions about high-impact practices, the Inquiry course was not a consideration. First years indicated that their participation in high impact practices focused mainly on learning communities, service-learning, and research with faculty. Of those first years who responded to the NSSE, 40% had participated in one HIP and only 8% had participated in two. If, in future surveys, the Inquiry course were identified specifically as an example of high impact experience at PRU, these percentages might change.
Participants

Participants in my study had to have previously completed their Inquiry1000 course and still be currently enrolled full time at the university. Most of the participants were (or were about to be) classified as juniors or seniors in college and as such, were enrolled in their upper division courses. I used purposive sampling to identify my study’s 17 participants. Sample size in a qualitative design depends on many things, such as time constraints and funding, but an important consideration is the research purpose (Rossman & Marshall, 2016). Purposive sampling is guided by both the framework, in this case constructivism, and by the philosophical design, in this case, phenomenology, and a reasonable amount of “variation in the phenomenon, settings or people” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 109). For this study, the participants, although not randomly selected, were instead tightly bound to the phenomenon (engagement in Inquiry course) and as such, greatly increased the likelihood of quality responses eliciting thick, rich descriptive data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Demographic characteristics of the participants collected for this study included academic year in school, major selected, age at the time of the study, race (self-identified), gender (self-identified), and whether or not they considered themselves as first-generation (the first in their family who will earn a college degree). Presented below (Table 3.1) is a list of the all students participating in the study. Students are organized first by focus group number and then alpha listed using their selected pseudonym.

Table 3.1 Participant Demographic Information

Group number, selected pseudonym, academic year, major age, race, gender and first-generation status.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group #</th>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>First Generation</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
A summary of participants’ self-identified demographics is also provided to acknowledge the wide variety of student voices in this study and to demonstrate that participants are mainly upper division students reflecting a diverse population (Table 3.2). To some degree, the research sample reflected the general student population at PRU. At PRU, 8% of students identify as Asian, 21% Black or African American, 55% White, and 14% Multiracial or other. In addition, PRU enrollment reflects 63% female and 37% male. This study had greater participation from women, Asian, and Black students than would have been expected by the general student population.

**Table 3.2 Summary of Participants**

*Summary of the data from Table 3.1 showing the demographic diversity of participants.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Freshman</th>
<th>Sophomore</th>
<th>Junior</th>
<th>Senior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>(Biology, Kinesiology, Therapy, Nursing)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SOCIAL SCIENCES Majors: (Computer Science, Social Work, Art, Political Science, Psychology, Accounting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from PRU, I used various methods to recruit student participants. I requested the PRU’s institutional research office (IR) to provide a list of students who had completed Inquiry 1000 and who were still enrolled at the university full time. I did not limit this to class year (junior or senior) but as most students who take Inquiry 1000 are second term freshmen or first term sophomores, the majority of students on the IR list were at least of sophomore status (30+ credit hours) and most were juniors (60+ credit hours) or seniors (90+ credit hours).

**Selecting Participants**

Students were recruited using email invitations from the list provided by institutional research (see Appendix B for recruitment materials). Of the 981 students contacted, 17 responded, for a response rate of .02%. In addition, recruitment flyers were
posted on bulletin boards around the University campus (see Appendix C). Students who responded favorably to the invitation were asked to sign up for a scheduled focus group time and date. They were also asked to confirm that they had completed their Inquiry course and were told that they would be given participant consent forms prior to the start of the focus group (see Appendix D). The form included the purpose of the research, the length of time expected to complete the focus group, the risks and benefits from the research, the confidentiality of the data findings, and a statement that participation was voluntary meaning, that the participant could have withdrawn at any time (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Participation in this group was voluntary and unpaid; however, students were provided snacks and beverages during the focus group interview.

According to the research, four to six participants is an optimal number for deep conversation but can still provide richness in diverse perspectives (Patton, 2002). While the sample size may appear to be small in scope, size does not negate its validity or meaning (Patton, 2002). In fact, the “insights from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected” than sample size (Patton, 2002, p. 245). Most of the five focus groups in this study contained 3-5 participants in each group (Table 3.1).

After collecting consent forms, I asked the participants to complete another form for their demographic data (see Appendix E). On this form, each participant chose a pseudonym which was used throughout the focus group discussions. The information gathered from the focus group, including demographic information, was categorized, stored, and protected using the pseudonym.
At the bottom of the demographic form, I listed the open-ended questions for discussion in the context of the focus group. This enabled participants to consider their responses more carefully, anticipate the length of the session, reduce anxiety about the unknown, and allow them to opt out of questions they did not wish to answer.

Finally, the focus group began with video and audiotaping of students participating in the semi-structured, guided discussion, which included questions about academic engagement during their first year, during their Inquiry 1000 course, and during their upper division courses. I used both video and audio recordings of the focus group discussions so that I could actively engage with students as they told their stories. Using the video recording not only captured direct quotes of the participants, but I could also go back and re-live the intonation of voice, the emotions, and the participants’ non-verbals, as well as content of what was discussed.

**Instruments**

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the *primary* instrument. The researcher may learn from the participant, but must maintain a stance of neutrality when collecting the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This suggests that researchers must consider their own positionality when collecting the data. In this study, as primary instrument, I used Moustakas’ (1994) guidelines for phenomenology. Because of my relationship to Inquiry, this was an important measure to add distance and perspective. From Moustakas’ complete outline of strategies for qualitative research, I used the following pieces for my study.
Step 1 – The researcher explores his/her personal experiences to examine assumptions and viewpoints – this is called *epoche* – to refrain from judgment (Moustakas, 1994).

Step 2 – Researcher *brackets* personal prejudices and assumptions, putting them aside for reflection later (Moustakas, 1994).

Step 3 – Researcher uses *phenomenological reduction* – continual returning to the experience to find more meaning in it (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Step 4 – Researcher uses *horizontalization* to examine data, treating everything equally, and then organizing into clusters to determine themes. Horizontalization is the process of placing data out for examination, treating all with equal value initially, and then organizing into clusters/themes (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Step 5 – Researcher uses *imaginative variation* to view the data from various perspectives, “as if walking around a modern sculpture” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 27).

Step 6 – Finally, researcher can see the composite – the essence – of the phenomenon. The description that results should help the researcher understand what it must have been like for the participant to have experienced this phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

**NSSE Engagement Indicators (EI) as Framework for Confirmatory Study**

The National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE, 2017) asks students questions regarding about their engagement both in and out of the classroom. NSSE developed ten Engagement Indicators (EI) organized around four separate themes: academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with faculty, and campus
environment (see Appendix A). In my study, I used two of these Engagement Indicators: *learning with peers* and *experiences with faculty*. The peer and faculty engagement indicators also provided the structure for the focus group questions and served as a priori coding themes for the two research questions.

**Semi-Structured Focus Group Questions**

Focus group questions were provided to each participant prior to the start of the interview. This was done intentionally, allowing students ample opportunity to think about what they might say or what they would not like to answer. Therefore, participants had a clearer vision of what was expected from the focus group discussions (see Appendix E).

Students were told they did not have to answer any of the questions, but that their responses would be valuable and important to future planning. They were also told that they did not have to disclose their Inquiry 1000 professor’s name, or topic, unless it made sense to do so. They were told that no real names (theirs or any faculty) would be used in the paper.

The recorded conversations of focus group members were transcribed using an external transcriber for the 5 hours of recordings (approximately one hour per focus group). The transcriber was given student pseudonyms, rather than their real names, to protect the identity of the participants. In a phenomenological study, recording and transcribing the entire focus group conversation does two things: a) preserves the integrity of the participant’s message and b) assigns equal value to the statements made by each participant (Moustakas, 1994).
Data Collection Methods

In qualitative research, there are four methods of gathering information: 1) participating in the setting, 2) direct observation, 3) in-depth interviewing, and 4) analyzing cultural documents or materials (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In my study, I gathered information as a participant observer, using group interviewing (focus group) with open-ended questions, structured around a cultural document (NSSE engagement indicators). The focus group, guided by the researcher, explored the topic of student engagement. It was structured using an emic perspective, rather than the etic perspective, meaning that the focus group yielded data from the participant’s viewpoint, not the researcher’s (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Moustakas (1994) suggested that the researcher use epoche to explore personal experiences and examine assumptions or personal viewpoints, to avoid biased outcomes. At the same time, I bracketed my personal prejudices and assumptions, putting them aside during the study, a process which is discussed in detail in Chapter five (Moustakas, 1994).

Five focus groups had each three to five participants in each group, with one exception. The fourth focus group consisted of two individuals, which was unexpected, as two students who were scheduled to participate did not appear. The two students who attended the group were prepared to participate did not want to reschedule. Therefore, I honored their time and input by continuing with the focus group of two individuals.

The focus group format was “socially oriented” and encouraged participants to be more relaxed than in a one-on-one interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 154). Therefore it was a more engaging way to collect data than an individual interview (Parker
& Tritter, 2006). Engagement is a socially constructed phenomenon, ideal for a focus group, with topics that are culturally appropriate and are not highly sensitive, personal, or inappropriate to discuss in front of strangers (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). For participants, the opportunity to reflect on their classroom experiences with faculty and peer groups was cathartic in some ways, but was not overtly harmful for the subjects. In addition, participation was voluntary in nature, so students who did not wish to divulge information were not obligated to do so. For these reasons, this method of collecting data was ideal for the topic of academic engagement.

**Data Analysis**

Using the NSSE engagement indicators helped to structure the qualitative data provided by participants. The constructive framework with phenomenological methodology provided information about the peer and faculty engagement experienced in a lower division inquiry course and its effect on student engagement within successive courses.

My analysis used the epistemological framework of constructivism, based on my belief that there was no single reality, rather there are multiple realities or perspectives in interpreting student engagement. The participant information was recorded and then transcribed line by line, for each of the five focus groups. I did not change the types of questions asked in each of the five groups, so I was able to easily compare the answers in each of the groups. However, some of the responses did lead to probing questions for later focus groups, which honored the philosophical framework of constructivism – socially constructed realities. To analyze the data, I used the process of Constant Comparison Method implemented by Wong (2015).
Similar to Wong’s study (2015), I used a priori method of coding, using pre-determined themes to harmonize with my study’s conceptual framework in order to directly answer the research questions (Saldana, 2016). The NSSE engagement indicators served as first cycle coding themes by which to structure the data. I was able to sift through the transcriptions and organize responses into individual codes: engagement with peers and engagement with faculty (Saldana, 2016). By using the engagement indicators as first cycle coding, I organized the data by themes (peer engagement and faculty engagement) to prioritize and synthesize the information into sub themes, (Saldana, 2016). The peer engagement responses were coded for two sub-themes: collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others. The faculty engagement responses were also coded for two sub-themes: student-faculty interaction and effective teaching practices. Van Manen (1990) suggested that using themes helps to determine what is essential and what is not. It was necessary to use a priori coding themes (the pre-determined NSSE engagement indicators), because it structured the analysis process. Saldana (2016) stated that “theming data is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, especially for phenomenology” (p. 200).

This line-by-line data were recorded and organized into an excel spreadsheet. The excel sheet made it easier when looking for key words and descriptions that the participants shared regarding engagement with faculty and engagement with peers. Often, the participant responses were coded in chunks of dialogue, which was then grouped with other student responses of similar content. These passages were copied and pasted into a codebook organized by date, time, line item, and pseudonym under the
progressing into second cycle coding, I compared, prioritized and synthesized the transcription data into sub themes (Saldana, 2016). Sub themes were those units of meaning that help to describe the contextual and personal factors that shape the experience of engagement. Subthemes met two criteria: a) they provided information relevant to the study, but b) they were able to stand alone and make meaning for the engagement experience (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana, 2016). On the excel spreadsheet, I was able to identify major themes with subthemes under each. This process made writing the results much easier, as I was able to extract quotes from each of the different themes discussed further in chapter four.

Wong (2015), whose study was similarly constructed to my own, used the NSSE categories for guidelines and used the constant comparative method (CCM) to compare the NSSE data with qualitative “lived experiences of students as expressed in their reflections on their experiences of learning” (p. 60). He also used the benchmarks of NSSE data to code the student experiences from focus groups, making comparison between the NSSE data and those collected from student reflections (Wong, 2015). Implementing the CCM determines the “core message of the interview with the codes that are attached to it and to understand the interview including any difficulties, highlights and inconsistencies” (Boeije, 2002, p. 395).

One challenge with using CCM is that it is not apparent “how one should ‘go about’ constant comparison, nor does it address such issues as whether different types of
comparison can be distinguished” (Boeije, 2002, p. 393). In his design, Wong (2015) addressed the challenge by creating a process that was more effective for his own study. Wong made comparisons between the categories of NSSE and the data collected from his focus groups, comparing those factors that promoted student engagement.

For this undergraduate population, Wong (2015) used two benchmarks of effective educational practice: enriching educational experiences and active and collaborative learning. Similarly, my study was organized using two NSSE categories for student engagement: faculty and peer interaction. I was able to compare what NSSE identified as engaging behaviors with those identified by the participants in my study, confirming or not confirming their similarities with each other. Some of their responses articulated similar NSSE-like behaviors and some were in direct opposition to those espoused by NSSE.

In addition, after reviewing the transcripts of all five focus groups, I found that some of the statements made by students involved assessments of the course itself. These assessments offered a wealth of information, which, while not related to the research questions, warranted further exploration during the qualitative discussion in chapters four and five.

I combined the CCM process with the process developed by Moustakas (1994) to analyze and reflect on the focus group data. First, before designing the study, I acknowledged that I had personal connections to the research project and as such explored my personal experiences to examine pre-existing assumptions and viewpoints – otherwise known as epoche. After thinking about what assumptions I had about Inquiry course and its effect on student engagement, I bracketed personal prejudices and bias and
constructed open-ended questions that would not be leading for participants (See Appendix F). Only after bracketing did I conduct qualitative focus groups with student participants.

After collecting the data, Moustakas’ (1994) concept of horizontalization helped me examine transcriptions carefully, treating all of the data equally. This process was accomplished as part of the first cycle coding. I also used phenomenological reduction – returning to the experience shared by the participants in order to find more meaning in it (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). I implemented the imaginative variation technique (Moustakas, 1994) to look at the study from different angles or perspectives. I constructed core meanings from the participants’ mutual experiences and then compared the data to what was described in the literature on engagement. I then identified words and behavior indicators in recorded passages from focus groups (units) that fit with pre-determined categories and sub coded them. This process was part of the second cycle coding (Saldana, 2016).

Second cycle coding occurs when the researcher links categories and units with other units to see how they are related (Saldana, 2016) and also to determine which ones are more dominant and which are less important (Boeije, 2010). I compared codes and passages (CCM) of all student responses to find similarities and differences. This back and forth continuum continued until I reached a saturation point and no new units emerged (Saldana, 2016). I then implemented phenomenological reduction – a continual returning to the experience to find more meaning in it.

What resulted was an unusual amount of information from discussions about the Inquiry courses itself, not necessarily another engagement indicator, but more akin to
program assessment. I began to consider this particular data with *Imaginative Variation* – viewing from various perspectives, and as a result, created some thoughts about course design and course context. In other words, a new topic, aligned with program assessment, emerged from the data. Now, more enlightened about holistic engagement experience, I then created a *composite* – the essence of the phenomenon which is presented in chapter four.

**Protection of Subjects**

Protecting the participants and keeping their data confidential is of the utmost importance in designing a research study, especially in a qualitative study where the researcher often obtains personal information from participants. When interviewing, the process often carries risks and benefits to the participants and as such, the researcher should be aware of the two potential ethical dilemmas: the collection of data and the dissemination of findings (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). For the collection of data, the following IRB protocol was followed to ensure participant protection:

- For data collection and analysis, participant information was categorized by self-selected pseudonym.
- The researcher replaced participant contact information with pseudonyms.
- The researcher stored the information, interview recordings, and pseudonym key in password-protected files.
- At the completion of the study, the researcher will dispose of participant data by destroying all files and key codes with pseudonyms. The researcher will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without written consent unless required by law.
• The data will not be made available to other researchers for other studies following the completion of this research study and will not contain information that could identify participant contact information (including name and email).

These guidelines (and other pertinent information about the study) were listed on the participant consent form (Appendix D). Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and sign the form before volunteering for the study.

When analyzing the data and then publishing the findings, the researcher may face a second ethical dilemma. At times, participants shared identifiable details about their experiences, which could threaten their anonymity. I elected to remove this data from the study. I do recognize that I have a personal interest in the results of this research and as such, may have bias towards the research results. This is the positionality issue previously mentioned and is discussed in more detail below.

**Positionality of Researcher**

As the Director of First and Second Year Experiences, I had a personal interest in examining the effects, if any, that a high impact course situated in the first two years of college had on upper division experiences. Since the Inquiry course’s inception five years ago, I had been collecting anecdotal evidence about the applicability of Inquiry skills for students in their upper division courses. Most of the participants discussed that Inquiry, although mandated for all lower division students, was not only important, but necessary for student success in upper division, especially in terms of group work and faculty interaction. Through purposeful, phenomenological research, I intended to discover how students in upper division really perceived the value of their lower division Inquiry course.
I have worked with first year students for over eighteen years, and as such, developed a strong feeling of advocacy on their behalf. I also was part of the Inquiry course’s development and implementation, so I was biased for my support of its value. Because of these two interests, student success and Inquiry course success, I had to examine my preconceived ideas about this research topic before I began my study and try to suspend judgement (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

I have tried to put aside assumptions and pre-judgments so I could research the phenomenon with fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Although my past experience has led me to believe that Inquiry is a valuable, high impact course for students and that it is best situated the first two years of college, I bracketed these assumptions (to the best of my ability) when students began to share their lived experiences in order to get at its essence (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

The researcher’s analytic lens also plays a role in positionality (Saldana, 2016). In my study, how I perceived and interpreted what was happening in the data depended on my coding lens. Saldana (2016) cautioned that how a researcher views the phenomenon depends on “what type of filter covers that lens and from which angle you view the phenomenon” (p. 8). I used a priori method of coding, using a set of codes determined beforehand to harmonize with my study’s conceptual framework and find answers for my research questions (Saldana, 2016).

In this study, the categories used for analyzing the data from focus groups were pre-determined by the NSSE Engagement Indicators. There may be some “danger” in using predetermined categories as it “creates a bias in data analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 212). However, the use of these categories seemed the best response considering
the purpose behind my research and helped me in understanding the engagement with peers and faculty. In light of this, the predetermined NSSE categories assisted in making the data “conceptually congruent” for my study about engagement (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014, p. 212-213).

Qualitative research is a “dialectic process that affects and changes both the participants and the researcher” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p.64). I was reflexive in my research, willing to learn from the process and understand its effect on me personally (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Therefore, I developed the open-ended interview questions which elicited responses from participants and encouraged them to share their experiences through their own lens, rather than my own. I did this so that participants would view themselves as active researchers, providing advice and thoughtful considerations, rather than as passive observers. I not only listened to them, but also provided encouragement to voice their lived experience without fear of judgement. In this process, I would say that I was not only a researcher, but also a student.

**Trustworthiness**

Results of a study are considered trustworthy when there has been effort or rigor in implementing the study (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). And while reliability and validity for qualitative studies are not measured in the same way as quantitative, for any study, validity and reliability can be strengthened with careful consideration of the study’s conceptualization, in this case, the NSSE engagement indicators (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This study’s conceptualization was initially based on the NSSE survey data for PRU and its findings about student engagement. The NSSE instrument reports on those
institutional student behaviors that demonstrate “quality of effort and involvement in productive learning activities” and so completing the NSSE is in itself an effective educational practice (Kuh, 2009b, p. 6). NSSE provides a valid and reliable instrument for measuring student engagement outcomes (Kuh, 2009b). NSSE relies on self-reported data, the validity and credibility of which have been examined extensively resulting in a general agreement that “the psychometric properties of NSSE are very good …based on data collected over the years from focus groups, cognitive testing, and various psychometric analyses” (Kuh, 2009b, p. 13). In particular, NSSE’s Engagement Indicators (EIs) have also been rigorously tested. In its 2015 Report of Annual Results, Indiana University found “each EI provides valuable, concise, actionable information about a distinct aspect of student engagement” (NSSE, 2015, p. 10). Therefore, using Engagement Indicators for the structure of my research provided a foundation for validity.

Trustworthiness also assumes a standard of reliability and validity. Reliability refers to the extent to which the research findings can be replicated; however because human experience “is never static,” reliability is “problematic” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 250). Validity is defined as the extent to which the findings can be applied or transferred to another situation (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). For this study, the following strategies were employed to increase reliability (consistency) and validity (transferability): a) triangulation of data, b) audit trail, and c) transferability.

**Triangulation of Data**

Triangulation uses strategies such as multiple theories, multiple sources (journal articles, books, and research) and multiple methods (focus groups and national surveys)
In this study, multiple theories (both student development and environmental) were used to understand academic engagement. Also, focus group information was compared with NSSE survey data to determine if there was consistency about engagement information. Finally, multiple sources of information were used (books and articles) to collect foundational information about engagement.

**Audit Trail**

An audit trail is a log that records exactly how a research process unfolds so that the study may be more reliable and consistent, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). It is not to ensure an exact replication, but rather provides an accurate accounting for how the researcher arrived at these results and why these results are important for exploring student success through engagement strategies.

**Transferability**

External validity can be demonstrated by the extent to which this study can be applied elsewhere. This is not to be confused with the concept of generalizability. Patton (2015) promoted the idea of extrapolation instead of generalizability, in qualitative research. In other words, one cannot generalize the findings of this HIP course to another institution, as the Inquiry course is institution-specific, but the concept of engagement can be applied to other settings.

**Summary of the Chapter**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of my qualitative study, its constructivist framework, and the phenomenological methodology which guided the study. The data collection methods were also described, including the 17 participants, the setting, the instruments, and the coding methods. I used *a priori* coding (NSSE Engagement
Indicators), for the confirmatory process and determined the sub-codes for categorizing how the participants experienced faculty and peer engagement in their upper division courses. The Constant Comparative Method (CCM) and the strategies employed by Moustakas (1994) were used to analyze the participant responses. To more accurately represent my positionality, I described my own personal bias and how it affected reliability and validity issues and what methods I used to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. In the next chapter, I present the research findings describing the students’ experiences with peer and faculty engagement.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of students enrolled in a high impact course, Inquiry 1000, and what effect, if any, that this course had on their experiences with engagement in their upper division courses, related to their peer and faculty interaction.

The first three chapters of this dissertation offered an introduction to the relationship between engagement and retention in college. A review of the literature for high impact practices and faculty and/or peer engagement resulted in the selection of the confirmatory, phenomenological design used for this study. This chapter will present the findings that emerged from the data collected.

A qualitative study collecting data from five focus groups was conducted with a total of seventeen participants. Pseudonyms for participants were created to ensure that all students’ identities were kept private. While it is generally advised for most focus groups to include somewhere between 6-12 participants (Kruger & Casey, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016), a variation in sample sizes for qualitative research is not problematic. Sample sizes should not be so small that it is difficult to achieve data saturation, or so large that it results in informational redundancy (Sandelowski, 1995). For purposes of this study, five focus groups, with 2 – 5 participants in each group, resulted in saturation.
Focus groups allow the participants a social interaction as they construct meaning of their experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). It was the most apropos method to collect data, considering the overall topic was about engagement and focus groups are, by their very nature, contextually social. Individual interviews might have elicited information about student engagement, but it would have been less socially constructed. Marshall and Rossman (1999) also underscored the importance of participants listening to others’ opinions in order to form their own, that “individual’s attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum” (p. 114). Therefore the method of focus group research was fitting, in that the process of dialoguing with those who may have a difference of opinion reflects the opportunity for engagement and discussion with diverse others. In other words, the focus group setting reflected the Inquiry classroom environment which was being researched.

**Overview of Findings**

When developing the codebook for this study, I considered the three types of coding: structural, data-driven, and theory-driven (DeCuir, Marshall, & McCulloh, 2001). Initially, the findings were meta-coded using the structural framework of two NSSE engagement indicator themes (peer and faculty engagement). As was discussed in my operational definitions, I explored the NSSE Engagement Theme of Learning with Peers, calling it *Peer Engagement*. I also explored the NSSE Engagement Theme of Experiences with Faculty, calling it, *Engagement with Faculty*. For purposes of this study, the terms and phrases I have used are synonymous with the language used by NSSE to identify engagement themes.
Each of these Engagement Indicator Themes was defined by two specific attributes of engagement. Engagement with Peers is defined by collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others and Engagement with Faculty is defined by student-faculty interaction and effective teaching practices (NSSE, 2017).

After reviewing the transcriptions, I realized I needed to add an additional category, which was more organic and reflected the students’ assessment of the Inquiry course itself. I developed an Excel codebook, which facilitated the process of looking for key words and descriptions that the participants had in common with the NSSE engagement indicators. The codebook was organized by date, time, line item, and participant pseudonym under each of the themes.

This chapter is organized by participant responses, meta themes and sub themes. First, the chapter explores the particular themes associated with peer engagement (collaborative learning, and discussions with diverse others) and interacting with faculty (student-faculty interaction and effective teaching practices). Then information about course assessment was added, relating the student perspectives about course design and course intent, which bubbled up in natural conversation during the focus groups.

Discrepant cases and non-confirming data were also included in the findings so that all salient cases are accounted for. The themes that emerge from the participants’ stories were pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experiences of engagement.

Findings presented served to answer the following research questions for this study:
RQ1: How do students describe their engagement experiences in a high impact course (Inquiry 1000) related specifically to peer and faculty interaction?

RQ2: How does the experience of participating in a lower division high impact course affect engagement in upper division courses in terms of peer and faculty interaction?

Participants

Participants were recruited using email invitations and flyers posted within the University. Participants must have completed their lower division Inquiry 1000 course and were currently enrolled full time at the university. Most of the participants were (or were about to be) classified as juniors in college and as such, were already enrolled in their upper division courses.

Some demographic characteristics of the participants were collected for this study including: academic year, major age, race, gender and whether or not they identified themselves as first-generation (See Table 3.1).

A summary of participants’ self-identified demographics was also provided to acknowledge the variety of student voices in this study and to demonstrate that participants are mainly upper division students who reflect a wide diversity of students at the university (Table 3.2). The students varied in age, gender, ethnicity, major, first generation status, and year in college (sophomores, juniors, and seniors).

While all student participants had a personal experience with the Inquiry course, some experiences were more positive than others. To some degree, experiences varied due to the course topic, type of course, major discipline of the instructor, or students’ personal attributes. A few of the subjects shared such different viewpoints that their data
might be considered discrepant, or it also might suggest that the degree of engagement 
varies, dependent on factors beyond what was explored for this study. Either way, these 
discrepant cases are discussed at the end of Chapter 4.

During the data analysis process, I coded the transcripts for each of the five focus 
groups. The themes that emerged reflected high impact practices related to engagement 
with peers (Theme 1) and engagement with faculty (Theme 2), which are also indicators 
of engagement identified by NSSE (2017). These themes contributed to my overall 
understanding of the student collegiate experience in both lower division and upper 
divisions. Beyond the engagement themes, the students themselves offered information, 
in the form of recommendations or advice, about the course’s design, essentially 
assessing the overall program. Discussion of how the results relate to the theoretical 
framework will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Theme 1:

Engagement with Peers: Increases Academic Confidence and Sense of Belonging

NSSE’s Engagement Indicator for Learning with Peers stresses the importance of 
working with other students in establishing stronger learning outcomes (NSSE, 2017). 
An examination of the data revealed that peers, friends, and classmates seemed to have a 
great impact on a student’s experience in and out of the classroom. Dorothy described 
her initial fear when she first arrived in college:

*I made good grades in high school ... but, my first year of college I was 
kind of naïve, was kind of ready to go through the door but I was kind of 
peeking around the corner like, I’m not really sure if I’m ready to do this 
but I’m going to do it anyway.*
Janiece described her university as a “family” where you interact with the same students again and again.

*You’ll see someone in one class and then later you’ll – did I see you last semester or a few semesters ago?..... And then it’s kind of like that bond just sparks back up. You kind of take classes with the same people in your major over and over again because it is a smaller school, so you kind of make friends that way and kind of network that way too.*

Learning to navigate college is difficult and so many students find that their peers are particularly useful resources. Dorothy mentioned that is this should be the main goal for the first year students.

*As a freshman you don’t even have a lot of friends and friends kind of help you navigate the college scene. So, I think it would be helpful to gain those friends early on.*

One way to establish friendships is within the classroom environment. But often, first and second year coursework is centered around passive instructional techniques, rather than more active pedagogy, such as collaborative or problem based learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The NSSE (2017) describes active and collaborative learning as one of its benchmarks for effective educational practice and positively impacts persistence (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010).

**Collaborative Learning: Both Necessary and Frustrating**

NSSE’s Engagement Indicator for Collaborative Learning stresses the importance of working with peers in establishing stronger learning outcomes (NSSE, 2017). In discussing the effects of collaborative learning with upper division students, it was
interesting to hear that working with other students is necessary and timely. In other words, students indicated that group work was potentially the most important skill to learn on the front end of the college experience. As a student who is already working in the health care field while going to school, Brandi reflected,

*I think one of the things that the Inquiry class taught was you have to learn how to work with people, you just do. In my field, doing – it is very much a team effort where I'm in clinic, there's constantly a therapist, you know if you're not busy, go check on your team and make sure – somebody else, go check on this person over here and make sure that they don’t need any help with their assignment and so on and so forth, so there is a lot of collaboration.*

In the same focus group, Marie agreed with Brandi, and indicated that as an art major, it was also important to learn to work together. She said, “Collaboration is something that is a priority for artists, knowing how to work with another artist and not have your style be buried underneath theirs or not crush someone else’s, it’s a thin line that you have to traverse.” However, it appears that the thin line she described can also result in some negative consequences.

Working in groups can be frustrating and even challenging, especially when Inquiry students learn that the projects are completely student-led rather than faculty driven. It makes the stakes seem even more stressful. As Liam, a non-traditional student, explains

*The reality is we had five groups and 20 something students and about 5 students who did anything in the class and it was supposed to be a group*
research project but nobody was doing the work and a few individuals ended up going, I'm not going to fail because you guys aren't going to do your share.

Liam further explained that he usually is the one to take charge, because he is afraid if he does not, then his grade will suffer. Isabel, who was also in Liam’s focus group, agreed with him, stating, “I feel like with group projects, there's always that one person who ends up taking over and making sure everything is correct before they submit it.”

Conversely, another student, Tyler, stated that the problem with group work is not the one person who has to take over, but rather the one person who “goes MIA.” Tyler explains, “as much as Inquiry is about working with others, sometimes you are going to get that lone wolf in the group that is going to be kind of off to the side doing their own thing kind of thing.” And while one might assume that this dysfunction occurs only in lower division coursework, it challenges students in their upper division as well. Tyler was quick to assert that group work, even in his upper division courses, is something you just have to “learn to deal with.” He explained,

*I mean...we've all been probably paired up with a group where either there's someone we don't like or someone, again, who is not pulling their share, and it takes us to have to pull them along or pull them aside and figure out, okay, the project is going to be due soon, how are we going to accomplish it and overcome this challenge. And I feel like with more of these coming along, we've kind of learned how to adapt to that and sometimes even expect it.*
However, most students who were interviewed agreed that in their upper division courses, group work was expected and, for some courses, often the only graded assignment. Rya, a senior, says that one of her major courses consists of only group projects – nothing else. “Just group work and you’ve got to get through it.” So when asked if Inquiry is a scaffolding process for upper division courses, Rya agreed, stating “It’s like saying to first year students, ‘I’m going to give you a little taste of what you can be expecting later on in your program’ versus letting them just go in blind.” Therefore, group work is utilized throughout the college years as a measure of student learning. This may also be important for career preparation, as well.

Beyond college, collaborative skills are useful beyond the confines of academia’s walls. Indeed, one student pointed out that collaboration was also an expected part of life, not just school. It prepares students with career competency skills. Brandi expressed that,

*There’s collaboration in every aspect – something in your life you’re going to have to collaborate on. I don’t know if it applies as much as in my field as it does in life in general. I think in general you just have to learn how to work with people. I think it’s important to teach that [collaboration] because there are going to be people that rub you the wrong way regardless of where you go in life, what your field of study is, what you want to do. You know, I can’t imagine there’s ever an instance where you won’t – whether it’s in your personal life or your professional life.*
Brandi’s reflections about collaboration also alluded to the challenges of working with others who may hold different perspectives. This can be especially challenging for first year students in an Inquiry classroom environment when discussion is expected and encouraged.

**Discussions with Diverse Others: Diminishes Awkwardness and Provides Common Ground**

NSEE’s Engagement Indicator for Discussions with Diverse Others explores the benefits to having students experience different perspectives when discussing topics both in and out of the class (NSSE, 2017). Colleges can provide fertile ground for opportunities to interact with and learn from others with varied life experiences and family backgrounds (NSSE, 2017).

Discussing personal opinions in class can be especially intimidating when students are unfamiliar with each other. This occurs frequently in classrooms when faculty do not encourage discussion between peers. However, faculty who intentionally group students with others they may not know establish a level of trust which encourages further discussion. Inquiry faculty are trained to group students with others whom they do not already know. While initially uncomfortable, this usually led to some fairly good class discussion. One student, Rya, reflected

*I only knew one person in that class and when we did group work I was scared, I was like, I want to be with my friend because I know her, but the professor was like, ‘no, I’m not going to partner you with your friend, so you’ll go to this group’ and we ended up just having a conversation together. And I was like, ‘oh okay, y’all are actually pretty cool’.* And
then we’d come together as a whole class and we had to start raising our hands because we’ll talk over each other. I never had a class like that - where everybody is so willing to just TALK!

Tyler mentioned that in his Inquiry course, the professor started collaborative discussions with diverse others the very first day of class. He found this to be one of his favorite experiences.

We even started off our first class spending a whole hour just going around the room pairing up with people, getting to learn each other, introducing them to the class. So, I felt like that was definitely a good start to collaborate with others and get to know other people.

Several of the students indicated, that as freshmen, they were hesitant to share opinions, especially when the teacher disagreed. Liam suggested that this reluctance was because the faculty “holds your grade in their hands” and so it was often intimidating to disagree with faculty. Nicole also mentions the perception that faculty hold a lot of power and that this often prevents students from speaking in class. She explained, “They hold your grade in their hands like you say the wrong thing, okay, F. That’s just how I feel. But I learned that’s not how it is, but still, that’s how it felt.” It was interesting to note the difference of opinion within the focus groups about the challenge of classroom discussion.

As a non-traditional student, Liam postulated that traditional-aged freshmen often “parrot back whatever either their previous school experience had….or what their parents think,” believing that what they were taught before was truth not to be disputed. Liam thought this issue was systemic, stating that the current K-12 educational system rewards
regurgitated answers because the administrators and teachers careers are all “riding on you being able to regurgitate that right answer.” However, in college, students are expected to have “healthy discussions.” Liam pointed out that “if you don’t talk, the teacher is not going to notice you and all he has to work on or she has to work from is those numbers on those tests.”

Of course, students do not always agree with each other’s opinions. Within the Inquiry course, it is to be expected that dialogue about a variety of topics lead to some healthy dialogue, even perhaps disagreements, but as one student, Phoebe, pointed out, “We were very, in a sense, mature about it. If someone didn’t like something, it wasn’t a big deal, half the time you could find someone in the class that agreed. And so, we definitely bonded through what we liked and what we didn’t.”

Phoebe continued, saying that as a self-identified introvert, she did not always feel very comfortable speaking up in class. However, the Inquiry course was so “dynamic” that it gave her the courage to begin talking in her other courses. She stated, “Inquiry helped me to try to make more of a stretch - to be open in my other classes and talk to other people.” Therefore, students’ age and level of extroversion may play a role in their willingness to speak out. Nearly all participants agreed that speaking up in class was important for the learning process.

Rya also voiced why engagement with peers is so important in the classroom. She credits her academic success from the shared learning between the faculty and students.

*I'm hearing different ways of learning things, I may not be able to learn something the way the professor is teaching me, but if a student can get to
the answer a different way that I understand, then that helps me and vice versa, I can help that student. So, with everyone giving their own interpretations of what's going on but still getting the idea, that's helping everyone in the classroom.

Rya pointed out that the true value in education is both the receiving and the giving of information from diverse perspectives.

**Theme 2:**

**Engagement with Faculty: Approachability and Mattering Affect Student Perception**

In addition to Peer Engagement, NSSE’s Indicator for Faculty Engagement also stresses the importance of student-faculty relationships in establishing stronger learning outcomes (NSSE). The importance of faculty on student retention, student learning, and student engagement is well documented; however, within the confines of a high impact practice (HIP), faculty play an especially important role (Astin, 1993, Kuh et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). One student, Nicole, credited faculty in her decision to remain at the university.

*I made friends so I was like, I'll stay. And then I got to know them [faculty]*

*I got to know how they work, how they grade, how they teach, so if I was to uproot myself and go somewhere else, it would be like freshman year all over again and I don’t want to do that so I stayed.*

Faculty may impact student persistence and engagement by simply providing opportunities for meaningful interaction and offering educationally effective pedagogy that interests the students they teach.
Student-Faculty Interaction: Student Perception is Reality

NSSE’s Engagement Indicator for Student-Faculty Interaction stresses that experiences with faculty assist students in making connections between the *why* in attending college and *how* they will move forward (NSSE, 2017). The issue seems to be the point at which faculty and students actually engage. NSSE’s engagement indicators website states “Interactions with faculty can positively influence the cognitive growth, development, and persistence of college students” (2017, p. 1); however, according the focus group participants, freshmen are often intimidated by faculty and see them as “scary.” Therefore, the very population that needs faculty the most is often the *least* likely to seek out their advice. The participants discussed their own feelings of inadequacy in talking to professors the first few semesters of college.

Nicole, now a junior, stated that talking to a professor “wasn’t an option my first year. I was just like, if I don’t get it, okay, I don’t get it. That’s fine. I'll have to ask a classmate or something because they were just – it was intimidating for some reason.” Other students suggested that while asking questions in class was unthinkable, they were willing to wait after class or email faculty later.

Wendell agreed with this fear, stating that in high school, students interact with their teachers every day, but in college…

*You’ve never met these people and then you only see them twice a week,*

*maybe three times a week, and then they're just – they seem unapproachable, not all of them, but a bunch of them just seem unapproachable, which they really aren’t you just have to get to know*
them. But, definitely freshman year... it was kind of intimidating to go visit your professors.

One issue was the students’ perception of faculty’s approachability. If faculty members appeared to enjoy teaching first year students, then it was easier to talk with them. Phoebe reflected on the importance of student perception.

*It’s easier to have an approachable professor than one that comes to class, teaches what they need to teach, and then kind of just leaves.*

*Because I know a lot of my professors have been approachable and have reached out if we didn’t show up to class or if we missed an assignment.*

*So, you know that they care and that they're paying attention to what's going on in the class or who is there and who is not there.*

Janiece stated that in her experience, creating a culture of engagement supersedes even the faculty. “The professors and even the deans or associate deans or chairs, you know, they care, they care about how we're learning, or they check up on us and make sure, you know, the professors are doing what they should do. So, I feel like you may not get that at a larger university.”

Despite the fact that Inquiry is a one credit hour course, meeting for only ten weeks, many students were surprised at how faculty acknowledged them, remembering their names long after the semester was over. Phoebe was pleasantly shocked by this realization.

*There was one time that me and one of my friends who was also in the Inquiry class, we were walking into this building I believe and she was*
walking out, and she was like, ‘oh, hey guys, how are you doing?’ And we were just like, ‘you remember us? Okay. Hi.’

Wendell’s Inquiry experience was similar. He said of his professor, “He wanted us to all feel like a family, that we all mattered and our opinions all mattered.”

Emily, on the other hand, had a different experience, stating that because her Inquiry course was not challenging enough, she did not go out of her way to get to know the professor outside of class. “Since the Inquiry class wasn’t very difficult, I didn’t really get to know the professor that well, I didn’t talk to her outside of class at all.” When asked to explain further she suggested that she did not have to talk to her after class. “I didn’t have any questions because the instructions were easy enough to understand.” Sanford’s (1962) idea of challenge and support is reflected in her statement; in other words, if students do not perceive the course as challenging, then why bother talking outside of class with the professor?

Most of the participants, now upper-class students, acknowledged that fear of faculty should not be reality. Leah even mentioned her over-confidence as a detriment to her grades. She realized that visiting faculty outside of class is a positive behavior.

When I came in, I was like, I’ve got this, just study and realized like kind of – I mean, my grades weren’t bad but they could have been where I wanted if I had reached out to my teachers. But now, I’m like, okay, I don’t understand it, go to the teacher’s office.

The student-faculty interaction is a strong reason that many students remain at a particular university. Tiffany stated, “Because I do talk to my professors, I do enjoy having conversations with them outside of class and everything which they do make me
feel welcome in the school which that’s why I stay.” She says that is not always the case for her friends in larger universities, suggesting that smaller schools or smaller class sizes tend to increase student-faculty engagement.

One student says that over time, her relationship has changed with her professors. Isabel, who has completed several undergraduate research projects with faculty, now feels a sense of comradery with them.

*I've grown in my relationship with faculty. Now I see them more as like – not friends, but like respectfully like my friend. Does that make sense? Or like a mentor type of relationship. I always joke around with one of my professors like I'll just walk into his – well, of course I knock – but I'll just walk into his room just to say hi, not because I need to go to office hours or because I need him to bump me up on a test grade.*

The juniors and seniors reflected that as first year students, they would not dare speak up in lecture class. They would not visit a professor in during office hours, or speak to them if they saw them off campus. They then discussed their experience with Inquiry as a *forced conversation*. One student said her Inquiry professor would not provide her grades unless she (and all other students) had a conversation with him first. She said he mandated that all Inquiry students take responsibility for conversing with faculty and encouraged them to do so in other courses.

Another student shared his personal growth in learning to speak with faculty. Wendell shares that he used to hide behind his emails, only talking to professors electronically. He said that after his Inquiry experience, when a professor says to just email him with questions, he says “no.” Wendell reasoned, “Now I'm just like if I have a
problem I automatically go to them and they'll be like, *you could have emailed me*, and I'm like, no, I need to talk to you in person.” The idea of face to face interactions between faculty and students seem to be preferred method of communication for these student participants, despite the ease and efficiency that electronic communication would afford. This seems ironic, considering that for most students, their preferred method of communication with peers is texting (Levine & Dean, 2012).

**Effective Teaching Practices: Relating Coursework and Personal Experiences**

**Creates Connections**

NSSE’s Engagement Indicator for Effective Teaching Practices states that “student learning is heavily dependent on effective teaching” (NSSE, 2017, p. 1). In order to increase comprehension within the classroom, faculty must provide clear and organized instruction with examples and feedback (NSSE, 2017). The focus group participants shared what they remembered as the most effective or salient pedagogy from their Inquiry coursework. They compared Inquiry’s discussion-based methodology to that of traditional lecture-based courses.

Inquiry is a topic driven course, taught by faculty from all disciplines, and usually focuses on topics of faculty research or interest. However, it is also a student-driven course, where the faculty guides student learning, not provides it. Groups of students grapple with topics, usually of their choice, and learn to discuss differences of opinion respectfully with diverse others. I asked the participants about whether the topic affected their overall learning and interest. One student remarked that it was not the topic, but the *way* it was delivered that made the difference in whether a course was successful in her
opinion. Phoebe stated, “Maybe not the topic as much as the class dynamic was impactful because we could ask each other questions, even if we weren’t in class.”

Marie discussed that her friends’ experiences in taking an Inquiry course not related to their major still resulted in some positive outcomes. She shared with the group, “I knew friends who had a professor who was like completely different from where they were but they still ended up enjoying the class.” She continued by explaining a theory she learned in art history “integral theory,” where everything is related to everything else. She stated that she experienced this in her Inquiry course “the idea of having something somewhere along the way that teaches that your fields connect - whether you like it or not.” Marie explained that while students may not have selected the topic (and therefore, may not be interested in the subject matter), students are often able to relate it to their personal interests.

As a sophomore, Tyler, reflected that lecture-based courses are the norm for most lower-division courses, so being introduced to an active learning class in the first year or two of college was refreshing.

*Most of our other classes that I take are more like lecture-based and so for inquiry to be more of like kind of like dialog, you know working in groups, working as a class kind of thing, I feel like it’s much more lively and people are kind of like actually somehow happy to go to Inquiry versus like sitting through a history class or sitting through a biology class where you’re just going to be sitting there and taking notes the whole time.*

Tiffany’s Inquiry course employed problem-based learning strategies. She said this was effective because it “did help us learn how to critically think about the
information and where it’s going to get us.” Emily, on the other hand, had a different experience, comparing and contrasting ethnicity differences in healthcare. It was still problem-based learning, but it was using pragmatic examples that actually applied to her future career.

So it was more like a sociology course for me I guess. Yeah, it kind of focused on how different races, how they’re impacted by just like their race and how there's discrimination sometimes in healthcare systems. We all had like assumptions about how some races can be discriminated, but I think it just really went into more detail about – and gave examples of like how it actually happened.

Another student, Xiang, had a different type of Inquiry course. Xiang went on study abroad to Italy, where she enrolled in a paired Inquiry (Italian Food and Culture) and core Humanities (art, music and literature) combination while traveling in a foreign culture. The Inquiry course was used to delve deeper into the topics discussed in her Humanities class. She reflected, “I think pairing Inquiry and having it themed so that it matches like the humanities where you're learning about Italian culture in both classes that was helpful for me because it sort of enriched my Inquiry experience.”

As a non-traditional student, Brandi also found Inquiry to be more effective than typical lecture courses. She explained,

Because the lecture classes, although they are necessary and that’s understandable, when that’s all you get, sometimes it’s kind of like a breath of fresh air to have a different type of interaction where it’s not just
a teacher standing up there going through the PowerPoints. You're having an actual conversation.

Phoebe cautioned that it is all about the way the material is presented as to whether content will be retained, “Because you can have the most interesting topic but have the most boring professor and lose all interest in the topic. And so, it is how the information is presented that makes the topic interesting.”

The focus group students were surprised at how often the Inquiry professors required students to discuss topics in class, select their own group research or bring articles to class. This form of shared ownership of learning is supported by the literature as especially impactful and meaningful (Kinzie, 2014). Danielle pointed out the idea of classroom discussion as the lynchpin for engagement, both with peers and faculty. This once again acknowledges the importance of environment in fostering educationally successful outcomes (Astin, 1993).

I learned the most when we were doing just discussions in class ... she would just ask us our personal opinions and how we felt about the topics, I think that’s when I learned the most from that class, not from like the actual assignment, though I learned a little bit during the actual project of the research but I felt like ....it was just the actual in-class discussions we found very interesting.

While talking in class is often preferable to passively listening, it can be very uncomfortable for some students. Phoebe said of her own experience,

I’m still a very introverted person and so that’s always difficult to break, but at the same time, if I could have another class like that, I would!
Because some of the classes that I'm taking I'm not, 'yay, I have to go to class'. But that class [Inquiry] I was always excited to go to because I knew it would be fun and I would learn something and I could get along with the people as well.

The participants seemed to agree that required participation in Inquiry prepared them for their upper division courses and the expectations for class discussion and group work. Therefore, the practices employed in the classroom, active learning strategies, and other forms of engagement, make a difference in the participants’ perceptions of learning.

Interestingly, participants stated that students in lower division often equate learning with their results from graded tests, papers or exams. When the idea of reflection and discussion was mentioned as a learning outcome, the upper division participants agreed on its importance as a teaching practice. Danielle mentioned that as a freshman, she was already tired of the papers and tests, and found Inquiry to be refreshing. “It’s like a mental break between you have all these classes, these major classes, and so you have this one class where you're just like, I can breathe.” This statement reflected Levine and Dean’s (2012) findings that traditional aged students prefer instruction that is more interactive, hands-on and consumer oriented “preferring to choose if not the curriculum and content they wish to study, then the instructional method by which they learn best” (p. 167).

Additional Information:

Students’ Assessments and Recommendations for the Inquiry Course

In addition to the central themes provided by the NSSE (faculty and peer engagement), I also identified meta codes about students’ assessment of their Inquiry
courses. While this was not a separate theme, responding to the research questions, it was important to note for program improvement. The participants expressed several perspectives about both course design and course intent and felt compelled to express these ideas before leaving the focus groups.

It was evident by their discussion that participants felt free to express themselves openly and encouraged each other to dive deeper into a particular topic or question. In every one of the five focus groups, students began to ask questions of each other, rather than waiting on me (the facilitator) to guide the discussion. Often, the participants would drive the conversations in a completely different direction than what was originally planned. Yet, these demonstrations of engagement are the very skills utilized within the Inquiry course itself, indicating that the students were adept at applying shared learning strategies. Participants generally intended to learn from each other about the various perspectives of course design, course intent, and program improvement.

**Course Design Considerations: First or Second Year, Skill-Based or Research Content, Required or Self-Selection?**

As previously discussed, Inquiry is a required core course intended to target first year students in their second term or second year students. The course serves as a precursor for learning about research, by requiring students to design research-like projects and then publicly present their findings. The course instructor does not provide basic study skills, but rather scaffolds the research and instructional technology needed for upper division coursework. Finally, the course is designed to be project-based with collaborative learning, not lecture based with faculty who are the sage on the stage. The focus group participants indicated that overall they enjoyed this design, especially the
discussion-based pedagogy, and project-based learning. Most participants stated that this was perhaps the first time in college they were required to actively engage in class, rather than passively listen to lecture or take notes off power points.

**First or Second Year.** Several of the focus group participants discussed the pros and cons of situating the course in the freshman year. About half of them commented that it should be exclusively a first year course and the other half a sophomore course. When determining their reasons, the focus groups often disagreed among themselves and tried to come to some consensus. Students also employed the Inquiry principles (collaborative discussions, asking questions of each other, using examples to construct meaning) in answering the question: should Inquiry be offered to students in their first year or their second? Angelique argued, “I think maybe the first year just so you can get used to like having to have discussions with people and actually speaking up and voicing your opinion on things.” But in her same focus group, Phoebe responded that while she liked the idea of a first year course, the end of term project presentation (EXPO) could be intimidating and so might be “easier for students in the second semester rather than the first.” She stated that as an introvert, “If I would have just been thrown into an EXPO my first semester, I probably would have cried.”

The same arguments reverberated in the other focus groups with one student strongly advocating for situating Inquiry in the second year. Liam stated, “Give them a semester to go, ‘oh crap, this is not high school’, and then a whole other semester of, ‘okay, I get this, I'm starting to understand this’.” Leah, in another focus group, also pointed out this same developmental issue. “When you come in freshman year, you're just like trying to get a feel for everything, you're not really jumping into your courses -
like your major courses - until probably sophomore year.” Angelique suggested that taking the first year required communications course prior to Inquiry EXPO presentation would have been helpful. “I think in my situation I was nervous – I would have been nervous either way, but I think it would be nice to have some type of training on how to do public speaking before you do an EXPO!”

Danielle was ambivalent, mentioning that the maturity required to learn Inquiry skills might be more valuable in upper division courses. “I feel like the later you take it, the more you actually learn from it, but at that point, that would be like almost too late, but I feel like you want to have as much time to apply it during your college years.” Often, the focus group discussions would conclude with “either/or” first or second year students, and in this way, the ambivalence mimicked what was often found in the Inquiry course itself. There were no right or wrong answers, only more questions.

Skills-Based or Research-Based. Another consideration was the wide range of preparedness that affected entering college students – some students are ready for inquiry and research while others still need basic study skills. Several students commented on the fact that the university no longer offers courses for study strategies or life skills. Many students commented that this presented a deficit in the college experience. Phoebe mentioned her academic weakness when transitioning to college life, “taking notes and actually getting focused I wasn’t ready for the amount of work, that’s for sure. I was a kinesiology major first and that Biology 1107 class, I wasn’t ready. Was not ready.”

Xiang pointed out that Inquiry was perhaps not the best fit for freshmen students and that different content might be more appropriate for first year students. “When you go to an Inquiry class with discussions, that is good, I guess I just wish there was a way
for it to be I guess more helpful to freshmen and also like that it would be more focused.”

She explained that other institutions are different.

*I know a lot of institutions have like a freshman 101 class that they do where it’s sort of like orientation but they teach you about campus resources and it’s more in-depth, maybe if you could weave that into the Inquiry courses that could be more helpful to freshmen. Like this is how to get started in research if you’re interested and this is why research is good and here are various resources, here’s how – here’s who you can reach out to if you need help writing an essay or you need tutoring, things like that.*

Tyler, in her same focus group, agreed with her and said in response,

*I think, like you said, like I know a lot of freshmen come in and they don’t know who to go talk to about financial aid, they don’t know who to talk to about getting you know their class schedule fixed. And so I feel like, yeah, doing research is great, but you can’t really succeed at a university and do research unless you know how to successfully navigate that university.*

**Course Selection.** Another issue with Inquiry was that it was a mandatory core course – all students had to take it. In the first semester of freshman year at PRU, core courses are often selected by the academic advisor. This can result in students becoming more passive about their education and even resistant to the idea of higher education in general. Liam commented that lower division registration often is orchestrated by centralized advisement, providing little to no opportunity for choice. While this may affect Inquiry course selection, what responsibility do students bear in this process?
Tyler argued that many students do not select their own Inquiry course because they themselves have not put forward the effort. His friends told their academic advisors to “just put me into any old Inquiry course, it doesn’t matter.” As a result, Tyler reported these students did not like their Inquiry topic, thought the course was uninteresting, and did not really understand what Inquiry was it all about. Instead, Tyler suggested, “I feel like giving students the choice of what kind of theme [topic] they want is definitely something I think the school and the academic advisors need to emphasize.”

While Inquiry was designed to offer a variety of topics for students to self-select, this was often not the case in practice. Isabel noted that Inquiry needed more options, “More diverse than how it is now – it’s kind of like, if you have an interest in this, maybe you can take that Inquiry class, or if you have an interest in another thing, you can take that other Inquiry class.” Offering more topics in Inquiry might interest a wider variety of learners and thus increase active learning and engagement in the classroom.

Many of the participants did not know what Inquiry 1000 was before they took the course, and indeed, did not have a choice in the topic (“it fit my schedule” or “my advisor told me to take this one”). Students expressed their strong desire for more choice in this selection process. Rya suggested, “I think if the academic advisor [should] let the students choose the topic, because a lot of freshmen are still complaining or freshmen or sophomores are still complaining about the fact that, well, my advisor picks my schedule.” Course design was one assessment topic discussed by the students, but they also talked about the intent behind its creation and the perceived outcomes.

**Course Intent Considerations: Improving Retention or Recruiting Majors?**
Inquiry is designed to be a course which encourages student participation (peer interaction) and fosters engagement (student-faculty interaction), thus affecting retention. For some students, their peer group support directly impacts their intention to remain at the university and academic success.

Retention. Focus group participants reflected that attending a smaller university allowed them the opportunity to know other students on a personal level. As a junior, Leah reflected on why she has remained at this university.

*It’s definitely your peers and then being involved on campus. Like I joined BSU when I was a freshman, I'm still here now, and the main thing also for me is, now that I'm in my upper division courses, I see a lot of the same people over and over in each course, so I mean that’s comfortable for me versus going to another school and then not knowing anyone and so then you're like, well I don’t know who to study from or if I miss a day, who to get notes from.*

A few of them mentioned Inquiry specifically as being a course in which peer relationships were ongoing. Tiffany found this to be true for her course, “I feel like it’s the people you meet that makes the difference, and like if you have to discuss a lot like in Inquiry, you do meet new people and you do make new friends and that makes you want to stay [at the university].” Wendell discussed that his particular Inquiry course was so close-knit that they still continue to meet, “everyone in my [Inquiry] class – we're all still friends as a matter of fact. So, it was just – it was a great atmosphere.”

Inquiry is also designed to foster engagement with not only peers, but also faculty, which, according to students, also affected their retention. Tiffany felt that her
relationship with faculty was the main reason she chose to stay at the university, “I do talk to my professors; I do enjoy having conversations with them outside of class and everything which they do make me feel welcome in the school which that’s why I stay.” Rya also acknowledged that her professors noted when students were absent or were simply not themselves.

My professors actually try to check in on us, like hey Rya, I haven’t seen you in class for one day, are you okay? I actually like – I like seeing that you care, I like being at a place where I actually matter versus just being a number. So that kind of keeps me here.

This may reflect the idea that faculty engagement increases a student’s sense of belonging.

On the other hand, Wendell reflected a more holistic view of campus connections, “I stayed because of friends, because I knew professors, because I worked at the wellness center, and now at the academic success center so I made connections on the campus.”

Most of the participants did not credit Inquiry faculty as the reason for retention at the university, but rather the summation of experiential learning they received during the four years. Rya said, within her upper division courses, her professors allow her to apply her leadership skills she has learned both in Inquiry and in her campus organizations,

My professors let me use my leadership skills that I do on campus inside the classroom. So, one of my classes, our main topic is working together in groups and how to facilitate, that’s all I do on campus is working with groups and facilitating. So sometimes in class, he’ll let me actually lead the lecture, actually talk to students and actually put them in groups.
Another course intention was to use Inquiry as a major-related recruitment effort, essentially highlighting the research tools appropriate for a variety of disciplines. The question posed was whether Inquiry was chosen specifically to fit with the students’ major interest.

**Major Focused.** Nearly all participants indicated that the Inquiry course they had taken was unrelated to their major. This was due to three reasons. First, several indicated that their academic advisor selected the course for them. Danielle reflects her frustration with the process of registration “Well, I took it this semester. And, at the beginning, I really did not understand the full purpose of it, I just felt like it was another one of those freshman classes you just kind of had to take to graduate.”

Secondly, some participants indicated that they took the class that best fit their schedule (time or day) and not the topic. Finally, others said they really had no idea what course they signed up to take, that the title of the course was unlisted on their registration materials and they did not know until the first day of class. This institutional challenge has since been addressed, but several years ago, when the focus group students were taking Inquiry, this was indeed a weakness of the program. As a result, the discussion was not about whether the course was major-related (all but one said “no”), but rather, *should* it be major-related. Some very divergent opinions were expressed.

Several students felt that taking an Inquiry course that pertained to a student’s major would indeed scaffold that student’s perspective and research skills. Wendell noted,

*Since our school is research based and we know our professors all have like hands-on experience. So, them teaching us the same research*
theories, you know, learning about it and then going to through the experience, I think that would definitely help a lot of future majors especially where research comes into play.

On the other hand, Leah considered the impact on students of requiring the Inquiry course major-related. She advised, “I think that then it [Inquiry] would become a sophomore course more than a freshman course.”

Participants also expressed the support for varying perspectives within the course, recalling one of the NSSE engagement indicators of discussions with diverse others. Xiang said about Inquiry, “It’s a unique course because you're in a class where there's a lot of different majors and so usually if you're just like in science-heavy courses then like there's not that sense of diversity and diversity is healthy.”

Several students discussed the positive attributes of working with a variety of majors on a project. One student said that while at first it was frustrating working in a group, once she found her niche she was much happier.

I told him [professor] I was an art major and he sent me over to the one making the poster and I ended up doing all of the work for that, so that was fun. I realized how important it was because it was something out of my realm of knowledge.

Others thought it was beneficial for students who were undeclared to discuss majors with classmates who were more decided or more advanced academically. Rya indicated that in her class, it was helpful to have so many majors.

I think you should have a mixture because ...you can get different majors within that class that can spark your interest. Oh, I didn’t know about this
major, I actually like that stuff, I didn’t know we offered that here, versus just having everyone that’s biology because you’re never going to know what’s here if you don’t know.

Dorothy thought it was valuable for students to hear a variety of opinions and perspectives and that only congregating with their own major would propagate too much homogeneity.

I actually don’t think it would be helpful [to be major specific] because Inquiry is about kind of like discovering other things other than yourself, so I feel like if it was more major specific then you’re still in your little comfort zone and it should be kind of about breaking you out of it.

Institutionally, Liam considered the idea of Inquiry to be a panacea for overspecialization. He felt that as a university, we tended to be overly focused on one dominant domain (healthcare). Inquiry allowed and encouraged students to consider a variety of other options. “If we [the university] specialize on one thing then Inquiry is one of the easiest ways to avoid that overspecialization if it’s done right.”

Danielle, who was assigned her Honors-only Inquiry course lamented, “I remember hearing some of my other friends talking, and I was like, wow, that actually sounds kind of interesting, something more like – because I learned from my class, but just something else like to broaden my horizons just a little bit.” Therefore, most of the students advocated for diverse perspectives within the Inquiry course, recognizing that as juniors or seniors, there existed homogeneity of thought within their major courses.
Discrepant Cases

Much like Inquiry itself, the context of the focus group discussion occasionally focused on what might be considered discrepant cases or non-confirming data. These cases are also included to demonstrate that all participant voices are honored.

While the majority of the participants were enrolled in upper division courses, one participant, Danielle, identified as a freshman in the Honors program. This student was unable to participate in some of the questions about junior or senior year coursework; however, she did provide insight from her more recent experience of Inquiry, which inspired additional conversation. Danielle enrolled in Inquiry earlier than most students did because it was an honors requirement. As such, she indicated “We were all freshmen, we're all in honors, and we all lived in the same freshman dorm, so we were already kind of like in the same little environment with a community.” Her reflections about Inquiry, while valuable, were somewhat skewed as her class was pre-selected and organized around her established honors community. She continued by clarifying she did not advocate for this practice, and would have liked to have taken Inquiry with students other than those in her honors section.

Angelique had taken an online Inquiry course, and her experience, while valuable, provided a different perspective of engagement than those taking the course face to face.

*I took the online-based Inquiry class so we never had any time to meet together as a class or see each other or talk. I think it would have been better if it was like in class because it was kind of hard to communicate whenever we were having problems with understanding.*
Angelique indicated that she has had several online courses, but for this type of course, a face to face would have been the preferred method. Especially important was her concern about the end of course EXPO and meeting her classmates face to face for the first time. “I think it would be beneficial to have communication beforehand. I mean, I was kind of nervous either way just because I had never met with my class and then we're all expected to be here to present.” Angelique indicated that her online experience made the face-to-face EXPO presentation more challenging.

Two students self-identified as “non-traditional” and acknowledged that their INQR experiences were perhaps affected by their age or life experiences. Liam, who was thirty-eight years old, noted,

For me it's a little different because I'm coming back to school from being
– having a number of jobs. On top of that, I come from a family of
educators, so study skills, time management, that's all just outgrowths and
part of what I've experienced so far.

Liam continued, sharing his frustration with working with traditional-aged students who do not speak up in class, who do not participate fully with their group presentation and who seemed to be “entitled.” He said that for him, it was “not a question of what school did I go to, it’s a question of do I go to school?” His motivation was clearly focused on graduation and Liam felt the Inquiry was a hindrance to his intent to finish quickly.

At forty-three, Brandi mentioned that her age and circumstances were also what motivated her to succeed.

I was determined not to let my personal circumstances or anything stop
me from doing what I felt like I wanted to do because my circumstances
are just a little bit different, I'm a little bit older, I have a family. So, I had to keep that in mind but also I didn’t want to let that stop me from doing what I felt like I should be doing.

Brandi felt that traditional-aged students did not experience the same motivating factors and that this deficit may influence student success. In light of the non-traditional student input, it might be that Schaller’s (2005) model for sophomore development is more applicable for the traditional aged student.

Finally, Marie was convinced that as an art major, her experience differed from those of her Inquiry classmates because she felt immediately close to the art faculty before even arriving to campus - at least those within the department.

I like the relationships we form with our [Art] professors I think are more tightly knit than maybe others… I call all of my professors by their first name which is like it levels out that student teacher gap pretty quick.

Marie insisted that her Inquiry experience was not all that dramatically different from her art classes, in that she was already used to working closely with faculty and peers on projects.

These participants, the freshman, the online student, the non-traditional students and the art major, provided information that was contrary to what other students described as “typical” Inquiry experiences. It may be that the Inquiry experience itself should not be construed as a one size fits all, and as such, must release a wider variety of course offerings in order to attract the diversity of students we serve. There will be further discussion of this idea in chapter five.
Summary of the Chapter

Using five different focus groups, participants, mostly in their upper division courses, shared their memories of participation within their Inquiry core course. The Inquiry course is a high impact practice that targets first and second year college students. Student participants were asked about their experiences with faculty and peer engagement to determine what impact, if any, their Inquiry course had on their upper division course experiences.

The evidence suggested that engagement with peers increases overall academic confidence and sense of belonging. The participant responses were examined for the presence of two specific peer engagement indicators: collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others. The findings supported the presence of these themes, which will be detailed in Chapter 5. Collaborative learning was perceived as a necessary, albeit frustrating, experience for students, and discussions with diverse others was found to diminish awkwardness and provide common ground.

The evidence also suggested that engagement with faculty was affected by students’ perception of faculty’s approachability. The responses were examined for the presence of two specific faculty engagement indicators: student-faculty interaction and effective teaching practices. Results suggested that student perception is reality when it relates to interaction with faculty and that when faculty relate coursework and personal experiences while teaching, it creates connections for students. These themes will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Additional ideas emerged from the discussion regarding course design and course intent. Students provided assessment of their experiences with the Inquiry course, a
process that in some ways reflected the Inquiry process itself. The overall process of focus group discussion proved to be an ideal method for collecting data about Inquiry. The focus groups reflected the process of discovery and dialogue, much like the course itself. These points will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5 and will tie findings to the theoretical frameworks previously outlined in Chapter 2.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to engage students academically, many institutions have been increasing
the number and types of high impact practices (HIPs) they offer to students. The
Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) defines HIPs as
institutional practices which are designed to foster deeper learning and positively affect
retention/persistence rates (as cited in NSSE, 2007). Beyond measuring learning
outcomes and retention data, another way to consider the impact of these practices is to
study the students’ perception of engagement in a lower division HIP and how this
engagement behavior may follow students as they enroll in upper division courses.

Student engagement is often measured quantitatively (for example, National
Survey of Student Engagement) and usually provides data about cognitive outcomes or
students’ intentions to persist (Astin, 1993; Hu, et al. 2008). These tools are often used to
identify the existence of causal relationships, but do not address the “understanding or
explaining” of their existence in the first place (Pascarella, 2006, p. 515). Measuring
academic engagement should be an institutional priority; however, there seems to be little
information exploring students’ own thoughts about why those experiences presumably
encourage engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). How do we know that what we
are implementing is relevant and meaningful to students?
For this study, a qualitative approach to data collection about engagement provided a more complete view about how and why engagement affects lower division students as they move into their upper division courses.

This study used the framework of constructivism and the methodology of a confirmatory phenomenological qualitative study to ascertain the experiences of students and analyze them in terms of the NSSE engagement themes and indicators.

Student engagement is a multi-faceted experience; therefore, using the lens of constructivism was helpful because it assumes that there is “no single, observable reality” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 9). While constructivism provided the basic tenets of this qualitative study, the phenomenological approach offered a deeper understanding about the essence of student engagement (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The purpose was to explore the experiences of students discussing their engagement after completing their Inquiry course, and the effect, if any, that this course had on their experiences with peer and faculty interaction in their upper division courses.

Inquiry is an institutional core course, required for lower division students between second term freshman year and end of sophomore year. It is a one credit hour course, meeting 1.25 hours a week for 10 weeks, and is project-based. The course is taught by faculty from all disciplines and usually centers on topics of faculty research or interest. However, it is a student-driven course, where the faculty is simply guiding student learning, not providing it. Groups of students grapple with topics, usually of their choice, and learn to discuss differences of opinion respectfully with diverse others. In teams, students then collaborate to create a research question about the topic, find answers to the question, and then present findings at the end of the semester,
demonstrating their learning. Students are provided feedback by not only their professor, but other students as well. This is a required course for all students, and as such, demonstrates the intent of Kuh (2008) who argued that HIPs not integrated into the fabric of the institution are insufficient to address all student needs and student learning.

For this study, I suggested that Inquiry is “high impact” for students because it meets the six characteristics of HIPs as defined by Kuh (2008). Inquiry is an intentionally created project-based course with engagement learning outcomes. Students apply what they have learned, receive feedback for improvement, build relationships with faculty and peers, are exposed to diverse perspectives and others, are asked to publicly demonstrate their learning, and then reflect on this experience (Kuh, 2008). With the exception students reflecting deeply on these experiences, for which there is not time in the shortened term, the Inquiry course meets the definition of activities considered high impact.

In this study, I conducted five focus groups, with a total of 17 participants who were enrolled full time at a public research university (PRU), and then explored the lived experiences of academic engagement. The participants had to have completed their required high impact Inquiry course in their first or second year of college. Focus groups, in particular, are effective for determining factors that are influenced by opinion or motivation, not easily captured by survey data (Kruger & Casey, 2009). In other words, this method provided insight into topics or opinions that could not be communicated by using scores or percentages (Wong, 2015). Focus groups allowed the participants to interact socially as they constructed meaning of their experience (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Marshall and Rossman (1999) also underscored the importance of
participants listening to others’ opinions in order to form their own, since “individual’s attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum” (p. 114). Therefore, focus groups by their very nature are engaging opportunities for participants to discuss and reflect on the opinions of diverse others. In this way, the focus group methodology reflected the Inquiry course in its expectation for peer and instructor discussion eliciting socially constructed opinions, rather than isolated viewpoints.

Seventeen participants discussed their engagement experiences in their first two years of college and how this engagement impacted their upper division experiences. I captured their responses using open-ended questions and prompts, structured around the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) Engagement Indicators (see focus group protocol in Appendix F). This study uses a confirmatory, phenomenological approach to attain qualitative data analyzed with a priori coding using the NSSE engagement indicators.

I developed questions for the participants using the NSSE framework, transcribed the data from the focus group discussions, and analyzed the experiences from a constructivist perspective. Student development theories were somewhat helpful in understanding the challenges facing first and second year students, particularly Schaller’s Sophomore Developmental Stages (2005). However, theory alone did not inform my analysis.

Jones and Abes (2011) cautioned that student development theories are socially constructed and as such “do not capture the diversity of all stories” (p. 5). As a result, I also considered the importance of an environmental model to describe student interactions with their classroom settings and identify influential variables that affected
student experiences (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). Astin’s (1993) Theory of Inputs-Environment-Outputs (I-E-O) was particularly salient because it defined the importance of student inputs (e.g., age or major) and institutional environment (e.g., faculty interactions and peer collaborations) on outcomes (e.g., student engagement). Schaller’s theory and Astin’s model shed light on the importance of faculty and peer interaction (environment) and are therefore also valuable pieces of the puzzle in understanding how students experience engagement (student outcomes). However, they were only partially used in analyzing the student reflections.

The National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) uses Engagement Indicators that provided the main structure for organizing the themes. According to NSSE (2015), Engagement Indicator Themes offer valuable information about various attributes of student engagement using particular questions found on the NSSE survey. NSSE provided engagement themes from which to frame my study: Engagement with Peers (collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others) and Engagement with Faculty (student-faculty interaction and effective teaching practices). The engagement indicators offer a way to think about a particular activity or pedagogy and its impact on students using a structured design for a priori coding (Saldana, 2016). Selecting a provisional list of codes served to “harmonize” with the study’s conceptual framework, but did not preclude the formation of new codes in reviewing data (Saldana, 2016, p. 71). As a result, this study examined not only the pre-formed codes from NSSE’s engagement indicators, but also new codes, developed from student-driven responses about course assessment.

The following research questions guided my study:
RQ1:  *How do students describe their engagement experiences in a high impact course (Inquiry) related specifically to peer and faculty interaction?*  

RQ2:  *How does the experience of participating in a lower division high impact course affect engagement in upper division courses in terms of peer and faculty interaction?*  

**Summary of Findings**  
After reviewing the findings, an Inquiry seminar does appear to enhance communication with faculty and encourage peer interaction on the front end of college. In addition, the evidence demonstrates that as a high impact practice, the Inquiry course also apparently establishes a foundation for peer and faculty engagement, which affects students into their upper division years. Therefore, implementing an *Inquiry model* HIP designed for first and second year engagement improves both faculty and peer interaction throughout the college experience. This project-based course benefits student success by requiring students to integrate ideas with diverse perspectives, engage with faculty and diverse others, and participate in collaborative learning, resulting in a transfer of skills into upper division years.  

**General Discussion**  
A general discussion of the findings is organized by research questions and NSSE engagement indicators. I begin by answering the first research question, discussing the findings about engagement in the first two years of college, followed by the second research question, discussing the engagement in upper division years. These themes were established with *a priori* coding techniques. I then added another discussion using information provided by participant responses regarding Inquiry course design. It is this
last section that seems to offer more evidence for the implications of practice and research.

**RQ1: Inquiry Experience in Lower Division**

During data analysis, I reviewed the student responses, which supported themes relating Engagement with Peers (Theme 1) and Engagement with Faculty (Theme 2). These themes contributed to my overall understanding of the student collegiate experience in lower division (first and second year of college). Both of these themes provided insight into the lower division engagement, and the resulting conversations with students articulated how and why these themes were particularly salient for them. Interestingly, the NSSE data from the institutional site (PRU) offered a different, and sometimes contradictory, way to think about the student responses.

**Theme 1: Engagement with Peers: Increases Academic Confidence and Sense of Belonging.** NSSE’s Engagement Indicator for Learning with Peers stresses the importance of collaborating with other students in achieving stronger learning outcomes. An examination of the data collected revealed that peers, friends, and classmates often have a significant impact on student experience, both in and out of the classroom, in two primary areas: collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others.

**Collaborative Learning: Both Necessary and Frustrating.** NSSE’s Engagement Indicator for Collaborative Learning stresses the importance of working with peers in establishing stronger learning outcomes (NSSE, 2017). In discussing the effects of collaborative learning with upper division students, it was interesting to hear that working with other students in the first two years of college is both necessary and timely. In other words, learning to work effectively with others was potentially the most important skill to
learn on the front end of the college experience. This study’s site, PRU (2017), uses NSSE to measure engagement for its first year students and its seniors. PRU (2017) reported that 61% of first year students often asked another student to help them understand course, an indicator of collaborative learning. This average was significantly higher than that of the site’s institutional peer group, suggesting that students, at the end of their first year, had been exposed to collaborative learning techniques in their core courses. One of those courses may have included the Inquiry, which is project-based and requires an end of course group presentation as demonstration of learning. While most of the participants in my study agreed that in the first year group work was difficult and students had to overcome mismatched expectations of group members, in general, it is, as Tyler pointed out, “definitely a good start to learn to collaborate with others.” These statements appeared to confirm what NSSE engagement indicators describe as benefits of collaborative learning. In addition, it was noted by several students that this type of learning develops the competencies needed for successful workforce readiness. Schaller (2005) encouraged educators to provide opportunities for students to help them with expectations of others, including future employers. Therefore, while initially uncomfortable, collaborative learning does seem to prepare students for not only upper division coursework, but also their careers.

**Discussion with Diverse Others Diminishes Awkwardness and Provides Common Ground.** NSSE’s Engagement Indicator for Discussions with Diverse Others discusses the benefits of having students experience different perspectives when discussing topics both in and out of the class. The college setting has an advantage in providing numerous opportunities to interact with and learn from others with varied life
experiences and family backgrounds (NSSE, 2017). PRU’s NSSE results (2017) indicated that 76% of first year students had discussions with diverse others in terms of race/ethnicity, economic background, religious beliefs, and political views. This average was significantly higher than that of the site’s institutional peer group, suggesting that students had been exposed to discussions with diverse others and had experienced various perspectives, perhaps both in and out of the classroom. In addition, the study site reported that 75% of first year students tried to understand someone else’s views by imagining how an issue looked from their perspective (PRU, 2017).

The participants in my study did not seem to mind discussing topics with each other, but nearly all of them indicated this was a learned skill. The NSSE data from PRU (2017) indicated that students regularly had conversations with diverse others during their first year, but perhaps this was not in the context of the classroom. During the first year of college, they indicated it was difficult to speak up in class and it was even more difficult to share ideas that differed from that of the professor. Liam, a non-traditional student, suggested that it was age, not stage, which made debating difficult. He argued that traditionally aged students often “parroted what they had been taught in high school or by their parents.” He indicated that discourse in a college classroom did not readily happen his first or second year, unless it was with other non-traditional students, who “would have these lively arguments back and forth.”

Participants indicated that discussion with diverse others is a process of shifting alliances. In other words, the more topics students discuss and the more group projects they implement, the more often the found common ground. This shift occurred more often with a wider variety of peers. One day students might disagree with each other and
the next day (another topic) they would hold similar opinions. This shifting creates respect for diverse opinions. The more often students were asked to discuss, the more naturally students engaged. In fact, students reported that their fear of engagement dissipated over time. Increasing expectations for conversations in class also diminished the awkwardness for first and second year students. Astin (1993) acknowledged that while student inputs may vary, instructors could somewhat control the educational environment and thus impact student learning and engagement.

Overall, the NSSE engagement indicator for learning with peers seemed to be supported by the evidence provided by the participants. Both collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others, while sometimes frustrating, can provide meaningful engagement for lower division students. Overtime, students challenged to discuss in class and create group projects seem to develop more confidence academically. In addition, discovering common ground in a group of diverse others also helped students feel more engaged and heightened their sense of belonging. In both instances, faculty played a large role in creating opportunities for peer collaboration. However, Inquiry instructors also impacted engagement though student-faculty interaction.

Theme 2: Engagement with Faculty: Approachability and Mattering Affect

Student Perception. NSSE’s Indicator for Faculty Engagement also stresses the importance of student-faculty relationships in achieving stronger learning outcomes (NSSE, 2017). An examination of the data collected revealed that not only peers, but also faculty seem have a strong impact on a students’ experience in and out of the classroom in two primary areas: student-faculty interaction and effective teaching practices.
**Student-Faculty Interaction: Student Perception is Reality.** NSSE’s Engagement Indicator for Student-Faculty Interaction stresses that experiences with faculty assist students in making connections between the *why* in attending college and the *how* they will move forward (NSSE, 2017). PRU (2017) reported that 36% of first year students talked about career plans with a faculty member. While this percentage seemed low, PRU ranked significantly higher in this area in comparison to its peer institutions. Participants in this study discussed their own particular engagement with faculty as almost exclusively positive, even in their first few semesters. However, two things seemed to increase the likelihood of positive faculty engagement: a) the approachability demonstrated by faculty and b) the student’s perception that they mattered. Students noted that if faculty appeared to enjoy teaching a course, they were more likely to talk with them outside of class. Students reported that their Inquiry faculty especially seemed to enjoy teaching, perhaps because it was on a topic of their choosing or perhaps it was because they appreciated the increase in class discussion (compared with lecture based courses). Some students commented how powerful it was when faculty remembered them, even calling them by name. This was particularly surprising to students, who had only known the professor for ten weeks.

However, Liam pointed out that not all faculty needed to teach Inquiry and that they should be strongly vetted to determine if they had the skill set to teach first year students. He cautioned that graduate school professors, used to teaching about research, may not be prepared to teach undergraduates. However, Liam and Isabel both discussed the value of university administrators teaching Inquiry and that offering a classroom experience would provide an appreciation for their faculty and their students.
The social construction of the participant experiences was insightful in understanding faculty’s role in transitioning students into the university culture, but the NSSE data from PRU did not reflect the conversations about first year teaching practices.

**Effective Teaching Practices: Relating Coursework and Personal Experiences**

*Creates Connections.* NSSE’s Engagement Indicator for Effective Teaching Practices states that learning is strongly supported by on effective educational practices (NSSE, 2017). In order to increase comprehension within the classroom, faculty must provide clear and organized instruction with examples and feedback (NSSE, 2017). PRU (2017) reported that 66% of first year students received prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments. In addition, PRU reported that 77% first year students indicated their coursework emphasized *applying* facts, theories, or methods to practical problems/situations. This was a little different from the experiences of my participants who indicated that their first year was not about applying information. The participants, who are now juniors or seniors, reflected that in their freshman year, Inquiry was often the only course where they were expected to actively learn and interact in class. Most of their courses in first year were lecture-based. For students who took Inquiry in their second year, it was perhaps the first time they applied what they were learning to other classes and began to see where the skills in Inquiry scaffolded skills needed in upper division.

The experiences of the students seem to contradict the NSSE data, in this area – they do not remember first year being particularly effective in applying information; rather, they remember regurgitating facts. Sanford (1962) used the phrase *challenge and support* to identify effective learning practices; however, the participants acknowledged
that if coursework was not particularly challenging, then they did not feel the need to engage with faculty before or after class. As a one credit hour course, Inquiry holds the perception of an easy course, a “refreshing break” as some students noted. As such, Inquiry faculty may find it challenging to fully engage students. One way to address this concern is to create connections, both academic and personal, for students. Marie noted that Inquiry offered way of teaching that connected various disciplines. She was pleasantly surprised when her Inquiry faculty, acknowledging her major, asked her join the marketing group, utilizing her artistic skills. Other students expressed satisfaction with their Inquiry course when it taught them something they might use in their career. Emily, for example, was able to see value in contrasting ethnicity in healthcare, as she planned to attend medical school. Finally, if the Inquiry course addressed a particular interest, participants suggested this was also more valuable to them personally. For example, Xiang’s Inquiry offered a deeper look into Italian culture and was timely as it paired with her study abroad trip. These experiences often create deeper pathways and connections for learning, by asking students to make sense of the content and provide solutions or responses to the inquiry topic (Collier, 2014).

**RQ2: Inquiry Experience – Upper Division**

During data analysis, I reviewed the student responses, which supported themes relating engagement with peers (Theme 1) and engagement with faculty (Theme 2). These themes contributed to my overall understanding of how lower division student engagement experiences translated to peer and faculty engagement in upper division coursework.
Theme 1: Engagement with Peers: Increases Academic Confidence and Sense of Belonging. NSSE’s Engagement Indicator for Learning with Peers also measures senior students, prepared to graduate from the university. In examining the NSSE data from PRU (2017), it seems that engagement with other students continues to impact upper division students. PRU (2017) reported that 68% of seniors worked with other students on course projects or assignments. This percentage, while on par with those of peer institutions, seemed low – why did nearly a third of graduating students state that they had not worked with other students? I then realized that NSSE surveyed senior students (graduating in spring of 2016) who were not required to take an Inquiry course (Inquiry was first piloted in 2014). Therefore, it was possible that they had not been required to work collaboratively in other courses, including those within their major.

It was interesting to note that 74% of seniors indicated that they often had discussions with diverse others in terms of race/ethnicity, economic background, and political views. Perhaps as a result, 77% of seniors reported reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of their own views on a topic or issue. These percentages were significantly higher than those reported from peer institutions, so perhaps the concept of discussions with diverse others is more ingrained in the PRU culture. It certainly appeared that in the focus groups, the participants had no difficulty in expressing themselves, even respectfully disagreeing, with diverse others. They also reflected that working collaboratively with others became easier as they matriculated into major courses, that students learned how to effectively work in groups, or learned, conversely, that not all students have the same work ethic as they do. Tyler stated as a junior, “we’ve all been paired up with a group where someone is not pulling their share….and [we]
figure it out, okay, the project is going to be due soon, how are we going to accomplish it and overcome this challenge?” Tyler’s statement also highlighted the point at which students may experience a shift in their development from exploratory/tentative learners to their commitment stage, confident in their learning skills (Schaller, 2005). Participants acknowledged that group work, while still challenging in upper division courses, becomes easier when expectations change. The product of the presentation is the focus for upper division students, not the individual group member differences. Maturity and practice may encourage students to view the possibilities and challenges in a different way. Participants reported a stronger sense of belonging than they felt as first year students, and overall academic confidence is higher for these students who have persisted.

Theme 2: Engagement with Faculty: Approachability and Mattering Affect

Student Perception. PRU (2017) reported an increase in the number of students discussing their career plans with a professor from 36% freshman year to 55% senior year. This may be due to the impact of major selection and career exploration becoming more significant to sophomore and junior students, entering their commitment phase (Schaller, 2005; Schaller, 2010; Tobolowsky, 2008). PRU’s NSSE results (2017) also indicated that 72% of seniors felt they had high quality interactions with faculty. This was also reflected in conversations with focus group participants who indicated while they may have been fearful of faculty their first year, they were much more relaxed their junior and senior years. Interestingly, the population that might need faculty support the most (first and second year students) is often the least likely to establish relationships with faculty.
Faculty also seem to employ more effective teaching practices in their upper division courses. Rya commented that “everybody engages, everybody – we check on each other, we keep each other accountable. The professors – it’s never lecture-based at all – it’s all open discussion and group work.” Other students, now in their upper division, agreed that their course work is much more engaging, and students learned to, as Janiece reflected, “Speak up and interact with the professors.” She continued, saying “Now we are focusing on something that we are actually interested in – we have grown from our first and second year.” Therefore, over time, students develop a professional camaraderie with their faculty, but this is more easily accomplished when students communicate face to face.

One point that students made numerous times was the need for face-to-face interaction, especially in lower division. Angelique noted that in her experience, the inquiry model does not lend itself easily to the online platform, and in some ways, she felt anonymous. Students seem to prefer meeting faculty face to face rather than electronically, a sentiment reiterated by Wendell in his discussion about meeting with professors after class.

However, face to face does not guarantee approachability. Phoebe cautioned that simply showing up to class is not as important. Even online, faculty can reach out if students missed an assignment and show that “they’re paying attention to what going on the class, who is there and who is not there.” Most of the participants agreed that it was not the topic, but the manner in which it was delivered, that encouraged engagement. Juniors and seniors participating in this study seemed to think relational aspects improve overall engagement with faculty and connection to peers.
Additional Information: Students’ Assessments and Recommendations for the Inquiry Course

At the end of each focus group, I asked students what they would like to tell me regarding Inquiry course – its design, its intent, its timing in the college continuum. Though not answering a research question, my review of the transcripts yielded information for Inquiry program assessment at this particular institution, organized around two themes: course design and course intent. Therefore, in addition to the central themes provided by the NSSE (faculty and peer engagement), I also collected data about the design of the Inquiry course. The participants seemed to feel comfortable in sharing their perspectives and openly encouraged each other to dive deeper into the challenges and benefits of taking Inquiry. I was especially impressed at their adeptness in discussing issues, as the participants apparently translated their Inquiry skills into practice.

Course Design Considerations: First or Second Year, Skill-Based or Research Content, Required or Self-Selection?

The PRU Inquiry course is a required core class targeting second term first year students or first term second year students. It can be loosely defined as an academic seminar with variable content (Skipper, 2017). It serves as a precursor for upper division research, is not a skill-based study course, and is designed to be project-based rather than lecture based. In considering whether the course should target first years exclusively or sophomores, a few of the participants commented that it should be exclusively a first year course; some suggested that it could be offered either first or second year. However, more than half of the participants indicated this was ideally a sophomore course, for two reasons.
First or Second Year. Most participants cautioned against offering Inquiry to first semester, first year students. First, in one participant’s words, a freshman student is like a “deer in the headlight”, all they can think about is navigating college. Secondly, if Inquiry is supposed to connect with majors or faculty in your major, most freshmen are not ready for that commitment. Sophomores are more major and career focused than first year students. This sentiment is supported by the work of Schaller (2005). While there may not be a resolution to this debate, it opens the door for further discussions about the suitability of Inquiry for first years in terms of student development theory or environmental models. It would be interesting for this study to be implemented using student development theory to examine student fit for the Inquiry course.

In considering student development, theories may provide a better basis on which to make an informed decision about where to ultimately situate the course, first or second year. The vectors of psychosocial development: intellectual competence, interpersonal relationships, and developing purpose (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), or stages of development: random and focused exploration (Schaller, 2010), offer some framework for this decision.

Environmental models also provide information about factors affecting student success, such as inputs (precollege) or the learning environment (Astin, 1993). From the evidence I collected, I might assert that the sophomore student would be better equipped to appreciate the Inquiry design, especially if the student selected the Inquiry faculty within their intended major, thus reflecting Schaller’s (2010) work with sophomore development. Sophomore students who enroll in an Inquiry course may be more prepared for the expectation of engagement in the classroom environment.
Participants also indicated that freshmen were often unprepared or even “scared” to contribute to classroom discussion. These theories and models seem to suggest that in terms of stage of development or classroom environment, the needs of the second year student might more easily align with intended Inquiry outcomes.

**Skill-Based or Research Content.** The Inquiry course was designed to scaffold the research process, offering effective collaborative strategies to present project-based learning, a type of light research. Several students commented on the fact that the university no longer offers introductory courses, which teach study strategies or life skills. Many students commented that this presented a deficit in their college experience. While one might assume that the students who need study skills or academic success would be students without strong preparation for college-level work (such as first generation, underrepresented groups) this was not the case for these participants.

Some of the strongest advocates for an introductory, study skills-based college course were, in fact, academically successful students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) majors with cultural capital and family support. Some of the students who indicated that college was not *that* difficult, and that additional support was not necessary, were first generation students or students who had shared their academic difficulties with collegiate coursework. Therefore, participants did not come to any conclusion about whether or not to offer a traditional FYS course at PRU. Participants pointed out that this university already provided an Academic Success Center to meet study skill needs and that the Inquiry course was more appropriate for scaffolding upper division research. Two students suggested that Inquiry provide both study skills content and research practice. It is unlikely that PRU, having invested significant resources in its
Academic Success Center, would return to teaching its former study skills/life skills course. However, honoring the voices of student participants, I am sharing that there may still be a need for some entering freshmen to take a course for college success.

**Course Selection.** Another issue with Inquiry design was with the selection process. Registration for this lower division core course is coordinated by a centralized advising office, and according to students, provided little to no opportunity for student choice. When diving deeper into the issue, it was determined that students were unable to select the course titles, as the topics for the courses did not “show up” in the online registration process. As a result, students argued that as freshmen, they would have wanted more choice in making the selection with their advisors and better assistance in overcoming registration issues.

The students’ determination to change the selection process for Inquiry addresses both Chickering and Reisser’s vectors of student development (1993) and Schaller’s stages of exploration (2005). Participants demonstrated in their responses an increase in intellectual competence, showing concern about peer collaboration and relationships, and wanted more purpose from their Inquiry experience. Additionally, they seemed to shift from more random to more focused exploration in their need to select a topic of interest for their professional development. However, my study did not use these theories to the same degree that the NSSE framework was used in exploring student engagement. As this study does not specifically address the psychosocial development of the students, I would propose that this would need to be a separate study for developmental implications about student engagement in an HIP course.
Course Intent Considerations: Improving Retention or Recruiting Majors with Specific Populations?

When asked if the course topic should be offered within their major, for example a science-based Inquiry for a STEM major, the participants were again divided. Some agreed that taking an Inquiry course that pertained to a student’s major would scaffold the research skills needed to be successful in upper division coursework. However, the majority of the students cautioned that providing only one perspective might propagate too much homogeneity. Allowing students to self-select topics of interest would encourage students to consider a variety of perspectives and perhaps other majors. Similar to Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vector of developing purpose, students seemed to want more autonomy in their effort to develop pathways for purpose in college.

Taking an Inquiry course in your major field of study depends a great deal on the developmental stage of the student. If the student is still in random exploration phase (Schaller, 2005), then it makes sense to encourage them to enroll in a course not tied to a specific major. However, if the student is in their focused exploration phase (Schaller, 2005), then it seems reasonable to encourage a major related topic or faculty instructor from their discipline. The fluidity of when to take Inquiry can be problematic, but it can serve a variety of purposes for both first and second year students as their own development is still very fluid as well. In this study, I did not see evidence of developmental change, and while this might be an interesting study for future research, it was not addressed specifically.
Specific Populations. High impact activities offer a range of positive outcomes for students; however, the strength of their impact may differ due to student inputs (Astin, 1993) and pre-existing characteristics. For this study, I captured the data related to first-generation status, race and ethnicity, student majors, and age, which are discussed below as to the impact on engagement.

First Generation. Participants in this study were asked to identify if they were first generation (the first in their family to obtain their four year college degree). Seven of the participants (41%) identified as first generation, which was representative of the institution’s 44% of first generation students who responded to NSSE (PRU, 2017). Reis (2012) stated that first generation students “are easily intimidated by faculty in general, and during the first out-of-class interaction they may have no frame of reference regarding social protocol in such a situation” (p. 1). Baker and Griffin (2010) cautioned that first generation students need support, yet may be “unable to fully articulate their needs” (p. 2). This was supported by comments made by participants who were first generation and were, in fact, very intimidated by faculty in their first two years of college.

Some first generation students relied on their high school teachers to inform them about college classes. Sometimes the information was misguided. Leah reflected,

*In high school, I hear all this stuff from all the adults of like what college is like, and one of my teachers was even like if you come in class late then the professor just calls someone to come and take you out. But when I came here it was nothing like that.*
Phoebe, another first generation student, mentioned that while it was difficult to ask questions of the professor, it was even more challenging to ask in front of peers in a lecture-based course. Often she would “wait until after class to ask, [so that] not all eyes were on me.” The Inquiry course lends itself to more student-to-student participation in small groups, which is often more comfortable for students. Tiffany, also identified as a first generation student, acknowledged that Inquiry encouraged her to speak up for the first time in class.

Interestingly, Koopmann (2014) found that requiring first-generation students to participate in a HIP increased their overall academic confidence. Pike and Kuh (2005) suggested that first generation students might be less engaged because they do not know about its importance. However, the first generation students in this study not only knew its importance, but also were applying this practice in the focus group itself, suggesting that they routinely integrate engagement in other settings.

In considering the self-selected nature of participants in this study, perhaps these first generation students are unusually engaged, but perhaps not. Encouraging engagement on the front end of college is exactly what first generation students, and indeed all students, need and deserve. Sanford’s (1962) concept of challenge and support still holds true for today’s population. Meeting students where they live is an important factor in engagement. Additionally, it is interesting to consider that other types of historically underserved populations may also benefit from the Inquiry course, on the front end of a college career.

**Race and Ethnicity.** Participants in this study were also asked to identify their race, noted in Table 3.1. In this study, 18% of students identified as Asian, 47% as Black
or African American, 23% as White, and 12% as Multiracial or other. At PRU, 8% of students identify as Asian, 21% Black or African American, 55% are White, and 14% Multiracial or other (PRU 2017). This study had greater participation from Asian and Black students than would have been expected by the general student population. In addition, each of the five focus groups contained diversity, in terms of race, gender, age and major. This was unintentional on my part, but it worked in allowing students to participate and discuss with diverse others.

In reviewing the responses from students of various races, my research reflected the findings of Astin (1993) and Pascarella & Terenzini, (2005) who found that pre-existing characteristics do not explain everything that matters to student success in college. Students reflected on their engagement experiences as positive or negative without regard to race as a particular factor in engagement. This may be due to the diversity within focus groups themselves. Students of different races were responding to questions and were discussing with diverse others – which is the expectation of the Inquiry course. It may not have occurred to these students to discuss how their own race affected their engagement, but perhaps in a more homogeneous group, they might have done so.

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) found that all students, regardless of background, are more likely to perform better academically and persist to graduation when they attend institutional initiatives, such as Inquiry, that are “comprehensive” and are “based on effective educational practices” (p.556). While all students do enter college with a variety of precollege characteristics and behaviors (inputs), that alone does
not explain everything that affects students’ ability to succeed (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Kuh et al. (2008) listed a variety reasons for early departure from college, including lack of money, family demands, and poor social fit, or change of major. Academic engagement may not be the main reason for retention, but students in my study did mention the importance of interactions with faculty and/or peers for staying at this particular university. Junior and senior students identified two main reasons for persisting into their upper division: friends and faculty. Janiece, a junior kinesiology major, summarized her reasons for staying, “You kind of take classes with the same people in your major over and over again … so you kind of make friends and network that way too.” Dorothy, a junior nursing major, stated it was the faculty that made the difference. “They are kind of like a family, they're very welcoming.” On the other hand, Isabel, a biology major, seemed to think it was the entire package, both friends and faculty. She advised, “It’s the engagement in the classroom, that’s one thing that’s definitely been keeping me here.” One thing to note is that frequency of contact increases student perception of engagement with peers and faculty. In terms of Inquiry, which is a ten week, one credit hour course, an increase in frequency of contact and credit hours could improve the faculty’s ability to impact engagement.

**Major Focus.** I wondered about the various majors represented and if a student’s major affected their perception of engagement. I grouped participants of different majors into two areas (as categorized by the institutional site): STEM (Biology, Kinesiology, Therapy, Nursing) and non –STEM (Computer Science, Social Work, Art, Political Science, Psychology, Accounting) and examined their responses. I noted that the level of
familiarity students had with faculty during their junior and senior years was not distinctly different for the various majors.

STEM majors spoke highly of faculty support for research-related activities and viewed faculty as professional mentors. Non-STEM majors indicated that over time, they developed more trust with faculty, considering faculty as colleagues in practice. Angelique stated, “I'm more comfortable now going to professors if I need something” and Marie, an art major, compared her experience with that of other majors, stating that “the relationships we form with our professors I think are more tightly knit than maybe others.” There did not seem to be any differences in engagement across the majors, but there was a tremendous difference in the perception of faculty supporting first years vs students in the upper division. Students indicated that as freshmen, they perceived faculty to be intimidating, and they were hesitant to interact with them. However, once they had established a major, they viewed the faculty as mentors, partnering with them on their educational pathway.

If the participants were already in their junior or senior year, they seemed to have developed a sense of comradery with both their faculty and peers within their major. The participants in the focus groups who were first or second year students were conspicuously silent did not offer a great deal of information about this discussion point. Most likely, they were not yet integrated into their major courses and did not yet have the same positive experiences with faculty as mentors. It would be in the best interest of all students to offer a more diverse range of major-related Inquiry sections, in order to expose student to the diversity of disciplines available.
**Age.** In reviewing the entire data set, I did not see wide variation in the responses due to attributes such as first generation status, race, or major in school; however, there were some differences of opinion shared by older, non-traditional students. These student responses differed from the majority of traditionally aged students specifically about how their work experience related directly to the Inquiry skills developed in the class.

Interestingly, Lerer and Talley (2010) also found differences on the NSSE report when exploring responses by non-traditional students. These researchers strongly suggested that the “NSSE either restructure their benchmarks so they are more applicable to all students or at least consider excluding items from its benchmarks that are biased against nontraditional students” (p. 362). According to Lerer and Talley, the benchmark for student-faculty interaction should not reflect activities outside the classroom, as many non-traditional students only report their experiences with faculty in the classroom. Due to family and work constraints, they have little time for out of class educationally enriching experiences (Lerer & Tally, 2010).

Non-traditional focus group participants Liam and Brandi seemed to share their opinions freely in the discussions. They were the first to answer questions and participated more frequently than traditional aged students. Liam in particular was more likely to be unwavering in his opinions and less likely to take into account diverse perspectives. Therefore, the skill of listening to diverse others may be even important for traditional-aged first or second year students, who are yet still exploring ideas (Schaller, 2005) and developing in their purpose (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) because they may be more malleable in forming their opinions. In other words, traditionally aged students
may be more open to learning the art of engagement, whereas non-traditional aged students are adept with this skill, practicing for years in the workplace and at home.

Because student populations are becoming increasingly diverse, institutions should make an effort to examine the access students have to high impact practices and implement initiatives to increase their participation (Kinzie, 2012; Kuh, 2009a). While participation does not benefit all students equally, students from all backgrounds do benefit from engaging in effective educational practices (Kuh, 2009a). In other words, “educational advantages can be sustained and perhaps enhanced even under difficult circumstances when institutional leaders and others are committed to student success” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2011, p. 14). Therefore, institutions should create impactful and engaging experiences that require participation and offer a wide variety of approaches, appealing to a diverse enrollment.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

The scope of this study was limited to undergraduate students at one institution in the southeastern United States, a public research institution (PRU). It had a limited sample size, due to the methodology selected; however, the diversity of the sample reflected the larger campus demographic. In Table 3.1, I provided the demographic background of the participants, including their year in school, major, age, race, gender, and whether or not they identified as first generation. In Table 3.2, I summarized this data, showing the demographic diversity of the participants. Of the 17 participants, two were of non-traditional age, one was a first year student, and only three participants were male.
This study is not generalizable to other campus settings, as it is a qualitative study, which focused on an institution-specific required course (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Results from this study can only be extrapolated and used for transferability in other research sites (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The difficulty in replicating this study would be in finding a HIP course similar to Inquiry that uses the same pedagogy for first and second year students.

This study also used confirmatory, phenomenological approach with a priori coding using NSSE Engagement themes. The study itself was inherently small in scope, as my intent was to seek the meaning of a particular phenomenon using the words of participants, rather than numeric data (Moustakas, 1994). In other words, rather than trying to determine cause and effect (what makes student engage), this study attempts to uncover the meaning of engagement (how do students understand engagement) and confirm that the student responses were similar to that found in NSSE engagement data. It would be interesting to dive deeper into the NSSE quantitative data and its relationships with the student responses, creating a mixed methods study.

This study used students who self-selected to participate. I did not offer any incentive, other than a snack, for them to attend the focus group. It may be that students who would want to come and express an opinion about their Inquiry course would have strong desire to share (both positive and negative information) and therefore would already be “engaged” students. The participants were recruited with emails and flyers, but a few of them attended because a friend suggested they should go – more of a snowballing effect (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). This type of recruitment might reflect that a peer influence was particularly important to these participants and that they already
have developed strong peer engagement practices. In addition, two of the participants knew me as their former faculty and five of the participants serve on a student advisory committee with me. Having a prior relationship with the researcher may have influenced their discussions and their willingness to disclose. In general, it would also seem that a participant who self-selected to talk about their engagement with Inquiry might have already developed stronger overall student-faculty engagement practices.

If a future researcher wanted to examine the engagement experiences of upper division students without these limitations, they could design a focus group that minimized prior relationships with faculty (the researcher) or with peers (friends in focus group). Future researchers could also narrow the focus of the participants, using particular years (junior or senior), particular majors, or particular demographic populations. Researchers at a different site might also look at a variety of HIPs and use a control group to measure engagement in those who select to participate and those who do not. Finally, researchers might incorporate more quantitative data, controlling for precollege experiences and minimizing the bias that affects engagement (a mixed-methods study).

**Implications**

The sheer amount of research concerning the effects of college is overwhelming, not only vast in its complexity, but also in its considerable expansion (Pascarella, 2006). However, understanding the *why* of college impact is just as important as researching the evidence of its existence. Pascarella (2006) cautioned that programs and policies that are unexamined for their effectiveness “border[s] on the scandalous” (p. 513). While there exist numerous findings on the benefit of first year seminars on student persistence and
engagement, there is a “dearth of empirical evidence connecting [first year seminars] to cognitive and inquiry-based learning” (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013, p. 146). We often assume that if a program sounds rational or beneficial that it *is*. Therefore, systematic investigation into the impact that an Inquiry course offers (or doesn’t) is necessary to underpin its relevance and support the ongoing investment in a course which presumably impacts first and second year students (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013).

Offering high impact practices is beneficial to students in a variety of ways, but as a researcher, I was interested in the students’ perception of their own engagement with a high impact course and whether the benefits of engagement seemed to persist throughout their college years. Many universities offer First Year Seminars (FYS), which are structured in a variety of ways; however, an Inquiry course, most closely aligned with the “academic seminar with variable content,” may be more ideally suited for second year students, as it is not an FYS in the traditional sense (Skipper, 2017). This determination would need to include more robust measurement of developmental student progress than what is articulated here in this study. It would be interesting to tease out the particulars of student development and determine the best fit for an Inquiry course.

The Inquiry course actively engages students with faculty and peer interaction in a project-based design and thus student begin to share ownership of their education by integrating topics with a variety perspectives, offering engaging discussions with faculty and diverse others, and actively participating in collaborative learning. These are the skills that students said likely to transfer into upper division years. Using Kuh’s (2008) definition for high impact practices, the Inquiry course meets all expectations for such, but it may not fit the description for a for a first year seminar (FYS).
The evidence I collected suggested that this course is as valuable, if not more so, for second year students as it is for first year students. Usually, institutions front-load resources to support first year students, but often these resources are unavailable for the second year (Cuseo, 2015) which then may play a role in retention and success (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). The term *sophomore slump* is used to refer to students who feel disconnected from their university experience and perceive that their institution no longer supports them (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). Providing an HIP course, particularly for second year students, addresses student needs at the time when they feel the greatest deficit of institutional support (Cuseo, 2015). The difficulty seems to be in pinpointing the level of student development. At what point, first or second year, can students take and appreciate the unique pedagogy offered in this course?

Based on the findings in this study, I can see the value in offering Inquiry exclusively to sophomores, particularly if it can address major and career concerns (Schaller, 2005). Second year students might consider Inquiry a valuable opportunity to learn about collaborative research (project-based inquiry) or meet potential major professors (Inquiry faculty). Providing high impact practices for second year students may develop a stronger sense of commitment and connection to the university, which will in turn affect retention (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). Finally, back-loading institutional resources would provide additional support bridging into the second year (Cuseo, 2015). The Inquiry course can offer intentional conversations with peers and faculty in order to collaboratively solve problems, interact with diverse others, and receive feedback from faculty while integrating old and new ideas (Tukibayeva &
Gonyea, 2014). As such, Inquiry delivers the ideal high impact practice for second year students.

**Recommendations**

This study provides evidence that the Inquiry experience not only benefits faculty and peer interaction in the first and second year, but also impacts student engagement in the upper division. The findings from this study offer a foundation for future practice and future research to understand the student experience with high impact practices.

First, I offer recommendations for institutional practice within the areas of retention practices, qualitative research practices, and practices for faculty. Second, I have identified several recommendations for research that use the high impact Inquiry course designed for first and second year students as a starting point. These recommendations include longitudinal studies, transferability, and specific population research.

**Recommendations for Institutional Practice**

The purpose of this study was to understand the engagement experiences of students in their lower division Inquiry course and how this impacted their upper division engagement. This study used constructivist framework for collecting the phenomenological data using five focus groups with a total of 17 participants. Reviewing the responses of the students, I identified implications for practice that educators might consider in the areas of retention, qualitative research, and faculty roles.

**Retention Practices.** The rationales for retention initiatives often reflect institutional priorities. These priorities can include protecting the revenue source, increasing student academic purpose, fulfilling institutional mission, protecting
institutional accreditation, or satisfying the strategic plan (Gardner, Tobolowsky, & Hunter, 2010). Universities may implement programs and curricula designed to maximize retention; however, course design and course content should also be considered in creating these initiatives (DeAngelo, 2014). Intention to return to the same institution for the second year increases when students participate in academically engaging practices, such as group work or discussions with diverse others, or interact with faculty, especially outside the classroom (DeAngelo, 2014). An Inquiry course offers an opportunity for students to participate in these high impact practices affecting their intent to return.

However, simply offering a first or second year seminar is not enough to guarantee positive outcomes (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013). Landy (2015) argued that HIPs must include structure, connectivity, authenticity in order to elicit “gains in student engagement and retention” (p. 30). The experience must also be “integrated and central to the fabric of the institution” (DeAngelo, 214, p. 66). To be successful, first and second year programs must be part of a comprehensive, campus-wide endeavor for student success (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005) and not simply a “business model” designed to increase retention and revenue (Gardner, Tobolowsky, & Hunter, 2010, p. 251).

While Inquiry is a campus–wide initiative, offered (required) for all first or second year students, it does allow for some choices in topic and in project presentation, appealing to students with a consumer mentality (Levine & Dean, 2012). Inquiry scaffolds the early process of research through project-based pedagogy, integrates faculty
from multiple disciplines, and teaches transferable skills and competencies which student participants have indicated are some of the more positive aspects of the course.

Some of the participants indicated that their experience with Inquiry faculty was so positive that it gave them a sense of belonging and affected their decisions to remain. Others said the experience was not as positive, that working collaboratively in forced groups was difficult and not having the choice of topic or instructor was highly negative.

However, even students who did not have the most positive experience with their Inquiry course agreed that the skills they learned (collaborative group work, discussions with diverse others, interacting with faculty) were often used in upper division coursework. This alone was a viable argument for requiring Inquiry; it just needed some tweaking to ensure more positive outcomes.

**Qualitative Research Practices.** Quantitative surveys, such as NSSE, are often used to investigate the ways that institutions intentionally structure and organize initiatives that support first and second year students (Barefoot, 2005), but the link between assessment (surveys) and practice (curricula) is still weak, and institutional decisions are measured by retention and progression, not student engagement (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). When studying student outcomes, such as retention, researchers should value the involvement of students in the process.

This study used a qualitative approach, eliciting student responses in a focus group to study the effects of engagement. Students provide the most authentic source of information about the student experience; therefore, it seems reasonable to just simply ask them, not research them. Qualitative data (interviews and focus groups) about those critical connections (faculty and peer interactions) are even more salient when students
reflect back on their own experience. Students who participate in the process of learning and engagement are more invested (Gibson, 2011). When students feel that you are being authentic in your efforts to gain information, they are more likely to freely give their time, effort, and “buy-in” for the research process (Gardner, Tobolowsky, & Hunter, 2010, p. 253). Many other university initiatives should consider using a more qualitative approach in determining programming and policies.

**Practices for Faculty.** Faculty often struggle in finding balance between teaching and research or scholarship, yet an Inquiry course can offer opportunities for all three practices. Inquiry faculty may use their own research to provide innovative and engaging topics for teaching and then use their classroom as opportunity for scholarly practice. The key is in how faculty see their role in higher education. Students have a wide range of needs, and faculty are in the unique position to provide support for some of these needs (Baker & Griffin, 2010).

Instructors may play the role of faculty advisor, helping students select courses and pathways, or a professional mentor, providing a more emotional commitment, but Baker and Griffin (2010) suggested that faculty consider a new role as “developer” (p. 5). Developers are faculty who focus on students’ future goals and often “engage in knowledge development” (Baker & Griffin, 2010, p. 5). The process of development involves asking systematic questions to encourage students in their construction (and reconstruction) of their understandings and perspectives (Marienau & Fiddler, 2002).

Student-directed learning authorizes students to have some investment in their own learning. Often students appreciate a professor’s intent to “share the design” and “make it relevant to their lives and future careers” (Gibson, 2011, p. 98). Inquiry faculty
can fulfill the developer role as someone who aligns their own research interests with developing transferable skills for students “allowing each to inform the other” (Baker & Griffin, 2010, p. 7). In doing this, faculty developers teach students how to think rather than what to think, so that students begin to make meaning for themselves (Marienau & Fiddler, 2002).

**Recommendations for Research**

This research provided evidence that offering a high impact Inquiry course in the lower division years positively affected students’ engagement (both with faculty and peer groups) in their first two years of college and also impacted engagement into their upper division years. This research study offers only a starting point for additional research to understand student engagement. I have identified three areas that might use this study to expand on the literature of engagement and high impact practices in the field: longitudinal research, transferability to other institutions, and research with special populations.

**Longitudinal Research.** Pascarella (2006) cautioned that the majority of research on college student experience is linked to short-term outcomes. There is very little evidence to indicate those “specific experiences that enhance developing during college can have enduring implications for an individual’s later life” (Pascarella, 2006, p. 516). Brownell and Swaner (2009) agreed, suggesting that there is a “troubling lack of longitudinal data on high impact activities” (p. 27). It would be interesting to focus on linkages that demonstrate if Inquiry skills learned in college affect or impact students’ career competencies.
Due to its integrative nature, Inquiry not only offers engagement skills for students now but also engagement practices in the workplace for future graduates. Padgett, Keup, and Pascarella (2013) discussed the importance of measuring high impact practices for lifelong learning. One non-traditional participant, Brandi, determined that her experiences in Inquiry did affect her abilities to work with diverse others in her health-care job. She stated that “there is a lot of collaboration” required in her clinic and that Inquiry taught her how to improve this skill. For additional studies, it might be interesting to explore the long term impacts of Inquiry course, not just into junior or senior year, but into the first five years after college and research its impact in developing workplace competencies.

Transferability Research. This study offered a confirmatory, phenomenological approach to researching student engagement at one institution. Kuh et al. (2005) found that “most of the research examining the connections between student engagement and college outcomes is based on single institution studies” which both limits generalizability and does not control for student pre-existing characteristics (p. 542). This is certainly true for this study, which only ascertained responses from students taking an Inquiry course in one research site. While qualitative research studies cannot be generalized, they can be transferred or extrapolated to other situations, perhaps not identical, but in similar settings (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Therefore, studying similar practices in other institutions may provide data about student engagement and other effective practices which contribute to understanding persistence beyond simple student ability (Kuh, et al., 2005). The challenge for researchers who use this study for measuring engagement is that most universities do not offer an Inquiry course with project-based
learning, and if they do, it is usually not a required core course designed for first and second year students.

**Research with Diverse Populations.** DeAngelo (2014) discussed that while there is a plethora of studies about retention data, there is not a lot of research connecting how participation in first year practices and curricula affects retention. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argued that many of the studies on first year seminars do not take into account student characteristics and self-selection. More research should be implemented regarding the retention of student stakeholders and their motivations for participating in high impact practices.

Brownell & Swaner (2009) suggested that we need more research about learning outcomes for diverse populations. A majority of underrepresented and first generation students do not have the opportunity to participate in high impact activities and as such are less likely to take advantage of institutional offerings, such as study abroad (Gonyea, Kinzie, Kuh, & Laird (2008). However, the Inquiry course is a required core course for all first or second year students, and as such, does not preclude access of underrepresented students.

Most researchers only minimally acknowledge the diversity of participants, and even when available, “it is more often used in describing the sample than in analyzing or discussing findings” (Brownell & Swaner, 2009, p. 28. While I did focus on some of the various attributes of the participants (race, age, major, or first generation status) in terms of engagement, it would be interesting to dive deeper into this data. Kinzie (2013) concurred with this idea, stating that expanding the populations studied not only “recognizes their authenticity and value” but also provides additional support for policy
and practice and contributions to the field (p. 50). Perhaps offering focus groups with defined attributes, such as race or gender, would elicit more data in studying student perceptions of engagement.

**Conclusion**

All college students should participate in at least two high impact practices, ideally, once in their first year and another in their upper division (Gonyea et al., 2008). However, many students do not have access to this opportunity. High impact practices may provide more value for students who are historically underrepresented, and yet the very populations that would benefit most from high impact practices often do not participate (Brownell & Swaner, 2009).

Kinzie (2012) stated that while research shows that participation in HIPs benefits all students, for various reasons some students do not take this opportunity. According to Kinzie, “Institutions should adopt intentionally structured curricula that make HIPs more widespread and more available to all students” (2012, para.10). Additionally, HIPs can support second year students who may experience a sophomore slump, and yet most students do not participate in high impact activities until their third year of college (Provencher & Kassel, 2017).

In providing a high-impact Inquiry core course for first or second year students, the university ensures that 1) all students have access to a high impact practice on the front end of college, 2) the engaging pedagogy targets students when the retention risk is at its peak (between year one and year two), 3) interaction skills with faculty are scaffolded into upper division, 4) effective collaborative learning strategies are honed
early in college, 5) academic discussions with diverse others become commonplace, and 6) major selection, if not already determined, is explored more deeply.

In other words, the Inquiry model becomes the catalyst for students taking ownership of their own educational process. This dynamic shift encourages students to replace *reactive regurgitation* with a more *proactive digestion* of new ideas and new perspectives.

The Inquiry course in this study provides a timely and appropriate response to the research question: does this HIP affect student engagement with peers and faculty, and does this effect endure beyond the first two years? The results indicate that it does. The evidence supports the findings that Inquiry enhances engagement skills with faculty and peers, addresses retention concerns for both first and second year students, and bridges skills needed for smooth transition into their upper division courses. While Inquiry does have some challenges to overcome (some of which were previously identified by the focus group participants), it is a process, much like the course itself, dependent upon input from a variety of stakeholders in order to make the product a better practice for all students involved.
REFERENCES


Cuseo, J. (2015). *Creating a true first-year (vs. first-term) experience: “Back-loading” the first year & “bridging” to the sophomore year.* Retrieved from
DeAngelio, L. (2014). Programs and practices that retain students from the first to second year: Results from a national study. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, (160), 53-75.


Appendix A

NSSE ENGAGEMENT INDICATORS

To represent the multiple dimensions of student engagement, NSSE reports on 10 Engagement Indicators calculated from 47 core NSSE items. The indicators are grouped within four themes (adapted from the former NSSE Benchmarks). Additionally, in a separate report, NSSE provides results on six High-Impact Practices, aptly named for their positive associations with student learning and retention.

Engagement Indicators

Engagement Indicators (EIs) provide valuable information about distinct aspects of student engagement by summarizing students’ responses to sets of related survey questions. (Component items are listed on the next page.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Engagement Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Challenge</td>
<td>Higher-Order Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective &amp; Integrative Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quantitative Reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning with Peers</td>
<td>Collaborative Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussions with Diverse Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences with Faculty</td>
<td>Student-Faculty Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effective Teaching Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Environment</td>
<td>Quality of Interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supportive Environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The EIs and component items were rigorously tested both qualitatively and quantitatively in a multi-year effort that included student focus groups, cognitive interviews, and two years of pilot testing and analysis. As a result, each EI provides valuable, concise, actionable information about a distinct aspect of student engagement.

Scoring EIs

In the Engagement Indicators report, each EI is expressed on a 60-point scale. Component items are converted to a 60-point scale (e.g., Never=0, Sometimes=20, Often=40, and Very often=60), then averaged together to compute student-level scores. Institutional EI scores are the weighted averages of student-level scores for each class level. Student-level EI scores are provided to participating institutions in their NSSE data file.

High-Impact Practices

High-Impact Practices (HIPs) represent enriching educational experiences that can be life-changing. They typically demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and other students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback. NSSE reports student participation in six HIPs: three for both first-year students and seniors, and three for seniors only (see below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High-Impact Practices</th>
<th>First-Year</th>
<th>Senior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning community</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service-learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research with faculty</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship or field experience</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study abroad</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culminating senior experience</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Survey wording is on the next page.

Scoring HIPs

For each HIP except service-learning, participation is reported as the percentage of students who responded “Done or in progress.” For service-learning, it is the percentage of students for whom at least “Some” courses included a community-based project. Thus, a HIP score of 26 means that 26% of respondents participated in the activity.

NSSE founding director George Kuh recommends that all students participate in at least two HIPs over the course of their undergraduate experience—one during the first year and one in the context of their major. The High-Impact Practices report summarizes student participation in “1” or “2 or more” HIPs for first-year and senior students and disaggregates results by student and enrollment characteristics.

Sample EI and HIP reports are available on the NSSE website: nsse.indiana.edu/links/institutional_reporting
Summary statistics are also available: nsse.indiana.edu/links/summary_tables
Engagement Indicators and Items

Academic Challenge

Higher-Order Learning
During the current school year, how much have you emphasized the following:
- Applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations
- Analyzing an idea, experience, or line of reasoning in depth by examining its parts
- Evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source
- Forming a new idea or understanding from various pieces of information

Reflective & Integrative Learning
During the current school year, how often have you
- Combined ideas from different courses when completing assignments
- Connected your learning to societal problems or issues
- Included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in course discussions or assignments
- Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue
- Tried to better understand someone else’s views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective
- Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept
- Connected ideas from your courses to your prior experiences and knowledge

Learning Strategies
During the current school year, how often have you
- Identified key information from reading assignments
- Reviewed your notes after class
- Summarized what you learned in class or from course materials

Quantitative Reasoning
During the current school year, how often have you
- Reached conclusions based on your own analysis of numerical information (numbers, graphs, statistics, etc.)
- Used numerical information to examine a real-world problem or issue (unemployment, climate change, public health, etc.)
- Evaluated what others have concluded from numerical information

Learning with Peers

Collaborative Learning
During the current school year, how often have you
- Asked another student to help you understand course material
- Explained course material to one or more students
- Prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students
- Worked with other students on course projects or assignments

Discussions with Diverse Others
During the current school year, how often have you had discussions with people from the following groups:
- People from a race or ethnicity other than your own
- People from an economic background other than your own
- People with religious beliefs other than your own
- People with political views other than your own

Experiences with Faculty

Student-Faculty Interaction
During the current school year, how often have you
- Talked about career plans with a faculty member
- Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)
- Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class
- Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member

Effective Teaching Practices
During the current school year, to what extent have your instructors done the following:
- Clearly explained course goals and requirements
- Taught course sessions in an organized way
- Used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points
- Provided feedback on a draft or work in progress
- Provided prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments

Campus Environment

Quality of Interactions
Indicate the quality of your interactions with the following people at your institution:
- Students
- Academic advisors
- Faculty
- Student services staff (career services, student activities, housing, etc.)
- Other administrative staff and offices (registrars, financial aid, etc.)

Supportive Environment
How much do you think your institution emphasize the following:
- Providing support to help students succeed academically
- Using learning support services (tutoring services, writing center, etc.)
- Encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds (race, ethnic origin, religion, etc.)
- Providing opportunities to be involved socially
- Providing support for your overall well-being (recreation, health care, counseling, etc.)
- Helping you manage your nonacademic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)
- Attending campus activities and events (performing arts, athletic events, etc.)
- Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues

High-Impact Practice Items

Which of the following have you done or do you plan to do before you graduate?
- Participate in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together
- Participate in an internship, co-op, field experience, student teaching, or clinical placement
- Participate in a study abroad program
- Work with a faculty member on a research project
- Complete a culminating senior experience (capstone course, senior project or thesis, comprehensive exam, portfolio, etc.)

About how many of your courses at this institution have included a community-based project (service-learning)?
Appendix B

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Email to Students who have taken INQR 1000:

You are invited to join us for a conversation about student engagement and get paid for sharing your thoughts! I am a student like you, completing my degree and I am asking for your help with my final dissertation…..

You are receiving this email because you have taken INQR 1000. I am conducting a dissertation study on the experiences of student engagement to fulfill requirements for the Student Affairs Leadership, Ed.D, program at The University of Georgia. I am seeking undergraduate participants in their junior and senior year of college who have completed their INQR 1000 course. The purpose of the study is to examine the engagement experience students have when taking the INQR 1000 course and the influences that this experience had on future courses in terms of faculty engagement and peer to peer academic engagement.

I am asking students to do two things:
1) Complete the attached “meme” which provides a visual depiction of how you experience academic engagement;
2) Attend a focus group to share your experiences with other students. The focus group will include a snack and beverage.

Students who complete the study will receive beverages and a snack.

If you are able to assist me with this, please contact me at ehuggins@augusta.edu so I may reserve a spot in one of the three focus groups offered on the following dates and times:
1.
2.
3.
The focus groups are small, and participation is limited, so if you would like to join in the conversation, please respond on or before [DATE.] I know how busy you are, so I appreciate your consideration with this project!

Disclaimer: Choosing to participate or not participate in this study is not related to your academic success or progress at Augusta University. All study participants and non-participants responses will be kept confidential.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Huggins
Principal Investigator: Laura A. Dean, Ph. D.
Appendix C

RECRUITMENT FLYER

AUGUSTA UNIVERSITY

Let’s Talk About…

Academic Engagement &
INQR 1000

If interested, please contact:
ehuggins@augusta.edu

- Participants must be a:
  JUNIOR or SENIOR undergraduate student
- Participants must have completed:
  INQR 1000 course in their first two years
- Participants must be available:
  45 minute discussion + Short Activity
- Participants will be provided:
  Snack and Beverage during Conversation
- Participation limited: 4-6 per focus group
  Offered to only to students who RSVP

CONVERSATIONS

- Thursday, April 13, 4:00 pm
- Friday, April 14, 9:00 am
- Tuesday, April 18, 1:00 pm
- Thursday, April 20, 12:00 noon

LOCATION

Academic Success Center
University Hall, Room 143

Purpose:
This study examines student engagement after taking the INQR 1000 course and the influences that this experience has on upper division coursework.

Researchers:
This focus group is part of a dissertation study on the experiences of student engagement to fulfill requirements for the Student Affairs Leadership, Ed.D. Program at the University of Georgia.
Appendix D

INFORMED CONSENT

Augusta University
Research Informed Consent Document

THE INQUIRY EXPERIENCE:
ENGAGING SEMINARS FOR FIRST AND SECOND YEAR STUDENTS

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Huggins, MEd
Augusta University Employee and
University of Georgia Graduate Student

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Laura Dean, PhD
University of Georgia

Invitation to participate in a research study

- Elizabeth Huggins, the PI, invites you to participate in a research study about student engagement.
- The purpose of the study is to examine the engagement experience students have when taking the INQR 1000 course and the influences that this experience had on future courses in terms of faculty engagement and peer to peer academic engagement.
- You, hereafter known as the “participant”, have been asked to participate in this study because you fit the following criteria: you are a junior or senior student who completed the INQR 1000 course in their first or second year at Augusta University.
- You will be given the opportunity to ask any questions and receive answers to your satisfaction before signing the consent form.

Description of subject involvement

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to:

- Complete and submit a “meme” which provides a visual depiction of how you experience academic engagement. The meme will not be used for data collection – it is simply a conversation starter for our focus group discussion.
- Participate in a focus group which asks questions about your experiences with INQR 1000; your experiences with faculty engagement before, during and after INQR 1000; and your experiences with peer-to-peer academic engagement before, during and after INQR 1000.
- Participation in this study should take less than 1.5 hours for each participant.
- Participants will take 15 minutes (or less) to complete the meme before attending (voluntary).
- Participants will take 15 minutes for reading consent form, asking questions, signing form and enjoying a snack and beverage.
- Participants will have 45 minutes to discuss questions within a focus group of other student participants. Questions will on typed handout, distributed before the discussion begins, allowing participant to consider their responses carefully.

**Benefits**

You may directly benefit from being in this study because:
- By participating in this research study, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your own academic experience and your future courses of study. This reflection process could provide you with increased clarity on next steps as your progress towards graduation.
- In addition, you will help institutions of higher education, advisors, and faculty members who teach students in an undergraduate setting understand how the engagement influences the classroom experience. Faculty can use this information when designing courses to increase peer and faculty interaction, thus creating a more welcoming classroom environment. This ultimately might result in increases in student retention, persistence, and graduation.

**Risks and discomforts**

The researchers have taken steps to minimize the risks of this study. Even so, you may still experience some risks related to your participation, even when the researchers are careful to avoid them. These risks may include the following feelings of stress/comfort, sadness, guilt, anxiety, or loss of self-esteem when reflecting back on past academic experiences. You are not required to answer questions that make you uncomfortable. We will provide contact information for Academic Coaching or Counseling Services in case you would like to talk to someone in depth about your academic experiences.

**Compensation**

Participants who attend will receive a snack and beverage.

**Confidentiality**

If the results of the study are published or presented publically, we will not include any information that would identify you. There are some reasons why people other than the researchers may need to see information you provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for making sure the research is done safely and properly, including Augusta University.
- The results of the study will not include any information that would identify you. There are some reasons why people other than the researchers may need to see information you provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for making sure the research is done safely and properly.

To keep your information safe, the researcher will ensure the following protocols:
- For data collection and analysis, your information will be categorized by your pseudonym.
- For information that you email, your name will be replaced with your pseudonym.
• The researcher will replace participant contact information with pseudonyms.
• The researcher will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.
• Also, if you tell us something that makes us believe that you or others have been or may be physically harmed, we may report that information to the appropriate agencies.

Also, if you tell us something that makes us believe that you or others have been or may be physically harmed, we may report that information to the appropriate agencies.

Storage and future use of data
The data or specimens you provide will be stored in a password protected computer file that can be used for follow-up with participants during the study.
The researchers will retain the data for up to five years.
The researchers will dispose of your data by destroying all files and key codes with pseudonyms.
The data/specimens will not be made available to other researchers for other studies following the completion of this research study and will not contain information that could identify you as your contact information (including name and email) will be replaced and then categorized by your selected pseudonym.

Voluntary nature of the study
Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to withdraw the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

Contact information
If you have questions about this research, including questions about scheduling or your compensation for participating, you may contact the Researcher, Elizabeth Huggins at ehuggins@augusta.edu or the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Laura Dean at ladean@uga.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, a research related injury or wish to obtain information, ask questions or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Augusta University IRB Office at (706) 721-1483.

Consent of Participant:
By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in the study. **I understand that I must be eighteen (18) years old to participate in this study.** You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept with the study records. Be sure that questions you have about the study have been answered and that you understand what you are being asked to do. You may contact the researcher if you think of a question later.
I agree to participate in the study.

_____________________________________
Subject’s Printed Name

_____________________________________
Subject’s Signature

_____________________________________
Signature of Researcher (PI):
I acknowledge that I have discussed the above study with this participant and answered all of his/her questions. They have voluntarily agreed to participate.

Elizabeth Huggins
Investigator’s Printed Name

_____________________________________
Investigator’s Signature

_____________________________________
Date
Appendix E

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Your Answers:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your selected pseudonym (fake name) for the research paper?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What year are you in school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your current major?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your current age?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you describe your race/ethnicity?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you describe your gender?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will you be the first in your family to earn a college degree?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focus Group Questions:

You do not have to answer all questions, but your responses are valuable and important to me. Also, you do not have to disclose your professor’s name or INQR topic, unless you think it might make sense to do so. No real names will be used in this research paper.

1. Tell me about the meme you may have submitted before attending today. How did you arrive at those particular photos or visuals?
2. Think about your overall academic experiences in college your first year. Can you share what you remember?
3. At some point, you completed an INQR 1000 course, can you tell me about this experience?
   a. Participation and/or class discussion?
   b. Faculty interaction?
   c. Collaboration with peer groups?
4. Now that you are in your upper division courses, you may have a different perspective about engagement in college courses. Can you share your thoughts about academic engagement?
   a. How do you experience faculty engagement now?
   b. How do you experience peer collaboration now?
   c. What, if anything, has changed for you since beginning college?
5. How has engagement in the classroom
   a. Impacted your decision to remain at this university?
b. Impacted your major selection?
c. Impacted your perspective about faculty interaction?
d. Impacted your perspective about peer collaboration?

6. Do you have any additional thoughts you would like to add?
Appendix F

PROTOCOL

Steps:
1. Researcher welcomes participants, asks them to sign in with real name and selected pseudonym for study.
2. Consent Forms will be dispersed, read, signed, and collected.
3. Researcher will ask students to complete demographic and informational questions on written form (see below).
4. A simple snack will be offered.
5. Focus group questions will be provided to participants before session begins.
6. Session begins with discussion of the ice breaker – creative activity with meme.
7. Questions to students about academic engagement (see below).
8. Finish session with concluding statement (see below).

Demographic and Informational Questions (individually answered on written form to be used to report demographics of the participant group in the final dissertation):
1. What is your selected pseudonym?
2. What year are you in school?
3. What is your current major?
4. What is your current age?
5. How do you describe your race/ethnicity?
6. How do you describe your gender?
7. Will you be the first in your family who will earn a 4-year college degree?

Interview Questions (sub-questions to be used as needed to expand discussion):
1. Tell me about the meme you may have submitted before attending today. How did you arrive at those particular photos or visuals?
2. Think about your overall academic experiences in college your first year. Can you share what you remember?
3. At some point, you completed an INQR 1000 course, can you tell me about this experience?
   a. Participation and/or class discussion?
   b. Faculty interaction?
   c. Collaboration with peer groups?
4. Now that you are in your upper division courses, you may have a different perspective about engagement in college courses. Can you share your thoughts about academic engagement?
   a. How do you experience faculty engagement now?
   b. How do you experience peer collaboration now?
   c. What, if anything, has changed for you since beginning college?
5. How has engagement in the classroom  
   a. Impacted your decision to remain at this university?  
   b. Impacted your major selection?  
   c. Impacted your perspective about faculty interaction?  
   d. Impacted your perspective about peer collaboration?  
6. Do you have any additional thoughts you would like to add?

**Concluding Statement:**
Thank you very much for your time and your input. I know how busy you are this time of year.

Sharing your thoughts about student engagement will not only help educators to consider improvements in course offerings, but will, I hope, also give you some valuable feedback about your own progress in making your college experience meaningful to you.

I may send a few of you some summary passages or notes for what we call “member checking”. This will give you an opportunity to let me know if I captured your words and thoughts the way you intended. I feel like this is a partnership – that we are working together on improving student engagement -- and so any help you can provide will be gratefully accepted.

Just to reiterate, I plan to destroy all evidence once these notes have been transcribed and analyzed. If you have any questions or additional thoughts to share, I would welcome them.

Thank you again for your time.