ACADEMIC COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING AND STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS: UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education—Doctor of Philosophy

2023

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of undergraduate students who participated in academic community-engaged learning, specifically as those experiences related to student mental health and wellness. Student mental health is a growing priority for higher education institutions, and the number of students who are struggling with mental health concerns is rising. Understanding the nuances of these lived student experiences will help higher education institutions to better understand their role in supporting these students, ultimately maximizing potential positive impacts and mitigating potential negative impacts on student mental health and wellness. Further, these insights are needed in order to create trauma-informed community-engaged learning practices, which are important not just for the student participants but also for the communities with which they engage as well. This study examined the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of undergraduate student participants of community-engaged learning, specifically as they relate to their mental health and wellness?
2. How do undergraduate student participants of community-engaged learning make sense of the impact of these pedagogical experiences on their mental health and wellness?

The data for this qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was collected through semi-structured interviews with seven undergraduate students. Analysis resulted in the identification of essential components of the student community-engaged learning experience as it relates to their mental health and wellness and included three main themes: Identity (Head), Belonging (Heart), and Agency (Hands). The participants' experiences highlighted that reflection on identity, and knowledge development around identity, are essential parts of the mental health and wellness experience of community-engaged learning. It is important that these reflection experiences be restorative, give space to explore personal identity-based trauma, and provide

opportunities for validation, so that participants are more likely to feel safe to continue exploring new ways of thinking and knowing. Further, the participants' experiences highlighted that developing a sense of belonging is an essential part of the mental health and wellness experience of community-engaged learning. Participants' sense of belonging was facilitated by the practice and reciprocation of vulnerability, empathy, and compassion. Finally, the participants' experiences also highlighted that agency is an essential part of the mental health and wellness experience of community-engaged learning. Participants practiced taking control over their environment and telling their stories, and also struggled with what it means to have impact while ultimately working to understand their sense of purpose. The implications of these findings for community-engaged learning practices at higher education institutions are many, including pedagogical considerations for community-engaged classrooms, campus-wide considerations for the inclusion and support of high impact practices such as community-engaged learning, as well as community partner implications related to partner orientation, training, and support. Ultimately, the findings of this study will lead to a better informed and nuanced, macro-level strategy that higher education institutions can use to impact the state of student mental health and wellness broadly.

Dedicated to my boys.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While my gratitude will not be adequately captured in the words of this section, I would be remiss to not thank those who supported the writing of this dissertation. First, thank you to the participants of this study who practiced vulnerability, and shared their experiences so openly, with me. I felt the weight of sharing and honoring your stories with every word written.

Thank you to my dissertation committee for their time, energy, commitment, expertise, and encouragement. Specifically, thank you to my advisor, Dr. Ann Austin. Dr. Austin is perhaps the busiest scholar and practitioner I have had the pleasure of knowing, and yet she still made time to get to know and understand me as a scholar, professional, and person. Thank you, Ann, for your encouragement, your feedback, your suggestions, your kindness, and your time. Thank you Dr. Marilyn Amey for being an amazing contributor to this committee. Dr. Amey provided so many valuable insights, asked many insightful and challenging questions, and provided an important voice around theory and practice that is backed by a wealth of experience and knowledge. Dr. Diane Doberneck, thank you for your time and contributions to this committee. Dr. Doberneck asked important questions and provided incredibly helpful suggestions regarding specific research techniques. Dr. Doberneck's expertise in the area of community engagement was an invaluable contribution to the questions and feedback for this study. Thank you to Dr. Leslie Gonzales, who was both a contributing member of this committee but also one of my very first professors in the program. It was a privilege to learn from Dr. Gonzales both in class and as part of this committee. Thank you for helping to shape my thinking around diverse communities, and how those communities shape individual mental health and wellness experiences, and thank you for helping me develop practical ways to explore those topics with the study participants. I have been so grateful to be supported by this incredibly gifted group of scholars.

I would also like to thank my ‘coheart’ (Ariel Arnold, Paul Bylsma, Nestor Espinoza, Kyle Farris, Regina Gong, Dave Goodrich, Andrew Haggerty, Ben Lampe, Elena Lazzari, Katie Lopez, Bob Murphy, Brenda Nelson, Kyle Sabin, Alyssa Stefanese, Kris Surla, Jill Thomas-Little, Tanya Upthegrove, and Sarah Whitaker) for being such an important part of my experience as a PhD student. This journey would not have been the same without each one of you, and you have each left a mark on me as an individual and a scholar in your own unique ways. Thank you for challenging my ways of knowing, for setting the bar so high at all times, for introducing me to so many topics that I never would have explored on my own, and of course for the laughs and friendships along the way. A particular thank you to our Monday-night writing group, Katie Lopez and Sarah Whitaker, for keeping me accountable and encouraged for these last two years.

Thank you to my friends and colleagues who have shaped my journey to and through this program. Teresa Costanzo (aka Mother Teresa), for teaching a very young-and-naive-me what it means to engage in community, and what it means to actively love the members of those communities. Shannon Brecheisen for being one of my first mentors in higher education, but also for becoming my lifelong friend in the process. You have been an example of what it means to be a strong, competent woman, and I appreciate you more than I can express. Michelle Snitgen for taking me into the community-engaged learning world here at MSU, and for building a working relationship that I could not be more grateful for or proud of. Our pandemic trauma-bonding has in fact produced an incredibly important friendship, and I am grateful for you as a colleague and friend.

Last, but certainly not least, I need to thank all of my boys, the other members of Team Brewer. Thank you, Miles and Liam, for being my reasons. You are my motivation to keep

moving forward, to keep pushing, and to keep growing. Thank you for your love and understanding on those nights I was in class late, when I spent weekends writing, and when I was otherwise away from you during this program. I hope that you feel even half as loved as you have made me feel. And thank you to my best friend, partner, and husband, Dr. Dave Brewer. Thank you for being my light, my sounding board, my proofreader, my biggest cheerleader, my biggest challenger, and my favorite person on the planet. You constantly challenge me to be my best self, you are endlessly supportive, and you have walked along beside me for so long that I can't imagine my world any other way. Thank you for this adventure.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I often refer to my career in higher education as my second life. With my Bachelor of Science in psychology and my Master of Science in marriage and family therapy, my career began in the field of mental health. In my work as a mental health professional, I questioned the scope of my impact. I was often surprised and frustrated by the lack of influence therapy had on individuals' or families' progress. I was continually reminded that larger systems of oppression were more influential than my individual efforts as a therapist. I began to think about ways to move from addressing individual clinical issues to effecting large, systemic change.

My movement into the field of higher education was motivated by this search for significance. The transition happened slowly, starting with the development of an undergraduate course focused on critical thinking skills and the application of those skills to the field of family studies. Teaching a small group of Honors students, in a topic area that I was passionate about, restored my energy and helped me feel like I was making a difference. I saw working with undergraduate students as an opportunity to develop positive agents of social change who could take their newly developed skills out into the world.

This shift to higher education was demanding both personally and professionally because it pushed me to explore and challenge my thoughts about larger societal systems and the impact they have on educational access and student success. I have now held a few roles in higher education, wherein I work with undergraduate students in an academic community-engaged learning context. I have watched as students work through these course and community experiences, grappling with large systemic issues, and thinking through how their academic discipline could make an impact. I have had the incredible opportunity to build relationships with these students, working with them both in and out of the classroom. This access has provided

insight to the challenges and struggles that students face as they navigate their undergraduate experiences, including impacts to their mental health and wellness.

Fostered by my experiences both in and out of the higher education system, I hold the belief that community-engaged learning experiences can be truly transformative to student development. Additionally, this type of pedagogy educates around issues of identity, power, privilege, and social systems in a way that traditional learning does not. However, it is through working with students as they engage in community around large systemic issue areas, i.e. poverty, gender inequities, education access, climate change, etc., that I also have seen the impact that this learning has on student emotional health. These experiences place students outside of their campus boundaries, while also pushing students outside of their emotional comfort zones as well. These experiences with undergraduate students sparked my interest and readings in these areas, and led to the eventual creation of the research questions for this study. The following chapter will begin exploring the connection between mental health and community-engaged learning, will discuss the purpose of this study, introduce key terms, and provide a brief overview of the coming chapters.

Statement of the Problem

Mental health and wellness should be a top priority for higher education institutions (HEIs) nationally. Mental health is a persistence and retention issue, wherein students with a mental health disability tend to earn lower grades, have less social engagement on campus, are less likely to seek out or receive campus services, and have lower rates of persistence to graduation (Amaya et al., 2019; Cleary et al., 2011; Goss et al., 2010; Hartley, 2013; Hawley et al., 2016; Jorgensen et al., 2018; National Council, 2017; Quin, 2017). Perhaps even more importantly, mental health and wellness is a life or death issue. The American College Health

Association (2018), in the National College Health Assessment, estimates that approximately 11% of undergraduate students have seriously considered suicide, and approximately 2% of students have attempted suicide. In fact, it is reported that suicide is the second leading cause of death of college students (Kella, 2021). These statistics have a ripple effect, with students who are impacted by their peers' attempted and/or successful suicide reporting distress, including difficulty engaging in campus life and trouble focusing on coursework (Bellows, 2021; Kella, 2021).

The number of students who are struggling with mental health concerns is rising. Although it is difficult to get an exact percentage due to the non-visible nature of mental illness, reported totals have varied between 19% and 50% of students in colleges and universities having a mental health-related disability (Felber, 2019; Jorgensen et al., 2018; National Council, 2017). The age at which most individuals begin to manifest mental health symptoms is between 18 and 24, which directly coincides with the average age of undergraduate students (Cleary et al., 2011; Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013; National Council, 2017). It can be assumed that as the number of students seeking an undergraduate education continues to rise, so too will the number of students with mental health support needs (NCES, 2019).

HEIs are struggling to meet the increasing demand resulting from the rise in the number of students reporting difficulty with mental health (Ackerman et al., 2014; Katz & Davison, 2013; Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013; Marsh & Wilcoxon, 2015; National Council, 2017). Due to the invisible nature of mental health and wellness concerns, it is difficult for HEIs to identify students who could benefit from services. In order to receive mental health services, HEIs rely strongly on students to self-report, which often does not happen due to perceived stigma and fear of discrimination (Felber, 2019). However, even if those students were easily identified, HEIs

lack both human and financial capital to meet the need (Jorgensen et al., 2018). In the annual survey conducted by the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, LeViness et al. (2019) report that on average, the ratio is 1 HEI counselor to 121 students, with a range from 1 counselor to 23 students at the lowest report up to 1 counselor to 385 students at the highest. While this is a dramatic improvement over 2014 data (1 counselor to 2081 students) the caseload count is still daunting (Gallagher, 2015). Additionally, while 66.3% of HEIs have access to on-campus psychiatrists, 56.3% of those campuses stated they need more time from those psychiatrists in order to adequately meet student need (LeViness et al., 2019). Also, the added stressors of living in the global COVID pandemic, and navigating the resulting social and institutional changes, have already been shown to add to this growing mental health concern at HEIs (Bellows, 2021; Copeland et al., 2021; Kella, 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020).

In order to meet the scale of this increased need, HEIs have attempted to implement many different actions and care options. Some of those actions have taken a micro-level approach, wherein campuses have increased counseling staff numbers and hours in a direct attempt to provide more one-on-one services. Other actions have focused more on macro-level approaches, or strategies that focus on making a broader impact. For example, one strategy increased staff and faculty training across campus that focused on suicide prevention as well as on developing skills needed to make appropriate referrals for mental health treatment, ultimately increasing the number of front-line faculty and staff who can intervene. Others created committees aimed at early identification of students with mental health related needs. Some campuses provided wellness coaching, support groups, and mindfulness classes. Still others have increased their web presence with updated online education and resources as well as the implementation of mental health related apps (Gallagher, 2015; LeViness et al., 2019). These strategies indicate that HEIs,

particularly those with larger student populations, are seeking macro-level strategies that will make a positive impact. These macro-level strategies focus on large-scale, systemic intervention, to positively impact the mental health and wellness of large groups of students (Burgess et al., 2020; Wessells & Dawes, 2006; Zakour, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

As the demand for student mental health services increases, it is important to consider all strategies that HEIs could implement to promote improved student mental health and wellness as well as improved persistence and retention. Community-engaged learning, an experiential pedagogy in which students participate in educational activities in partnership with the community, has been presented as a proactive, macro-focused strategy that HEIs can use to promote positive outcomes among its participants, including positive impacts on mental health and wellness (Attree, 2011; Checkoway, 2007; Conway, 2009; Flanagan, 2011; O'Meara et al. 2011; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Swaner, 2007). Community-engaged learning can happen in a multitude of ways. One example is a class of undergraduate teacher education students who spend a semester engaging weekly with a local third grade classroom, by providing tutoring services, as a requirement of their course. A second example includes a class of social science students conducting research for a local non-profit organization in an effort to support the organization's future grant applications. Community-engaged learning practices are thought to have a connection to student mental health and wellness as evidenced by participant reports of improved decision-making and problem solving skills, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, and improved social relationships (Checkoway, 2007; Conway, 2009; Flanagan, 2011; O'Meara et al., 2011; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Swaner, 2007). More specifically, student participants report improved physical and emotional health and wellness, less feelings of

depression, loneliness, and anxiety (Attree, 2011; Conway, 2009; Flanagan & Bundick, 2011), lower incidence of substance abuse (Checkoway, 2007), and improved socially responsive knowledge and moral development (Conway, 2009; Swaner, 2007).

While there is some research that shows a connection between student participation in community-engaged learning practices and positive mental health and wellness outcomes, there is also research that shows potential negative mental health and wellness outcomes such as increased anxiety, stress, and exhaustion (Attree, 2011; Kulick et al., 2017). The evidence is sometimes contradictory regarding the impact of participation on students' mental health and wellness outcomes. In addition, there is also little research that directly examines the lived experiences of the student participants, specifically as it relates to their mental health and wellness. There is a need to learn more about the nuances of the lived experiences of community-engaged learning student participants in order to better understand the role HEIs can play in supporting students who participate in community-engaged learning, in an effort to maximize potential positive impacts on student mental health and wellness and to mitigate potential negative impacts on student mental health and wellness. Exploring this relationship will provide insights needed to create trauma-informed, healing-centered, and resilience-focused community-engaged learning practices at HEIs. These informed practices are important not just for the student participants, but for the communities with which they serve as well. Ultimately, this study will lead to a better informed and nuanced, macro-level strategy that HEIs can use to impact the state of student mental health and wellness broadly.

To better understand the scope and significance of the problem statement, it will be helpful to understand the relevant broader landscapes and current trends. Mental health and wellness concerns are not limited to the HEI community. Rather, the increased need for mental

health support has been seen globally (Burgess et al., 2020). With this growing need comes an increased understanding and acknowledgement that micro-level interventions do not account for the impact of macro-level influences. For example, while we continue to treat individuals for their personal experiences of poor mental health and/ or trauma, we fail to address the societal injustices that are causing or perpetuating the trauma originally, such as systemic health disparities, educational inequities, structural racism, and poverty (Attree, 2011; Burgess et al., 2020; Pasque, 2008; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019; Zakour, 2019). Scholars have found that those living in poverty are more likely to experience mental illness. Poor mental health is actually more likely to be preceded by variables such as unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and lack of financial resources rather than the other way around, and when those contextual variables are resolved, the rate of mental illness actually decreases (Verschelden, 2017). The World Health Organization (2007) describes the relationship as cyclical, wherein an increase in poverty increases risk of poor mental health which in turn increases risk of poverty and so on.

Of course, this does not diminish the very real impacts that poor mental health has on an individual, nor does it imply that the individual should not receive the support and services that they need. Indeed, the impacts of mental health concerns on an individual are many. Mental health disabilities are often found to correlate with many physical health concerns including obesity, cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, asthma, and cancer, in addition to the existing mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide (Felitti et al., 1998; Verschelden, 2017). The realization of this connection is attributed to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study conducted by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente between 1995 and 1996 (Felitti et al., 1998). This study included over 9,000 participants, and showed a correlation

between adverse childhood experiences and an increased prevalence of health problems as an adult. These childhood experiences included emotional, sexual, or physical abuse, physical or emotional neglect, loss of a parent, witnessing family violence, incarceration of a family member, having a mentally ill, depressed, or suicidal family member, and living with a drug or alcohol-addicted family member (Felitti et al., 1998).

The impact that poor mental health and wellness has on the educational experience is being recognized and acted upon at a growing rate, in both HEIs and the K-12 environment (Becker-Blease, 2017; Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Verschelden, 2017). Many of the recognized HEI professional organizations have hosted conferences, supported scholarship, and promoted policy developments related to student mental health. For example, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) hosts an annual mental health conference (NASPA, n.d.a), publishes a policy and practice series edition focused on mental health (Wesley, 2019), and hosts an online resource library entirely devoted to health, safety, and well-being (NASPA, n.d.b). However, HEIs are still grappling with how to best meet their students' needs, how to best understand HEIs' roles and responsibilities related to student mental health and wellness, and how to best match these efforts with the mission of the university.

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study is to illuminate the experiences of students who participate in community-engaged learning, specifically as those experiences relate to student mental health and wellness. By interviewing student participants, this study will describe the phenomenon of the student participant's experience of community-engaged learning. As a result of this study, HEIs can better understand the role the institution plays in support of students who participate in community-engaged

learning, and how to maximize the positive impacts and minimize potential negative impacts on student mental health and wellness. This study will examine the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of undergraduate student participants of academic community-engaged learning, specifically as they relate to their mental health and wellness?
2. How do undergraduate student participants of academic community-engaged learning make sense of the impact of these pedagogical experiences on their mental health and wellness?

Key Terms

Listed below are definitions of key terms that will be found throughout this study.

Community-Engaged Learning

"a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 1-2)

Community (or Collective) Trauma

the outcomes of shared experiences that negatively impact a community of people - often a result of historical and systemic conditions related to oppression - i.e. racism, sexism, violence, poverty (Erikson, 1991; Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Pinderhughes et al., 2015)

Critical Reflection

"a process of metacognition that functions to improve the quality of thought and of action and the relationship between them" (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 27)

this process of "analyzing, reconsidering, and questioning one's experiences" takes place "within a broad context of issues and content knowledge" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 26) and generates learning, deepens learning, and documents learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

Mental Health Disability

"a persistent psychological or psychiatric disorder, emotional or mental illness that adversely affects educational performance" (National Council, 2017, p.11)

Persistence

"continued enrollment (or degree completion) at **any** higher education institution" (National Student Clearing House, 2015, p. 7)

Retention

"continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the **same** higher education institution" (National Student Clearing House, 2015, p. 7)

Trauma-informed, Healing-centered, and Resilience-focused community engagement

Trauma-informed - a set of guiding principles that acknowledges the severe impact trauma has on the whole individual

Healing-centered - moves beyond trauma-informed to acknowledge that trauma is experienced collectively and therefore healing is needed at a larger, systemic level

Resilience-focused - the understanding that individuals and communities are more than their trauma - a focus on strengths and assets (Ginwright, 2018)

Wellness

a series of dimensions in which an individual actively and ongoingly moves toward a healthy existence; includes emotional, occupational, physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions (Goss et al., 2010; Hettler, 1976)

Overview of The Study

The following chapters will provide a review of the relevant literature, the resultant research questions, a description of my worldview as a researcher, the methodology and design, the study findings, and a discussion of the limitations and implications. In these sections, I describe how I explored the relationship between community-engaged learning and student mental health and wellness. The following sections will highlight connections between existing research and my research questions as well as between my worldview statement and my methodology and design. The findings will elucidate the lived experiences of student participants of community-engaged learning and will discuss implications as it relates to the development of trauma-informed, healing-centered, and resilience-focused community-engaged learning practices.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following literature review covers existing scholarly work on student mental health and wellness at HEIs, community-engaged learning at HEIs, and the intersection of community-engaged learning and student mental health and wellness. This literature review will highlight what is known and what is not yet known in each section, and will present the rationale for the resultant research questions. I will argue that we need a better understanding of the lived experiences of community-engaged learning participants in order to better understand the role HEIs can play in the support of community-engaged learning student participants, specifically as it relates to student mental health and wellness.

Student Mental Health and Wellness at HEIs

Researchers have defined mental health and wellness at HEIs in a variety of ways. According to the National Council on Disability (2017), the definition of a mental health disability as it relates to postsecondary education is, "a persistent psychological or psychiatric disorder, emotional or mental illness that adversely affects educational performance" (p.11). Fink (2014) expands this definition beyond mental illness by using Keyes' conceptualization that mental health exists on a continuum which includes emotional and social wellbeing in addition to psychological wellbeing. Dahill-Brown and Jayawickreme (2016) developed the definition further by adding that wellbeing is a relational activity and the practice of living life well. These differences in definitions highlight just how subjective the concept of mental health can be, and thus how difficult it can be to measure and how difficult it can be to effect change.

These varied definitions of mental health may be better understood when examined through a wellness perspective. The construct of wellness incorporates a broader interpretation of student health, and seeks to use an asset-based perspective in that it focuses on the existence of

health rather than on the absence of disease (Amaya et al., 2019; Larson, 1996). While all wellness models include multiple dimensions of wellness, there is not consensus on what is included in those dimensions (Amaya et al., 2019; Goss et al., 2010; Hermon & Hazler, 1999; Kulick et al., 2017; Larson, 1996; Hettler, 1976). However, most wellness scholars cite the National Wellness Institute's (NWI) model as their starting point (Goss et al., 2010; Hettler, 1976). The NWI includes six dimensions of wellness in their model, including emotional, occupational, physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual health (Goss et al., 2010; Hettler, 1976). Wellness is an ongoing process that requires intentional action on the part of an individual as they work toward a healthy existence in these multiple dimensions of their life.

Most wellness models highlight the importance of the individual's actions, often citing Self Determination Theory (SDT) and Self Regulated Learning (SRL) as theoretical foundations (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Zimmerman, 1990). However, some scholars acknowledge that this focus puts too much emphasis on the individual and ignores important environmental or contextual factors (Goss et al., 2010). Prilleltensky (2012) argues that wellness is very much impacted by the societal conditions in which a person finds themselves. Conditions of oppression, injustice, and helplessness exist at the personal, interpersonal, organizational, and communal level and they all influence a person's wellness. Building on this idea, it can be inferred that not only do individuals experience wellness, but there are also continuums of community and societal wellness as well (Adams et al., 1997; Goss et al., 2010; Myers et al., 2000).

Additionally, it is important to note that these societal conditions of poverty, injustice, and systemic oppression are more likely to impact individuals who identify as part of a marginalized community or identity group (Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Pinderhughes et al., 2015). Thus, it is important to understand how an

individual's mental health and wellness is impacted and understood in relation to those marginalized identities. Chavous et al. (2022) edited a special issue for educators that examined mental health among marginalized communities in order to raise awareness and improve campus services for students. This special issue included findings from Miller et al. (2022) and Leath and Jones (2022) that showed differences in access to mental health services, a lack of culturally informed services, and a lack of representation in mental health staff for LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, and students of color. The special issue also highlighted the impact of community trauma on student mental health, noting the impact of growing awareness of racialized police violence and killings on students of color (McCallum et al., 2022; Yazdiha & Boen, 2022). As Chavous et al. (2022) state, "Acknowledging the diverse experiences and intersecting social identities of a person is critical in order to develop policies and practices that will support the mental health and emotional well-being of people from marginalized communities" (p. 4).

The Student Experience

Mental health disabilities are likely to begin impacting an individual's life between the ages of 18 and 24 years old, which coincides with the average age of traditional undergraduate students (Cleary et al., 2011; Felber, 2019; Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013; National Council, 2017). This age range marks the transition from late adolescence and youth life stage to early adulthood life stage and is marked by high levels of stress and anxiety. During this transition, students begin to experience less parental oversight and involvement and an increase in personal responsibility and decision-making, and are often physically removed from their family and other support systems. While this transition of life stages is an opportunity for growth and development, it is also a time of high stress and anxiety that puts students at risk of mental health

concerns (Cleary et al., 2011). Students can experience changes and challenges in all dimensions of their personal wellness including emotional, occupational, physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual health as they transition to, and through, college (Amaya et al., 2019; Goss et al., 2010).

Anxiety-related disorders are the most-diagnosed mental health condition among undergraduate students, with mood disorders such as depression diagnosed second highest, and comorbid diagnoses (more than one disorder) as the third highest (Jorgensen et al., 2018; Soet & Sevig, 2006). Those students diagnosed with an anxiety-related disorder often reference academic pressure as the leading source of stress and anxiety. This academic pressure comes from high expectations from students' families as well as a highly competitive economic environment in which students perceive that good academic performance is necessary for employment and financial success (Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013). In addition, mental health disabilities and academic pressure are not limited to the undergraduate student population. The National Council on Disability (2017) reported that nearly half of graduate students report having an emotional or stress-related problem in the past year.

Interestingly, there has been little research on the experience of post-traumatic stress disorder as a college-aged-student. HEIs generally acknowledge that the risk of trauma is high for college students, citing such metrics as sexual assault (estimated to impact 25% of college-aged women during their time on campus), and the top three causes of death for traditional college-aged students (accidental death, homicide, and suicide), all of which may have a traumatic impact on the survivor or their peers (Soet & Sevig, 2006). The majority of research on student PTSD has focused on college student veterans (Elliott et al., 2011) or on survivors of specific, large-scale traumatic incidents, such as September 11th (DeRoma et al., 2003).

Impact on Student Success

Students with a mental health disability report many challenges and barriers that impact their academic success. These include stigma, difficulties with medication side effects, poor attention and concentration, unpredictability of the illness and its related symptoms, and a general lack of understanding by their peers and important adults on campus. In addition, these students cite challenges associated with getting help such as lack of services on campus as well as stigma. As such, they are less likely to seek support services than students with other types of disabilities such as physical health conditions or learning disorders (Felber, 2019; Jorgensen et al., 2018). These barriers and challenges impact students' academic performance resulting in lower grades and less persistence to graduation (Felber, 2019; National Council, 2017). These barriers also impact their social engagement, with students reporting less involvement in co-curricular activities as well as a lower number and quality of faculty interactions and relationships (Felber, 2019; National Council, 2017). This is problematic because, as Kalkbrenner et al. (2019) point out, faculty relationships can be a key factor in student success for many reasons, one of which being that faculty can help recognize mental health concerns and refer students to appropriate resources.

Additionally, students with a mental health disability have a different pattern of persistence than a traditional student. Due to the fluctuating nature of their disability and constantly changing personal factors, students with a mental health disability are constantly assessing their enrollment options. Sometimes multiple institutions are attended, and sometimes there are gaps in enrollment. These students are continually making decisions about what is the best enrollment choice for them at the moment based on their existing needs (National Council, 2017; Southerland, 2006).

Students with a mental health disability also reported that they felt less control over their graduation success due to the large number of barriers they experience. The National Association on Mental Illness (2012) reported that 64% of student attrition rates could be attributed to mental health related issues. Additionally, Jorgensen et al. (2018) found that students with a mental health disability cited views of important family and friends in the students' lives as the most powerful predictor of their intention to graduate. In other words, if those important individuals believed in and expected the student to graduate, then they were more likely to do so. This finding differs from established HEI theories that accentuate the importance and impact of social integration and a sense of campus belonging on student success and intention to graduate (Koch et al., 2014; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1987). Further information about the student experience is needed in order to better understand how students with a mental health disability are making meaning of their experiences, and to what factors they attribute their successes.

What Do We Know And Not Know About Student Mental Health and Wellness?

There are differences in definitions of mental health and wellness as well as differences in students' individual experiences with mental health and wellness at HEIs. However, scholars agree that a mental health disability has an impact on all areas of a student's life including their emotional, occupational, physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual health (Goss et al., 2010; Hettler, 1976). Scholars have also made the connection between student mental health and wellness and their academic experiences, noting that these students experience lower grades, less social engagement on campus, are less likely to seek out or receive services on campus, and have less persistence to graduation (Amaya et al., 2019; Cleary et al., 2011; Goss et al., 2010; Jorgensen et al., 2018; National Council, 2017). Scholars agree that this connection is a crucial

component of student success that needs to be better understood and supported by HEIs (Goss et al., 2010; Jorgensen et al., 2018; National Council, 2017; Southerland, 2006).

Based on existing literature, we do not yet know the nuances of the lived experiences of students with a mental health disability at an HEI. For example, what does the daily existence of these students look like? What are the challenges and barriers as understood by the individual student? Do these experiences and challenges differ according to their type of mental health disability? Additionally, we do not know what factors are positively impacting those students with a mental health disability who are able to persist successfully. For example, to what or to whom do these students attribute the successful navigation of their HEI experience? Finally, we do not yet fully understand the role that HEIs can play to best support and engage students with a mental health disability. As Jorgensen et al. (2018) found, students did not equate their successful graduation experience with any resource or strategy initiated by the HEI. A better understanding of the individual experience of these students may help inform strategies and practices designed and implemented by HEIs to better support students' positive mental health and wellness.

Community-Engaged Learning at HEIs

Community-engaged learning practices have been presented as one such strategy that HEIs can use to promote positive student mental health and wellness outcomes (Attree, 2011; Checkoway, 2007; Conway, 2009; Flanagan, 2011; O'Meara et al. 2011; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Swaner, 2007). Much like student mental health and wellness, there are different terms and definitions used to describe community-engaged learning. The name (sometimes interchanged with service-learning or civic engagement) and definition of community-engaged learning have evolved over time in response to needed critical feedback and have expanded in order to include

multiple implementation strategies (Jacoby, 1996; Iowa & Minnesota's Campus Compact, 2020; Mitchell, 2013). Jacoby (1996) defines service-learning as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes" (p. 1-2). Furco (1996) distinguishes service-learning, or community-engaged learning, as different from traditional volunteer activities in that volunteerism is purely a form of charity focused only on service, whereas community-engaged learning includes intentional reflection and learning components and focuses on sustainable and reciprocal partnerships. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.a.), which designates various classifications for HEIs, defines community engagement as:

> …collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good (Defining Community Engagement section).

Welch and Plaxton-Moore (2019) further highlight the complex nature of community-engaged learning, stating that a narrow definition is not possible. Rather, they outline three essential elements that must be present in order for a learning activity to be considered community-engaged: purpose, process, and relationships. The purpose of a community-engaged learning experience must allow for the development of student knowledge and skills while also

contributing to the common good by building the capacity of community members and organizations. The process of community-engaged learning must include experiences that are co-created with student and community involvement, must include critical reflection throughout, and must include formative and summative assessment. Finally, community-engaged learning experiences must build relationships with community that are reciprocal, sustainable, and flexible, and which aim to be transformational rather than transactional. Using these as a guide, community-engaged learning at HEIs can happen within or beyond the classroom as long as these three elements exist.

Theoretical Foundation

Community-engaged learning is widely accepted to have developed from the theoretical foundations of experiential learning, based in the works of John Dewey (Jacoby, 1996; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019). Dewey (1938) believed that the best way to advance the mission of HEIs (research, teaching, and service) was to engage students in active, experiential learning opportunities. However, Dewey believed that simply participating in an experiential activity did not automatically lead to learning on the part of the student. Rather, students must be led in a reflective process alongside their engagement.

Based in the works of Dewey, Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model now serves as a foundational theory for community-engaged learning, and expands on Dewey's call for reflection. The model contains four steps that exist in a continuous loop. The four components include concrete experience, observation and reflection, generating new ideas/ approaches, and application and testing. The learner moves through the four-step cycle continuously and repeatedly, with the intent of producing new knowledge throughout. This cycle is present in Welch and Plaxton-Moore's (2019) description of the essential community-engaged learning

element of “process”, which was outlined above. Kolb’s concrete experience stage aligns with Welch and Plaxton-Moore’s element of participation in a co-created experience. Kolb’s observation and reflection stage aligns with Welch and Plaxton-Moore’s element of process which includes critical reflection. Finally, Kolb’s generation of new ideas, approaches, and application and testing stages align with Welch and Plaxton-Moore’s requirement of formative and summative assessment (Kolb, 1984; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019). Community-engaged learning experiences, when they contain reflection (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984) and the three essential elements outlined by Welch and Plaxton-Moore (2019), are believed to be transformative educational experiences.

Mezirow’s (1997) Transformative Learning Theory serves as another foundational theory to help understand the potential impact of community-engaged learning. Transformative Learning Theory includes three separate phases that the learner works through. When a learner has an experience that is new, or challenges their preconceived notions of the world, they enter the cognitive dissonance or disorienting phase. In the second phase, the learner uses critical reflection to consider the positioning of their understanding in the broader sociocultural context in which the experience occurred. The third phase is where the learner makes decisions about how to move forward with this new knowledge. This is where the learner is transformed by the meaning they have made of their experience and by the creation of new knowledge, resulting in new behavior on their part.

Kiely (2005) further elaborates how transformative learning occurs in service-learning experiences specifically. Kiely’s (2005) Transformational Service-Learning Process Model contains five dimensions of learning that help illuminate the process students walk-through to create meaning from their experience. First, Kiely notes that students’ experiences are shaped in

unique ways by personal, structural, historical, and programmatic factors. Next, dissonance occurs when the service-learning experience challenges the students' preconceived understanding of the world. The student then begins to respond to that dissonance in different ways, often resulting in an emotional response. This process is called personalizing. Processing happens next, wherein the student begins to question, problematize, and seek answers. This is often done through reflection activities such as journaling, discussion, or research. Finally, students begin the connecting process, wherein they begin to conceptualize their understandings in the context of relationships. This context is where students begin to take action. While these dimensions help to further illuminate learning in service-learning experiences, Kiely notes that scholars should also seek to better understand the emotional and affective process of transformational learning in service-learning (2005).

Community-engaged learning experiences are also considered to be a type of high-impact practice (HIPs). HIPs in higher education are defined as experiences that demand large amounts of time and effort, engage students in learning beyond the classroom, require students and faculty to have meaningful interactions, provide opportunities for engagement with diverse communities, and provide frequent and substantive feedback (Kuh, 2008). Kuh (2008) identified ten different teaching and learning practices that are widely used at HEIs that fall within the definition of an HIP and included service learning, or community-based learning, as one of those practices. While there is criticism surrounding the scholarship on HIPs, particularly as it relates to who has access to HIPs at HEIs and whether or not there is equity in existing practices (Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008), HIPs are often seen as important student experiences that can contribute to a sense of belonging (Flanagan & Bundick, 2011; Ribera et al., 2017; Soria et al.,

2003), greater academic performance (Bonet et al., 2016), and greater persistence and higher graduation rates (Brownwell & Swaner, 2009; Kilgo et al., 2015).

While the definitions of community-engaged learning differ slightly (Jacoby, 1996; Mitchell, 2013; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019), they all highlight the importance of critical reflection. The same can be said for the foundational theories (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1997; Kuh, 2008). While they all differ in nuanced ways, each theory calls on the importance of critical reflection in order for the learner to gain new knowledge, make meaning of their experience, and to enact new ways of engaging with their world. Critical reflection is clearly a crucial component of community-engaged learning and therefore is examined further.

Critical Reflection In Community-Engaged Learning

Jacoby (1996) defines critical reflection as "the process of analyzing, reconsidering, and questioning one's experiences within a broad context of issues and content knowledge" (p. 26). Ash and Clayton (2009) further state that critical reflection should be seen as "a process of metacognition that functions to improve the quality of thought and of action and the relationship between them" (p. 27). They go on to state that critical reflection generates learning, deepens learning, and documents learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009). When left to process experiential learning opportunities on their own, students may reinforce stereotypes, oversimplify complex and systemic social problems, and move away from the intended learning objectives of the course or the beyond the classroom experience (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Jacoby, 1996). Facilitated critical reflection is crucial to ensuring that students are making meaning of their experiences in ways that meet learning objectives, lead to changed personal behavior, and prompt positive social change (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

Community-engaged educators should strive to facilitate critical reflection opportunities that are rigorous and substantive. Scholars have outlined principles of good practice as it relates to developing these types of effective critical reflection activities. Eyler et al. (1996) outline the four C's of critical reflection. First, critical reflection must be *continuous,* or ongoing, throughout the entire learning experience. Second, it must *connect* the learning experience to the content of the course. The reflection activities must also be connected to one another, building upon each other throughout the learning experience. Third, critical reflection must be *challenging*. Students must engage in difficult conversations and activities that push them to reconsider their preconceived notions. Finally, critical reflection must be *contextualized*. Reflection activities must be related to the community setting where the students are engaged and must be appropriate for their developmental level. In addition to the four C's, Bringle and Hatcher (1999) add that effective critical reflection must be guided, must involve feedback that helps enhance learning, and helps the learner to clarify their values.

Ash and Clayton (1999) put forth the DEAL Model for Critical Reflection as an approach to ensure these principles of good practice are followed. The DEAL model outlines three steps that the learner must move through: description, examination, and articulation of learning. In the *description* stage, the learner is asked to put forth the facts of the experience. Where were they? Who was present? What happened? What did they see? This stage encourages the learner to be present in the experience. The learner is then asked to *examine* and begin to make linkages between their experience and the learning objectives of the course. Finally, learners are asked to *articulate* their learning. Traditionally, this is done using the four prompts: what did I learn?, how did I learn it?, why does it matter?, and what will I do now that I know it? The actual

strategy used to elicit these stages can range from in-class discussion, to journaling, to a final paper, to a podcast or other creative reflection activity.

Models of Academic Community-Engaged Learning

While scholars agree that community-engaged learning must include critical reflection in order to ensure meaningful learning is taking place, there is some flexibility of thought in regard to how academic community-engaged learning can be incorporated into the curriculum. Community-engaged learning can take place continuously throughout a semester course, be conducted as short-term or one-time projects, be implemented in groups or individual placements, and may be required or serve as extra-credit (Heffernan, 2001). Heffernan (2001) outlined six general models of community-engaged learning including discipline-based, problem-based, capstone course, service internship, undergraduate community-based action research, and directed study extra credit. First, in the discipline-based model, students participate in community engagement throughout the semester with the same community partner(s). They work with a community partner that is related to the course discipline and reflect on connections to course content. In the problem-based model, students are assigned a community partner with a specific need and spend the semester developing solutions to that specific need in an attempt to help the partner to solve the problem. For example, marketing students may help a community partner to develop a marketing campaign for their organization to help with development and increased engagement. Third, in the capstone course model, students in their final year of coursework are asked to apply knowledge from their major or minor to relevant work with the community. Community engagement is used as a way to gauge the students' understanding of their overall coursework. Service internship is the fourth model, and involves students working multiple hours on a weekly basis in a community setting. Students are expected to produce an

outcome that is valuable to their community partner by the end of the internship. Fifth, undergraduate community-based action research involves students working with a faculty member to help conduct community-based research. The final model, directed study extra credit, involves students working independently with a community-based project and earning course credit for the experience. The faculty directing the study serves as the facilitator of reflection for the student.

In addition to the models for curriculum incorporation outlined by Heffernan (2001), community-engaged learning can also use different modalities for implementation including virtual, in-person, and hybrid (Furco, 2015). Virtual community-engaged learning incorporates all the components of traditional community-engaged learning, but the instruction and/or the engagement occurs partially or fully online. There are four emerging models of virtual community engagement as outlined by Furco (2015) and each model has important implications related to the impact on community partners, the impact on student outcomes, and the facilitator. Hybrid model I includes virtual class with in-person community engagement. This model allows students to serve in a community that is convenient or of interest to them. An example is an online sports management course in which students partner with their own local parks and recreation association in-person. Hybrid model II incorporates in-person class with virtual community engagement. This type of engagement traditionally involves a smaller number of community partners and therefore takes less logistical resources to facilitate. An example would be an in-person information technology course in which students build online resources for a community partner. Hybrid model III is blended in that class and community engagement are offered partially online and partially in-person. This model provides great flexibility but requires a large amount of logistical support from the facilitator. An example of this model would be a

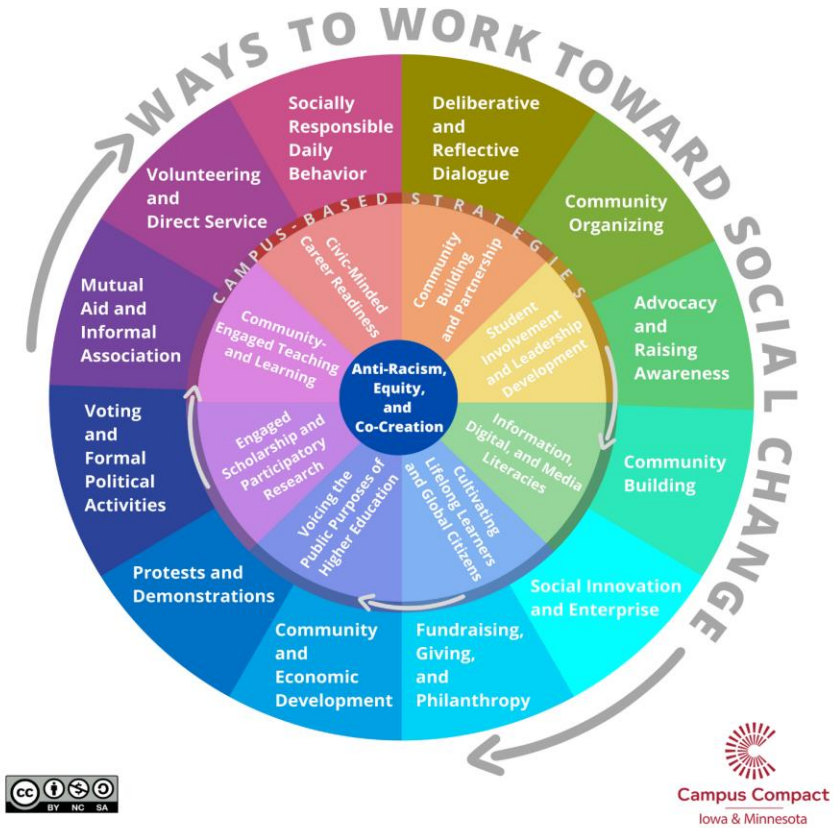
nursing course that combines in-person instruction with online community partner engagement, followed by an education abroad experience that allows for in-person student engagement with the community partner. Finally, extreme community engagement incorporates virtual class with virtual community engagement. Again, this provides great flexibility for the course design as well as the community partner options, but it may be difficult to sustain engagement throughout the semester. An example would be an online policy course that develops a policy statement/ analysis for a community partner.

In addition to the models for curriculum incorporation outlined by Heffernan (2001) and the different modalities for implementation outlined by Furco (2015), the community-engaged learning implementation strategies used in courses can take many different forms as well. The Social Change Wheel, developed by Iowa and Minnesota's Campus Compact (2020), provides a framework for highlighting the many different implementation strategies that may fit into the definition of community-engaged learning. This framework was initially developed in 2005, but version 2.0 was released in 2020 in response to the social disruptions of that year, including the COVID global pandemic and its disproportionate impact on communities of color. The updated wheel, depicted in Figure 1 is intended to help community-engaged faculty and practitioners think creatively about how to build sustainable partnerships and expand their definition of community-engaged learning beyond the traditional service-learning approach (i.e. students volunteer at a food bank or students participate in a community cleanup day). Instead, community-engaged learning strategies may also incorporate project-based experiences that focus on capacity building, philanthropy, advocacy, community-based research, social innovation and entrepreneurship, community organizing, economic development and more (Campus Compact, 2020; Jacoby, 1996). For example, a social work course focused on children

in foster families could choose to use a community building implementation strategy in which they spend the semester identifying and profiling all community organizations that focus on supporting foster children and families in the area. The social work course may also choose an advocacy implementation strategy by spending the semester facilitating a letter-writing campaign to their local government in support of policy change and funding support for foster families. Finally, that same social work course could use a direct-service implementation strategy and spend the semester providing tutoring services one-on-one to foster children in the local community. Course facilitators often use multiple implementation strategies within the same course (Campus Compact, 2020).

Figure 1

Iowa & Minnesota's Campus Compact (2020) Social Change Wheel 2.0



Benefits of Community-Engaged Learning

Community-engaged learning provides benefits to those involved but also poses challenges for implementation. Per the definition of community-engaged learning, it is imperative that all participants benefit from the experience, and no one participant group benefits more than another (Jacoby, 2014; Kenworthy-U'Ren et al., 2006). As such, research shows benefits for the students, faculty, and the community. Students who participate in community-engaged learning have been shown to have higher rates of retention (Jacoby, 2014; Kenworthy-U'Ren et al., 2006), positive impacts on their academic performance, critical thinking skills, self-efficacy, leadership, plans to participate in service after graduation, a greater connection to their institution and the surrounding community (Astin et al., 2000; Coops et al., 2015), and develop career readiness skills (Otto & Dunens, 2021). These impacts coincide with the stated benefits of participation in HIPs cited above (Bonet et al., 2016; Brownwell & Swaner, 2009; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh, 2008; Ribera et al., 2017; Soria et al., 2003). Community-engaged learning student participants also showed reduced stereotyped beliefs, greater inter-cultural understanding, more political awareness, and higher civic engagement scores (Simons & Cleary, 2006). Astin et al. (2000) discovered that the most important factor associated with student benefit was the student's degree of interest in the subject matter, therefore they push for inclusion of community-engaged learning in required courses in the students' major.

Faculty members who include community-engaged learning in their courses also benefit from the experience. In some ways, their benefit is similar to students in that they show an increased connection to their institution and the surrounding community (Astin et al., 2000; Coops et al., 2015). While Pribbenow (2005) notes that there is a lack of research on benefits specific to faculty members, their research does identify six themes regarding how community-

engaged learning impacted faculty. First, faculty showed more meaningful engagement and commitment to teaching. Second, that deeper engagement allowed the faculty members to form deeper connections and relationships with their students. Third, faculty expressed a better understanding of their students' learning and were able to assess their learning more effectively. This deeper understanding led to the fourth benefit, which was a rethinking of how knowledge is created and thus the incorporation of different learning strategies in their course. The fifth benefit was a greater understanding and awareness of the community. This understanding was communicated more effectively through course material and created learning objectives. Finally, Pribbenow (2005) noted a greater involvement in a network of faculty who engaged in similar community-engaged work. These faculty created an informal learning community of their own which provided support and continued learning opportunities.

Community partners also benefit from their involvement in community-engaged learning, although the benefits they seek differ from those identified by students and faculty and seem to be less often researched. Among the benefits experienced, community partners list satisfaction with the students who participated, an increased level of human capital directly focused on achieving their goals, an increase in energy, and better relationships with the associated college or university (Coops et al., 2015). Miron and Moely (2006) noted that community partners indicated more benefits of their participation if they felt they had more involvement in the planning of the community engagement opportunity. Additionally, Miron and Moely (2006) found that community partners who had a longer-history of involvement with the university, as well as larger numbers of students involved, voiced greater benefit to their organization.

Challenges of Community-Engaged Learning

Community-engaged learning can be a transformative teaching practice, and as discussed, has benefits for students, faculty, and community partners when done well. However, there are challenges to implementing this type of pedagogy in the classroom. First, the planning and implementation of community-engaged learning is time intensive. Many faculty do not have the time to plan these types of experiences, and this type of work is not usually recognized or supported in faculty promotion practices (Rusinko, 2010). Some higher education institutions create centralized offices, such as centers for teaching and learning or community engagement, to support faculty in this type of work; however, that resource is not always available.

A second challenge to community-engaged learning is the difficult work of ensuring that the community is engaged as a co-educator throughout the experience and is benefiting along with the students and faculty. As Kenworthy-U'Ren et al. (2006) note, "Building reciprocal and sustainable partnerships with community partners remains perhaps the greatest challenge for academic institutions" (p. 125). Community partners should be engaged as co-creators of knowledge and student experience, but again, this type of thorough planning takes time and resources that faculty, and community partners, often lack (Rusinko, 2010).

A final challenge is that students may not be prepared to fully participate in the community-engaged learning experience, and thus will not gain full benefit. Additionally, community-engaged learning can be difficult for non-traditional students to incorporate into their lives, for example, adult students with jobs and/or children, students who commute, etc. HEIs must be fully committed to providing training and resources for students through orientation, logistical support such as shuttles or bus services, skills training, and reflection opportunities (Heffernan, 2001; Kenworthy-U'Ren et al., 2006; Rusinko, 2010). Further, students should be

engaged in pre-reflection or training activities that highlight the ethical considerations of engaging in community. Specifically, students should understand the importance of doing no harm to the community while engaging (Morgan, 2003), and recognize community members as experts and to engage with them from an asset-based perspective (Garoutte & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014).

What Do We Know And Not Know About Community-Engaged Learning?

While there are differences in terminology and definitions as it relates to community-engaged learning, scholars do agree that it is a type of pedagogy that pairs experiential opportunities with critical reflection in a manner that provides benefits for the students, faculty, and community partners involved (Dewey, 1938; Jacoby, 1996; Kolb, 1984; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019). When this pedagogy is implemented using rigorous and substantive critical reflection activities, the learners generate deep learning and are likely to have a transformative learning experience (Ash & Clayton, 1999; Mezirow, 1997). Scholars also agree that there are a multitude of ways that community-engaged learning can be incorporated into curriculum and courses (Heffernan, 2001; Campus Compact, 2020) and that benefits of participating in these experiences include higher rates of retention, positive impacts on academic performance, critical thinking skills, self-efficacy, leadership, continued participation in service, and a greater connection to their community (Astin et al., 2000; Coops et al., 2015; Jacoby, 2014; Kenworthy-U'Ren et al., 2006).

Based on existing literature, we do not yet know how the student experience differs according to the curricular model, the implementation strategy, or the modality of engagement (virtual/ in-person/ hybrid). For example, do students who participate in community-engaged learning as a required course component have different benefits or challenges than students who

participate as extra-credit? Do students who participate in a community building implementation strategy have different benefits or challenges than students who participate in direct-service strategies? Do students who participate virtually have different benefits and challenges than those who participate in-person?

Additionally, this literature does not address the experience of students who participate in community-engaged learning as it relates to their mental health and wellness. As stated, the student benefits of participating in community-engaged learning (higher rates of retention, positive impacts on academic performance, critical thinking skills, self-efficacy, leadership, continued participation in service, and a greater connection to their community (Astin et al., 2000; Coops et al., 2015; Jacoby, 2014; Kenworthy-U'Ren et al., 2006) look to coincide with the challenges that have been identified for students with a mental health disability and poor wellness (lower grades, less social engagement on campus, are less likely to seek out or receive services on campus, and have less persistence to graduation (Amaya et al., 2019; Cleary et al., 2011; Goss et al., 2010; Jorgensen et al., 2018; National Council, 2017). It is important to know more about the relationship between community-engaged learning and student mental health and wellness. This is examined in the following section.

Community-Engaged Learning at HEIs and Student Mental Health and Wellness

Again, community-engaged learning practices have been presented as proactive, macro-focused strategies that HEIs can use to promote positive mental health and wellness among its participants (Attree, 2011; Checkoway, 2007; Conway, 2009; Flanagan, 2011; O'Meara et al. 2011; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Swaner, 2007); however, it should be made clear that community-engaged learning practices are not seen as interventions for individual students experiencing poor mental health and wellness. Rather, community-engaged learning is seen as a

proactive strategy for students at large which can provide supportive and protective factors for student mental health and wellness (Pasque, 2008). Researchers have noted that community-engaged learning participants report increased physical and emotional health and wellness, improved self-confidence and self-esteem, improved social relationships, less feelings of depression, loneliness, and anxiety (Attree, 2011; Conway, 2009; Flanagan & Bundick, 2011), lower incidence of substance abuse (Checkoway, 2007), and improved socially responsive knowledge and moral development (Conway, 2009; Swaner, 2007). However, this relationship between community-engaged learning and mental health and wellness outcomes needs to be understood at a more nuanced level.

Positive Impacts On Student Mental Health and Wellness

Scholars have found that participation in community-engaged learning can have a positive impact on mental health and wellness due to increased feelings of connection to others and an improved sense of belonging. Bronsteen (2016) suggests that happiness, or wellness, is influenced by interactions and connections with other people and that HEIs offer a crucial environment for facilitating and improving these interpersonal interactions for students. Checkoway (2007) supports this suggestion and highlights the Bringing Theory to Practice (BToP) program to explain. The BToP program was established across seven HEIs in the US wherein campuses attempted to address depression and substance abuse in college students through promoting involvement in engaged learning opportunities. The BToP program assumes that depression and substance abuse are symptoms of student disengagement, from both their HEI and from their broader community. As such, it was theorized that student mental health and wellness can be positively impacted by facilitating learning activities that help to build connections in these areas. Flanagan and Bundick (2011) found that as a result of participating in

community-engaged learning, participants reported that they felt like they were fitting into their community and that they had increased feelings of connectedness and a sense of belonging. This same connection between community-engaged learning and participant sense of belonging is supported by other scholars as well (Kuh, 2008; Ribera et al., 2017; Soria et al., 2003). This connection implies that HEIs can improve students' connection to community and increase students' sense of belonging through the facilitation of community-engaged learning opportunities, ultimately having a direct impact on student mental health and wellness.

Scholars have also found that participation in community-engaged learning can have a positive impact on mental health and wellness due to increased feelings of empowerment and self-efficacy. Attree (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of literature on community-engaged learning and found that there was evidence that participating in community-engaged learning had valuable psychosocial benefits due to a positive impact on perceptions of personal empowerment. Swaner (2007) also found that student participants of community-engaged learning reported feeling more control over their learning experiences and thus felt less stress and fewer negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. This connection again frames student mental health and wellness as a problem that can be supported by HEIs by providing community-engaged learning opportunities that can improve feelings of empowerment and self-efficacy.

While Conway et al. (2009) echoed these findings, reporting that community-engaged learning promotes feelings of self-efficacy, they add that intensity and duration of engagement would act as moderating factors, with longer periods of engagement and the presence of critical reflection activities generally being associated with larger effects. The importance of critical reflection and its impact on positive mental health and wellness outcomes is elaborated by

Bronsteen (2016). Bronsteen suggests that the way a person thinks about their circumstances may be more important than the circumstances themselves. Thus, HEIs should focus their critical reflection on activities that help teach students how to think about their experience, how to understand their position in relation to the community they engage with, and how to tap into happiness through the cultivation of compassion for others. Bronsteen suggests that growing compassion rather than defensiveness leads to improved happiness and well being. Again, this connection frames student mental health and wellness as a problem that can be addressed by HEIs by providing community-engaged learning experiences that include critical reflection activities that teach students how to think about their experience and to cultivate compassion for others.

Negative Impacts On Student Mental Health and Wellness

Despite these reported positive impacts of community-engaged learning experiences on participant mental health and wellness, it is also important to note that there is also scholarship that highlights potential negative impacts of participation in community-engaged learning on student mental health and wellness. Anxiety-related disorders are the most diagnosed mental health condition among undergraduate students (Jorgensen et al., 2018; Soet & Sevig, 2006), and those students often reference academic pressure as the leading source of stress and anxiety. Swaner (2007) acknowledges that academic environments tend to be high-stress and points out that if stress levels become too high, students may actually dis-engage from their learning and experience negative impacts to their well being. More specifically, Attree (2011) noted negative health impacts for community-engaged learning student participants who were already experiencing high stress as a result of existing conditions, such as a physical disability.

Kulick et al. (2017) found similar negative impacts related to existing high stress conditions when looking at students who identify as part of marginalized communities such as racial minority groups and/or the LGBTQ community. Students in these marginalized communities are more likely to have experienced identity-based trauma and oppression that can have their own negative impacts on mental health and wellness. Different types of community engagement may either moderate or exacerbate those mental health and wellness outcomes. Specifically, Kulick et al. (2017) suggest that students in marginalized communities who are involved in very high or very low levels of community engagement are likely to experience higher rates of depression, whereas students with a moderate range of community engagement are more likely to experience positive mental health and wellness benefits. This is attributed to the idea that those students with low levels of engagement did not have sufficient time in the community, or enough perceived impact, to develop feelings of empowerment and self-efficacy outcomes as outlined above (Attree, 2011; Swaner, 2007). Those students with high levels of engagement are more likely to experience the opposite in that their greater exposure to the broader negative systemic issues in the community actually decreased their perception of impact and feelings of empowerment and increased their exposure to microaggressions. This is in contrast to Conway et al.'s (2009) findings that increased intensity and duration would lead to greater self-efficacy outcomes.

It should be noted that community engagement in Kulick et al.'s (2017) study was defined as engagement in the broader campus community, rather than the off-campus community which is traditionally where community-engaged learning takes place. However, the experiential component of the students' experiences in Kulick et al. (2017) align with the definition of community-engaged learning used in this study. The students were engaged in activities that

addressed human and community needs - the community just happened to exist on the HEI campus. The following section looks more closely at the concept of community and community trauma and its impact on student participants of community-engaged learning.

Community Trauma and Student Mental Health and Wellness. As noted, when defining the concept of student wellness at HEIs, conditions of oppression, injustice, and helplessness exist at the personal, interpersonal, organizational, and communal level. Therefore, not only do individuals exist on a continuum of wellness, but there are also continuums of community and societal wellness as well (Adams et al., 1997; Goss et al., 2010; Myers et al., 2000). Community-engaged learning practices are traditionally designed to improve community and societal wellness by addressing social injustices such as health disparities, educational inequities, and poverty. As such, community-engaged learning activities traditionally take place in communities that are underserved, marginalized, oppressed, low-income, more likely to be communities of color, newcomer communities, or communities that are otherwise experiencing identity-based oppression (Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Pinderhughes et al., 2015; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019). The impact of community-engaged learning practices on community and societal wellness is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is important to understand how concepts such as power, privilege, systemic oppression, and other community traumas impact the mental health and wellness of community-engaged learning student participants (Attree, 2011). Pasque (2008) notes that community trauma and intergenerational impacts of community trauma are concepts that need to be addressed, and this focus on the connection between community-engaged learning, student mental health and wellness, and community trauma can help advance community-engaged work at HEIs.

Much like the concepts of student mental health and wellness and community-engaged learning, there are varied definitions of trauma, and only in the last decade or so have scholars begun to use the term in relation to community experiences. The concept of trauma-informed care has traditionally focused on the individual without addressing the community-level systemic inequities that contributed to the individual trauma in the first place (Becker-Blease, 2017). Erikson (1991) explores the idea of collective trauma, defining the concept as an experience or experiences that damage the bonds attaching people together and which ultimately impairs the sense of community. Communities experiencing this collective trauma begin to define their shared experiences, culture, shared language, and kinship in such a way that it is the trauma that becomes the defining factor that separates them from other communities (Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Pinderhughes et al., 2015).

Community trauma is often misdiagnosed as problematic individuals, as it is often identified by observing individual behavior. Therefore, community trauma is often addressed by intervening at the individual level (Atkinson et al., 2014). These interventions miss the mark as these traumas stem from the daily stressors that come from violence, concentrated poverty, historic and structural conditions of racism, sexism, isolation, and the dissolution of family and other emotional support systems (Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Pinderhughes et al., 2015). Community trauma results from the exclusion of groups of people from the dominant culture, which ultimately erodes communities' sense of empowerment and agency (Kulick et al., 2017). Addressing individual trauma does not respond to the imbalanced systems of power and oppression that exist in our communities, and therefore does not work to change those systems (Becker-Blease, 2017). Acknowledging the concept of community trauma allows for the development of interventions at the community level that work

to disrupt the systems of power, rebuild support systems, and develop community agency and empowerment. If community trauma is not addressed, there is risk of perpetuating the systems of oppression that caused the trauma originally and retraumatizing those individuals involved (Atkinson et al., 2014; Becker-Blease, 2017; Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Pinde).

Existing models of trauma-informed community engagement focus on protecting the community members involved from further retraumatization (Becker-Blease, 2017; Falkenburger, 2018; Pinderhughes et al., 2015; Weinstein et al., 2014). This focus is needed to ensure we do no harm to the communities with which we engage and to ensure systems of oppression are not being perpetuated. Missing from these existing models of trauma-informed community engagement is the acknowledgement and connection between student mental health and wellness and the wellness of the community in which they are serving. HEIs cannot ensure they are doing no harm to a partner community if the HEIs are not adequately preparing or supporting their community-engaged learning students who are partnering with those communities. However, HEIs cannot adequately prepare or support their students if there is limited understanding of the impact of community-engaged learning on those students' own mental health and wellness. There is limited to no scholarship that examines the lived experiences of students involved in community-engaged learning practices with communities experiencing trauma (Falkenburger, 2018; Pinderhughes et al., 2015; Weinstein et al., 2014). It is important to learn more about the lived experiences of those students involved to develop a better understanding of what is happening, what individual characteristics are important to consider, and what variables may act as moderating or exacerbating in regard to student mental health and wellness. This enhanced understanding will help community-engaged learning

practitioners ensure that pedagogies are being enacted that honor trauma-informed, healing-centered, and resilience-focused community-engaged learning practices at HEIs - ultimately working to protect both the student and the community they are engaging with.

HEIs Role In Minimizing Negative Impacts. These potential negative impacts of community-engaged learning on student mental health and wellness are important to highlight, and even more important to address in the planning and implementation of these experiences at HEIs. Can these findings of potential negative outcomes be impacted by HEI community-engaged learning facilitators? Mitchell et al. (2016) found that students reported positive mental health outcomes when they perceived that their campus was supportive of developing their ethical and moral reasoning as well as other skills necessary for them to successfully engage, while also providing a campus climate that supports the importance of contributing to a larger community. This finding highlights the importance of HEIs' role in providing student support and preparation, as well as providing intentional critical reflection opportunities that help support positive mental health and wellness outcomes (Bronsteen, 2016). Community-engaged learning is a pedagogy that creates tension in the learning and development process that can challenge students. This initial challenge can decrease mental health outcomes in the short term, which is particularly important to note for students who may already be experiencing difficulty in these areas. Managed correctly, HEIs can support learning and build a foundation that influences mental health positively. This is particularly true if students believe they are part of a larger campus climate that supports them in this process (Attree, 2011; Kulick et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2016; Swaner, 2007).

What Do We Know And Not Know About Community-Engaged Learning and Mental Health and Wellness Outcomes?

The existing scholarship shows that community-engaged learning experiences provide mental health and wellness benefits for student participants (Attree, 2011; Checkoway, 2007; Conway, 2009; Flanagan, 2011; O'Meara et al. 2011; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Swaner, 2007). Scholars point out that these benefits likely stem from the fact that community-engaged learning experiences help student participants have increased feelings of connection (Bronsteen, 2016; Checkoway, 2007), an improved sense of belonging (Flanagan & Bundick, 2011; Ribera et al., 2017; Soria et al., 2003), increased feelings of empowerment (Attree, 2011; Conway et al., 2009; Swaner, 2007), and increased self-efficacy (Bronsteen, 2016; Conway et al., 2009). Scholars also agree that these student benefits are impacted by certain factors related to the experience, such as intensity and duration of the experience (Conway et al., 2009). Additionally, it is noted that providing intentional critical reflection opportunities is essential to producing these student benefits (Bronsteen, 2016; Conway et al., 2009).

While there is less research on the potential negative impacts to student participants' mental health and wellness, scholars do agree that these potential negative impacts exist. Specifically, scholars have found negative impacts for those students who were already experiencing high stress as a result of existing conditions such as a disability (Attree, 2011) as well as for those students who identify as part of marginalized communities (Kulick et al., 2017). Additionally, it is important to understand the potential negative impact that community trauma can have on the student experience (Falkenburger, 2018; Pinderhughes et al., 2015; Weinstein et al., 2014). While more information is needed to better understand the experience of these

students, it is agreed that HEIs have a responsibility to avoid these potential negative outcomes and to support and prepare their student participants in these experiences.

Based on the existing literature, there are gaps in what we know about community-engaged learning and student mental health and wellness outcomes. As stated, the definition of community-engaged learning has expanded to include multiple implementation strategies (direct service, advocacy, community building, etc.), curricular models, and modalities for delivery (virtual, in-person, hybrid). The majority of existing scholarship is based on the traditional direct-service type of community engagement. Therefore, we do not yet know if participation in different types of community-engaged learning results in differences in student mental health and wellness outcomes. For example, is there a difference in student outcomes as a result of participating in different community-engaged learning implementation strategies - direct service vs. philanthropy vs. social innovation vs. advocacy? Additionally, are these student experiences different for virtual vs. in-person community engagement experiences? How do these experiences differ for those students who are experiencing poor wellness outcomes, or high anxiety, already? How do students make meaning of their experiences, and to what do they attribute their mental health and wellness outcomes? HEIs need to know more about the student experience of community engaged learning in order to better understand how they may best support the mental health and wellness of student participants.

Research Questions

Mental health and wellness impact all areas of a student's experience. Students with a mental health disability experience lower grades, less social engagement on campus, are less likely to seek out or receive services on campus, and have less persistence to graduation (Amaya et al., 2019; Cleary et al., 2011; Goss et al., 2010; Jorgensen et al., 2018; National Council,

2017). Community-engaged learning practices have been presented as proactive strategies that HEIs can use to promote positive mental health and wellness among student participants (Attree, 2011; Checkoway, 2007; Conway, 2009; Flanagan, 2011; O'Meara et al. 2011; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Swaner, 2007). However, in addition to noted positive impacts, there are potential negative mental health and wellness impacts on student participants of community-engaged learning that must be addressed by HEIs (Attree, 2011; Falkenburger, 2018; Kulick et al., 2017; Pasque, 2008; Pinderhughes et al., 2015; Swaner, 2007; Weinstein et al., 2014). In order to better understand the role HEIs can play in support of students who participate in community-engaged learning, and in order to mitigate potential negative impacts on student mental health and wellness, we need to better understand the lived experiences of community-engaged learning student participants. This study did just that, and looked to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of undergraduate student participants of academic community-engaged learning, specifically as they relate to their mental health and wellness?
2. How do undergraduate student participants of academic community-engaged learning make sense of the impact of these pedagogical experiences on their mental health and wellness?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the current study was to illuminate the experiences of undergraduate students who participate in community-engaged learning, specifically as those experiences relate to student mental health and wellness. Though there is a good amount of literature on the benefits of participating in community-engaged learning, the scholarship that looks specifically at mental health and wellness outcomes is limited and does not directly examine the students' lived experiences. Additionally, the existing literature shows conflicting findings regarding the potential negative impacts on mental health and wellness outcomes. The following sections discuss my research paradigm and worldview, conceptual framework, and methodology, including participant selection, data collection and analysis.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of undergraduate student participants of academic community-engaged learning, specifically as they relate to their mental health and wellness?
2. How do undergraduate student participants of academic community-engaged learning make sense of the impact of these pedagogical experiences on their mental health and wellness?

Research Paradigm and Worldview Statement

In order to develop and implement a clear and relevant methodology for exploring these questions, one must first understand their worldview as a researcher. As Coe et al. (2017) state, "...it is important for researchers to understand their own and others' views about the nature of reality (ontology), how we can know about it (epistemology) and the

different values (axiology) that may underpin enquiry…" (p. 5). This development and understanding of worldview as a researcher shapes the questions we ask, how we ask them, and how we answer them. It is the very core of who we become as scholars. In this worldview statement, I highlight my views regarding the nature of research including what is knowledge and how does it come to be known, where my views developed, how these shape my approach as a researcher, and how they are related to my research questions.

First, I will examine my views regarding the nature of research, including what knowledge is and how it comes to be known. These incredibly large questions can be explored through the lens of ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods, all of which exist on a continuum of thought. Ontology clarifies where the researcher stands in regard to the nature of the social world and ranges from realism to constructivism (Coe et al., 2017). As a researcher in the field of education, I believe that multiple realities exist which are constructed by individuals through experience. A classroom full of thirty students will have thirty different experiences, and knowledge will be created in thirty independent ways, regardless of the shared classroom and/or instructor. These unique experiences are shaped by a large number of variables, including prior lived experiences, social identities, existing relationships among learners, prior knowledge of content, and so on.

Following ontology, the researcher must examine their thoughts regarding epistemology. Epistemology encourages questions regarding how knowledge comes to be known and exists on a continuum from positivism to interpretivism (Coe et al., 2017). For this scale, I lean toward interpretivism, which states that direct knowledge is not possible; rather, knowledge exists through a process of interpretation. If I am observing the classroom of thirty students outlined above, I now add my interpretation of those thirty experiences, whether through direct

observation or through learner accounts. I cannot understand the classroom, or the participants, without bringing in my own set of prior lived experiences, social identities, existing relationships, etc., much like the learners themselves.

Methodology follows ontology and asks the question of what procedures should be followed to access knowledge (Coe et al., 2017)? On this continuum, I move closer to the middle than I did on the prior two scales, however, I still lean toward ideographic, dialectical and hermeneutical methodologies. While I do see value in nomothetic, or experimental, methodologies that can help to provide general descriptions and context for phenomena, I believe the idiographic approach, or the examination of individual cases, is how we can best uncover the complexities and nuances that exist. Educational research allows us the opportunity to build and facilitate learning experiences that will have meaning for all participants. I believe that these experiences cannot be effective unless we have an understanding of the individual experience, and use the individual experience to build interventions, policies, and systems that meet the needs of those individual students, faculty, and community partners.

The last area to be considered when exploring my views on the nature of research and knowledge concerns method, which asks how data will be collected and used (Coe et al., 2017). Methods are decided by asking what data are needed to answer the research question; however, the research question should be formed in such a way that it exists within the purview of the researcher's ontology, epistemology, and methodology. As such, my methods fall within qualitative research traditions. Because the individual experience, and the individuals' interpretation and understanding of their experience, are of utmost importance, methods such as interviews, focus groups, case studies, surveys, and ethnographies are most in line with my values as a researcher.

Next, to better understand my views on the nature of research and knowledge that I've outlined above, I will briefly highlight some of my own lived experiences that helped shape these views. Following my own rather traditional higher education experience, I worked for a decade as a mental health and community development professional. In this context, I worked in a world in which individual experience was of utmost importance. Individual experiences, and interpretation of those experiences, were key to understanding how to best intervene and treat for mental health concerns. Clients were not interested in how I could help impact the larger system. They needed to know how I was going to help them. I eventually moved out of direct mental health work and transitioned to a career as a higher education professional focused on the creation and facilitation of experiential learning opportunities for students in the realm of community engagement. In this setting, I am still acutely aware of the individual experience of students, faculty, and community members. However, in this work, I have more space to explore the complex interaction among and between individual experiences. I have more opportunities to use systems thinking to explore how these experiences are connected and intertwined. These professional experiences developed my values regarding the importance of promoting mental health and community engagement. But additionally, these professional experiences have shaped my views around what is knowledge, how do we come to know, and how do we design research experiences that allow for the gathering of this data.

My worldview, and practical real-world experiences, come together to shape my approach as a researcher. This impact can be seen tangibly in my research questions. The research questions in the current study align with my beliefs that knowledge is individually constructed in that the research questions specifically ask about the individual student experience. They also align with my belief that knowledge is created and understood through the

process of interpretation in that I am asking for the students' perceptions and understanding of their mental health and wellness.

I feel firmly rooted in my worldview regarding what knowledge is, how it comes to be known, how it is uncovered, and how those beliefs impact my work as an education practitioner and researcher. In addition to my academic discipline, my professional experiences, which are very much grounded in experiential learning, have worked to build my worldview and very much informed the conceptual framework, methodology, design, and analysis of this study - all of which will be described in the following sections.

Conceptual Framework

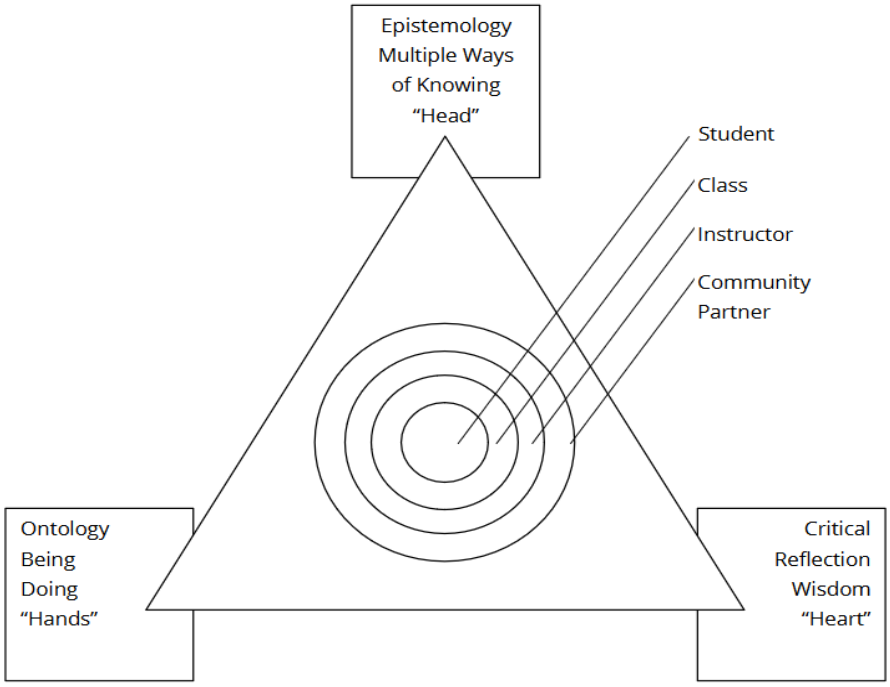
Community-engaged learning scholarship provides the theoretical grounding for my research. As outlined in the previous chapter, community-engaged learning is supported by the theoretical foundations built by Dewey (1938), Kolb (1984), Mezirow (1997), Kiely (2005), and Kuh (2008). Each of these foundational theories differs from the others, but they all contribute to our understanding of how students experience community-engaged learning, how they make meaning of their experiences, and how that meaning impacts their learning and lives. Welch and Plaxton-Moore (2019) provide a triadic theoretical framework that helps to synthesize these foundations of community-engaged learning:

> …engaged teaching and learning are composed of the following components: (a) epistemology as multiple ways of knowing with an emphasis on the intellectual development of a student as well as generating new knowledge that builds capacity for society at large, (b) ontology as a way of being or doing in the world by applying what is learned and experienced, and (c) critical reflection to contemplate and make meaning of the learning and doing. (p. 39).

This theoretical framework, shown in Figure 2, consists of three components: head (ways of knowing), hands (doing), and hearts (critical reflection and wisdom). The framework helps visualize how students use reflection (heart) to make meaning of their community-engaged learning experience by connecting their studies (head) with their community engagement (hands).

Figure 2

Welch & Plaxton-Moore (2019) Integrated Triadic Framework for Engaged Teaching and Learning

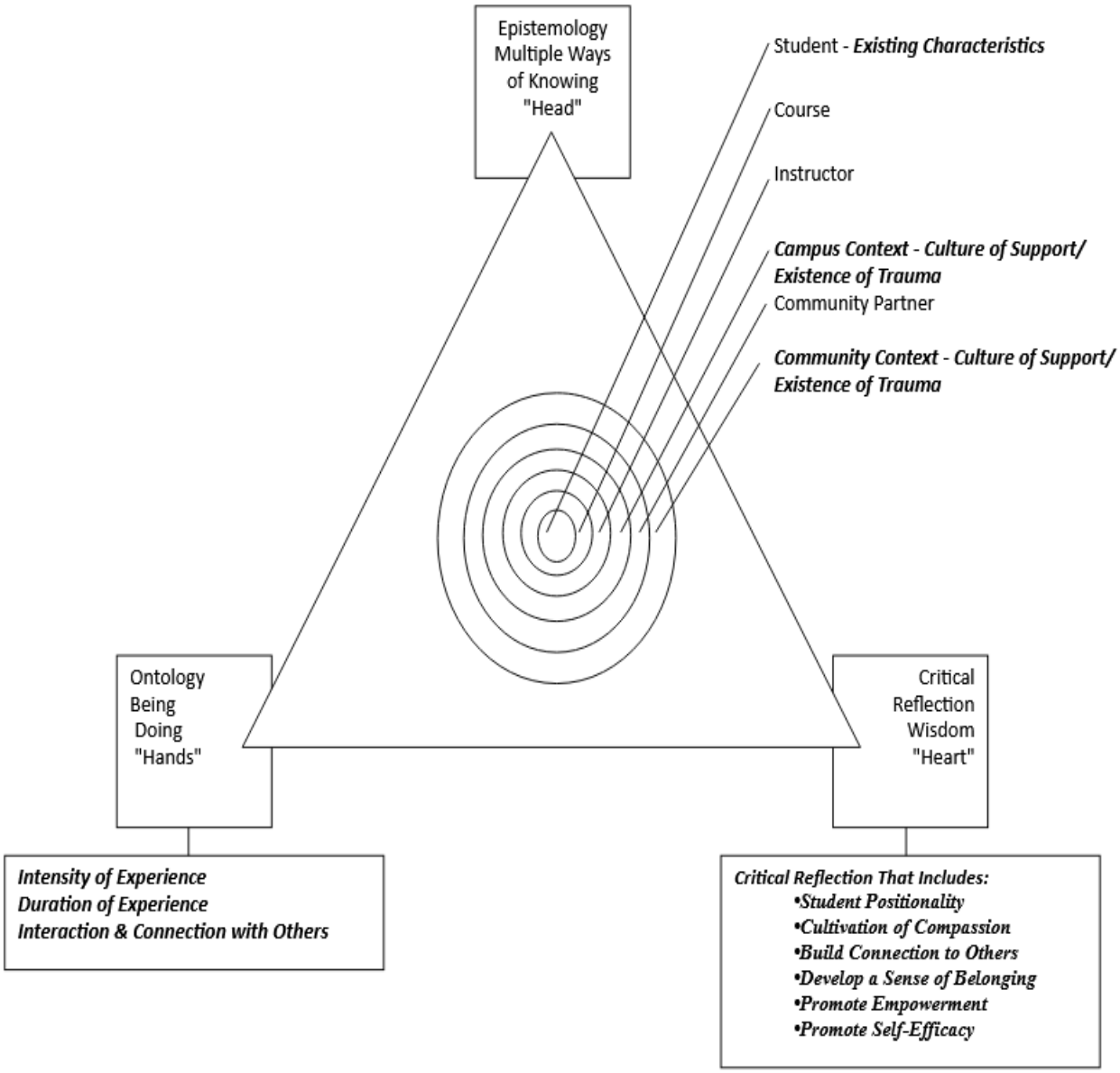


Welch and Plaxton-Moore's (2019) theoretical framework provides the base for my conceptual framework, shown in Figure 3. My conceptual framework situates the existing scholarship on community-engaged learning and student mental health and wellness within this existing theoretical base. This resulting conceptual framework provides an overall picture of how I understand the phenomenon of community-engaged learning and specifically its impact on

student mental health and wellness. Again, this understanding is based on existing literature and therefore it is expected the presented conceptual framework will be informed further by the findings of the current study, which will be explored in Chapter 6. Items noted in ***bold italics*** are those that I have mapped onto Welch and Plaxton-Moore's (2019) existing framework.

Figure 3

Conceptual Framework for Understanding Community-Engaged Learning and Student Mental Health and Wellness at HEIs



The scholarship surrounding community-engaged learning and student mental health and wellness begins to elucidate how student participants are impacted by their experiences, and how they make meaning of their learning and doing. There are multiple influences cited in the existing scholarship as having potential impact on participant mental health and wellness. First of those influences is the potential impact of existing student characteristics, such as an existing disability (Attree, 2011) or identification as part of a marginalized community (Kulick et al., 2017), on student mental health and wellness. This is indicated by the addition of ***Existing Characteristics*** to the student circle. Second, ***Campus Context - Culture of Support/ Existence of Trauma*** was added as a circle surrounding the student, course, and instructor. The addition of "Culture of Support" represents the findings of Mitchell et al. (2016) who noted that students who perceived that their campus was supportive of developing students' ethical and moral reasoning, as well as developing the skills necessary to successfully engage, were more likely to report positive mental health outcomes. In contrast, the addition of "Existence of Trauma" represents the findings of Kulick et al. (2017) who noted that students who are members of marginalized communities are more likely to experience their campus community in ways that feel oppressive and impact mental health and wellness negatively. Third, the existing scholarship also notes the potential impact of the broader community context, specifically the existence of community strengths and support as well as the existence of community trauma, on the student participants' mental health and wellness (Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Pinderhughes et al., 2015). Thus, ***Community Context - Culture of Support/ Existence of Trauma*** was added as an additional circle to show the potential impact on students' mental health and wellness.

Additionally, scholars agree that there are influences that are not accounted for using the

critical reflection, or "heart" lens of this framework. First, scholars agree that student participants need to develop an understanding of their ***position*** in relation to the community (Bronsteen, 2016), increase their feelings of ***connectedness*** and a ***sense of belonging*** (Flanagan & Bundick, 2011), and increase feelings of ***empowerment*** and ***self-efficacy*** (Attree, 2011; Swaner, 2007) through critical reflection. Scholars also agree that it is the presence of critical reflection activities that helps produce these effects (Conway et al., 2009; Bronsteen, 2016). Additionally, Bronsteen (2016) suggests that the process of critical reflection should be focused on the ***cultivation of compassion*** for others, or using Welch and Plaxton-Moore's (2019) terminology, focused on the development of the "heart". As such, these have been added to the existing framework below the "Heart" corner. This indicates the impact of the inclusion of critical reflection activities that are intentional about making these outcomes explicit on student mental health and wellness.

Finally, existing scholarship notes some important components to be added to the hands portion of the framework. Kulick et al. (2017) noted that the ***Intensity*** and ***Duration*** of the community-engaged learning experience had impacts on the mental health and wellness of the student participants. Very high or very low levels of engagement were more likely to result in higher rates of depression, whereas a moderate range of engagement was more likely to result in positive experiences of mental health and wellness. ***Interaction and Connection with Others*** was also added to the hands portion of the framework to represent the importance of intentionally fostering interaction and connection in community-engaged learning experience design in order to promote positive impacts on student mental health and wellness. This important connection was noted by Bronsteen (2016), Checkoway (2007), and Flanagan and Bundick (2011). In the next section, I will discuss methodology, including data collection and

analysis. This methodology will provide data that will further inform my conceptual framework.

Methodology

This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to illuminate the experiences of students who participate in community-engaged learning. By interviewing student participants, this study describes the phenomenon of community-engaged learning and student mental health and wellness, as well as examines how students make meaning of these experiences. The main objective of IPA is to elucidate experience and to understand how individuals make sense of their experience. IPA is a method that allows the researcher to gather rich descriptions and personal meanings of lived experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA is grounded in the basics of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology is a methodology, and some would argue an entire ontology (Groenewald, 2004; Kim, 2012), that supports the idea that multiple realities and ways of knowing exist and that those ways of knowing can only be interpreted through the reality of the researcher (van Manen, 2016). This qualitative method supports my worldview in that it seeks to understand larger phenomena through the examination of the individual case.

Phenomenology, founded by Husserl, and later developed by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Sartre, and van Manen, is a philosophical way of examining human experience (Husserl, 2012). A researcher using phenomenology as a lens seeks to understand the lived experience of the individual in order to describe the overall phenomenon they are studying (Groenewald, 2004; Randles, 2012; van Manen, 2016). Phenomenology aims to understand the essential components of experience in order to determine what makes a specific phenomena unique (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; van Manen, 2016). For example, in the context of this study, phenomenology helps to uncover how community-engaged learning

is unique from other types of learning experiences. This is done by gathering accounts of experience from multiple individuals to determine components that are essential to that phenomenon.

Further developing phenomenological understanding, Heidegger believed that there is no way for the researcher to separate themselves from the research as all researchers exist within the world (Dibley et al., 2020; Groenwald, 2004). He called this "Dasein", interpreted to mean 'being there'. To account for this inability to remove oneself, Heidegger presented the hermeneutic circle to describe how the researcher makes sense of phenomenological data. The researcher, when analyzing data, first starts with an understanding of the whole, usually through the use of a transcript. Then, there is an understanding of the parts as the researcher works to code and theme the data. As the researcher breaks down the information and synthesizes it, they then look again at the whole in order to develop a new understanding of the phenomenon. This process is circular, or spiral, in that it is constantly evolving and producing new understanding of the whole (Groenwald, 2004; Dibley et al., 2020). Ascribing to Heidegger's belief, researchers using IPA attempt to truly understand what it is like to be the study participant, and use their own understanding to help make sense of the participant's world. IPA then uses a double hermeneutic process to interpret participant data. First, the participant makes meaning of their world through their experience, and then the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant's meaning making, all through the lens of the researcher's existing understanding of their own world (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Shinebourne, 2011).

While IPA draws on the foundations of phenomenology, it is different in that it does not aim to transcend, or rise beyond, our everyday assumptions. IPA acknowledges that people exist in a broader context and world and are in relationship with others, and participants and

researchers cannot remove this existence from their experience of the world. IPA is consistent with traditional phenomenology in that it is interested in examining the lived experiences of the participants, but departs from traditional phenomenology in that it seeks to understand the meaning made by the participants about those experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Shinebourne, 2011). A researcher using IPA "...recognizes there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8).

Phenomenology has traditionally been used to examine social and psychological phenomena (Groenewald, 2004; Kim, 2012; Randles, 2012), and IPA specifically has become increasingly popular in European and American psychology in the last few decades (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Historically, phenomenology has considered the exploration of feelings as a distraction from the study of experience, however Eatough and Smith (2010) highlight the importance of emotion when examining motivation, learning, and identity development and establish that emotion is a legitimate focus for study in its own right. Eatough and Smith (2010) support IPA as an appropriate methodology in that it seeks to understand lived experience, while allowing space for the legitimization of emotions and feelings as part of those lived experiences. This supports the use of IPA in the discipline of education and in the current study with its focus on mental health and wellness.

Using IPA in the current study allows the researcher to examine the lived experiences of participants with a focus on mental health and wellness, but also to explore the meaning that is made by the participants about those experiences. In addition to being directly in line with my worldview, IPA as a method supports my belief that the lived experiences of student participants in community-engaged learning, as well as the interpretation of those experiences, are in fact data (Coe, 2017; Dibley et al., 2020; Eatough & Smith, 2010; Husserl, 2012; Larkin &

Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Shinebourne, 2011). These data can be collected and analyzed in order to gain an understanding of the larger phenomenon of community-engaged learning experiences at HEIs.

Data Collection Procedures

IPA is the lens through which data collection methods were selected. Researchers have used many different methods to gather data about the lived experience of participants, including ethnography (Kim, 2012), focus groups (Dibley et al., 2020), in-depth interviewing (Groenewald, 2004; Hunt, 2007; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Nazir, 2016; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), field visits, participant journals, gathering of relevant artifacts (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Nazir, 2016; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), and researcher journals and memoing (Groenewald, 2004; Kim, 2012; Nazir, 2016). These various data collection methods all work toward gaining insight to the lived experiences of the participants, and also offer ways to include the interpretations and thought processes of the researcher.

Before gathering data, IRB approval was obtained, and participants were recruited. Purposive sampling is a technique that is used in qualitative research to help identify individuals or groups who have knowledge about the topic being researched (Palinkas et al., 2015), or in the case of this study, students who have participated in community-engaged learning experiences as part of their academic coursework. Working with students who participated as part of an academic course as opposed to a co-curricular experience allowed for a higher likelihood that participants would represent a broader range of academic disciplines as well as a broader range of individual demographics.

The researcher identified seven different undergraduate academic courses at a large Midwest research one university, that included a community-engagement requirement. Courses

were identified via their course description in the course catalog, and were selected from a variety of disciplines and colleges. Only courses which included semester-long engagement as a required and fully integrated component of the undergraduate course were chosen, as opposed to courses which included one-time engagement events or extra credit community-engaged learning. This was to account for the finding of Conway et al. (2009) that intensity and duration of engagement acts as moderating factors in mental health and wellness outcomes, with longer periods of engagement generally being associated with larger effects. Courses were also selected so as to allow for representation of different types of community-engaged learning implementation styles (advocacy vs. direct-service vs. community building, etc.) as well as varied modes of engagement (online vs. in-person). Course lists and student contact information (email addresses) were requested from the campus Registrar's Office, and recruitment emails were sent to 134 undergraduate students (see Appendix A). Interested students submitted an online form via Qualtrics which included basic demographic and course information. The researcher then selected student participants to ensure representation from multiple courses and varied demographics. There were 17 interest surveys submitted, ten individuals were invited to interview, and seven confirmed and participated in the interview.

In line with the theoretical foundations of IPA, which seek to gain a full appreciation of each individual's experience, IPA samples tend to be small. IPA seeks to understand the individual case, rather than generate theory or generalize to entire populations (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In order to participate, students did not need to have a history of mental health or wellness difficulties or diagnoses, and they were not asked to disclose mental health or wellness diagnoses prior to, or during, participation. Rather, the current study took a broad approach and explored the impact that community-engaged learning had on

student participants' mental health and wellness regardless of their mental health and wellness starting point. The current study did not explore the impact of community-engaged learning on students with specific existing mental health and wellness diagnoses.

It should be noted that the researcher is employed at the institution where student participants were recruited. Participating students had the potential to feel that they could not be honest with the researcher, or that their participation could impact their standing as a student at the institution. As such, every effort was made to clearly articulate that this study was in no way related to the researcher's professional capacity at the institution, and was in no way linked to institutional goals or actions, or to the student's affiliation with the university. Also, student participants were asked to participate after their community-engaged course was complete; therefore their participation would have no impact on their course grade.

Participants completed an informed consent procedure (see Appendix B). The informed consent forms and information discussed reasonably foreseeable risks to participation as well as provided procedures for protecting against and/or minimizing these potential risks. As part of this study, participants were asked to talk about their community-engaged learning experiences and how those experiences related to their mental health and wellness. Participants were not asked to disclose personal or confidential information about their mental health and wellness status, including such information as diagnoses, symptomatology, or treatment. However, participants were asked if their mental health and wellness were impacted in positive or negative ways, and the discussion of this impact had the potential to result in feelings of anxiety and/or discomfort. In order to protect against and/or minimize these potential risks, the informed consent form included information about the nature of the current study, including the definitions of mental health and wellness used in this study. The informed consent also highlighted that

participants were not expected to disclose personal information about their mental health and wellness that they were not comfortable sharing, but rather that the current study seeks to understand the overall impact on mental health and wellness as a result of participation in community-engaged learning. Additionally, the informed consent stated that participation was voluntary and could be ended at any time and for any reason. Finally, the informed consent form included information regarding on-campus mental health and wellness support resources for any participant who felt distress as a result of participation. All of this information was reviewed again in-person at the beginning of each individual interview. The researcher was sure to check-in with each participant periodically throughout the interview to reiterate this information and to confirm that the student was willing to continue. No participants indicated any distress, or a wish to end, throughout the interview process.

Following informed consent procedures, participants were asked to complete an information form that was used to gather details about their community-engaged learning experience (course title, implementation strategies used, modality used, community partner, and other relevant details of their experience). This form also allowed the participant to choose their own pseudonym for the study and invited them to submit a course artifact. The researcher then worked with each participant to schedule a Zoom interview. All but one participant completed their interview in one sitting, all lasting approximately two-hours in length. The final participant completed two separate one-hour interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed for the telling of experience in rich detail (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Interviewing continued until saturation had occurred, or no new meaningful information was discovered. Saturation was seen as more important than the total number of participants or total number of interviews.

An interview guide was used to direct the discussion (see Appendix C). A pilot interview was conducted with one student prior to the above described data collection process in order to gather feedback on the interview protocol. Very slight modifications were made in regard to the order of questions asked. Information gathered during the pilot interview was not included in the final data analysis.

Participants were prompted to elaborate as needed to fully describe their experience. All interviews were recorded via Zoom, and recordings were used for transcription. Transcription was completed using Otter transcription services. Each transcript was reviewed and edited by the researcher for accuracy. Transcripts were also sent to participants for member checking. As part of the interview process, students were asked to submit an example of an assignment they completed as part of the community-engaged learning portion of their course. This could include reflection papers, journal entries, discussion board submissions, or some other related artifact. This artifact allowed the researcher to access participant thoughts and experiences as they occurred during the community-engaged learning experience, as opposed to the reflective comments obtained during interviews.

Finally, the researcher kept a reflection journal to track thoughts, emotional responses, and interpretations to the participant data. Phenomenology acknowledges that participant ways of knowing can only be interpreted and understood through the reality of the researcher (Husserl, 2012), a concept that Heidegger called “Dasein” (Dibley et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important that the reality of the researcher be recorded throughout the data collection process. The researcher also used this space to begin identifying participant statements that seemed to matter, or stand out, as well as the potential meanings of those statements (Larking & Thompson, 2011). These notes were then used to make the personal biases of the researcher explicit, to examine

them, and to elaborate the understandings of the researcher. Researcher journaling, in addition to member checking of transcripts, was used as a method to increase trustworthiness, or validity, of the data.

Data Analysis

Phenomenology warns against the idea of analysis of data, as it holds the potential to break the data apart into too small pieces so that the whole phenomenon under investigation is lost. Instead, phenomenology, and IPA specifically, seeks to understand the examined phenomenon as a whole (Dibley et al., 2020; Groenewald, 2004; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA directs the researcher to fully immerse themselves in the data in order to best understand the participant's experience and meaning making (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The analysis of phenomenological data is informed by the concept of the hermeneutic circle and should include a process of identifying essential features and relationships among the data. The researcher should spend time 'sitting' with the data in order to get a full understanding of what is being revealed. Through this sitting, relationships between the details and the larger themes and ideas start to become clear (Husserl, 2012). The idea of sitting with the data was a bit ambiguous, and did not provide much direction for the researcher. In order to make this process a bit more accessible, the researcher followed IPA analysis steps outlined by Larkin & Thompson (2012).

Upon completion of the recorded interviews, all interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Participants were asked to review their transcripts and provide feedback and/or requested changes. No changes were requested from participants. Transcription resulted in over 200 pages of data, not including the example course assignments that were submitted by each participant. First, again following the IPA analysis steps outlined by Larkin & Thompson (2012), the researcher conducted a line-by-line analysis of each transcript and course artifact and

began to identify the ideas, claims, and experiences of the individual participant. During this initial reading and coding, the researcher underlined, highlighted, and made notes in the margins regarding any piece of narrative that stood out. This was a free coding exercise that resulted in hundreds of notes, or initial codes. The researcher made notes separately, in their reflection journal, about potential themes and overarching ideas that seemed to be emerging as each transcript was reviewed.

Transcripts were then copied into an Excel workbook and separated into different tabs by participants. Individual participant transcripts were chunked and separated based on the initial free-coding process. The researcher notes from the first round of free coding were also copied into the spreadsheet next to the relevant transcript text. These chunks of transcripts and notes were then read again to identify experiences that seemed to matter to the participant as well as for the meaning or claims that the participants made about those experiences. At this point, the researcher began to think about the transcripts in relation to one another and began to look for similarities among accounts. This process is where Husserl's (2012) concept of 'sitting' with the data became more clear. The researcher spent time considering the details of each participant's experience while also beginning to recognize larger themes across the data.

Next, the researcher began to identify emergent patterns and themes across multiple participants. The researcher looked for similarities as well as divergence among participants. Third, the researcher began to incorporate their own thinking around the emerging themes informed by the researcher journal as well as the researcher's understanding of existing scholarship. The researcher noted their own thoughts regarding words, metaphors and imagery used by participants, and any sections of narrative that felt connected to the existing literature on community-engaged learning and student mental health and wellness as outlined in chapter 2, as

well as the conceptual framework outlined in chapter 3. These various components began to create the researcher's interpretation of the themes. Finally, the researcher developed ideas around the relationship between themes. This process was ongoing, iterative, and dynamic as data emerged from each participant interaction. At the conclusion, the researcher developed a narrative, which includes participant examples and quotations, that explain the identified themes and discuss the research process (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This narrative can be found in Chapter 5.

Advantages and Limitations of Chosen Methodology

For every methodology, there are advantages and limitations of choosing that particular approach. IPA is no different. IPA allows the opportunity for individual stories to be told; stories that can capture and reflect broader implications for social, and cultural understandings. The telling of these stories can be powerful for the teller, the researcher, and eventually the reader. However, these stories and lived experiences are incredibly individual and subjective. Additionally, it must be understood that the stories found in the research are being retold through the words and interpretations of the researcher. The reader then interprets the stories through yet another lens of their own experience. All of this is to say, the data collected through this method is subject to bias and can be difficult to generalize or use in broader decision-making. In addition to these limitations of phenomenology at large, purposive sampling can lead to similar limitations of the data including a decreased ability to generalize the findings (Coe, 2017; Husserl, 2012; Hycner, 1985; Nazir, 2016; Noy, 2008; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has shared their research paradigm and worldview, which were shaped by their academic discipline and professional experiences, both of which are very

much grounded in experiential learning. The researcher's experiences and resulting research paradigm and worldview have informed the conceptual framework, methodology, design, and analysis of this study. In the next chapter, the researcher will provide a description of participant selection as well as an introduction to the study participants. Additionally, research question 1 will be explored through a rich description of each participant's lived experience of community-engaged learning, specifically as relevant to their mental health and wellness.

CHAPTER 4: STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The purpose of the current study was to illuminate the lived experiences of undergraduate students who participate in academic community-engaged learning, specifically as those experiences relate to student mental health and wellness. The two research questions that drove this IPA study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of undergraduate student participants of academic community-engaged learning, specifically as they relate to their mental health and wellness?
2. How do undergraduate student participants of academic community-engaged learning make sense of the impact of these pedagogical experiences on their mental health and wellness?

The previous chapter outlined the research questions, researcher worldview, conceptual framework, IPA as methodology, and the data analysis process that was used for the current study. This chapter provides a description of participant selection as well as an introduction to the study participants. Additionally, research question 1 will be explored through a rich description of each participant's lived experience of community-engaged learning, specifically as relevant to their mental health and wellness. In the next chapter, these accounts will be analyzed and themed in an attempt to explore the second research question of this study.

Study Participants

As described in chapter 3, purposive sampling was used to select undergraduate student participants who had knowledge of the phenomenon under study, specifically, students who had participated in community engaged learning in an academic course (Palinkas et al., 2015). Seven undergraduate students from a large Midwest research university participated in the study. The

participants completed an academic course that included community-engaged learning experiences that were semester-long, required as part of the course, and fully integrated into the course. The student participants were selected from the interested pool to ensure representation from multiple courses and disciplines, as well as varied demographic backgrounds, in order to ensure that the phenomenon under study was considered from multiple perspectives or lived experiences. Seventeen students voiced interest in participating in the study, ten individuals were invited to interview, and seven students confirmed and participated in interviews.

The seven undergraduate student participants, who were asked to provide their own pseudonym, included Alexander, Emma, Jordan, Mark, Melody, Sonia, and Xile. Of the student participants, four were female-identified, two were male-identified, and one was trans-male identified. Four student participants described their racial identity as White/ Caucasian, two described their racial identity as Hispanic/ Latina, and one described their identity as Asian or Asian-American. I have changed or obscured some of the details of the participants' descriptions in an effort to make sure participants are not identifiable. See Table 1 for a full listing of participant information.

Table 1

Demographic and Descriptor Information of Participants

Participant	***Alexander***	***Emma***	***Jordan***	***Mark***	***Melody***	***Sonia***	***Xile***
Current Year in School (At time of interview)	Sophomore	Sophomore	Senior	Sophomore	Senior	Senior	Junior
Major	Political Science	Biology	Engineering	Engineering	English	Pre-Law	Social Work
Racial Identity	White/ Caucasian	Asian/ Asian-American	White/ Caucasian	White/ Caucasian	White/ Caucasian	Hispanic/ Latina	Hispanic/ Latina
Gender Identity	Male	Female	Transgender Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
CEL Course Subject Area	General Education	Undergraduate Studies - Multi disciplinary	Engineering	Social Science	English	Chicano/ Latino Studies	Arts & Humanities
Year in School when Enrolled in CEL Course	Sophomore	Freshman	Junior	Freshman	Junior	Senior	Junior
CEL Course Modality	In-Person	In-Person	Online/ Virtual	In-Person	In-Person	In-Person	In-Person
CEL Project - Individual or Group Experience	Individual	Individual	Group	Individual	Group	Group	Group

Research Question 1: Description of Participant Experience

What are the lived experiences of student participants of academic community-engaged learning, specifically as they relate to their mental health and wellness?

The following section provides a rich description of each participants' lived experience of community-engaged learning. Details relevant to their mental health and wellness, as well as stories and anecdotes that stood out to the participants, are included. I have selected to include

details that are most relevant to research question 1. I have also changed or obscured some of the details of the participants' descriptions and/or experiences in an effort to make sure participants are not identifiable. These changes do not impact the essence of their community-engaged learning lived experience.

Alexander

Alexander is a White, male-identified, sophomore majoring in political science. He participated in community-engaged learning as part of a general education course during his sophomore year. This course was not a required part of his course of study. Instead, he enrolled because he knew that community-engaged learning was a component of the course. Alexander stated that he had participated in service organizations in high school and was looking for a way to continue in college. Alexander participated in the course and the community engagement in person. Alexander served weekly in the playroom of a local nonprofit organization that supports families who are experiencing homelessness. His main responsibilities included engaging children in play and helping with homework.

Alexander was expected to serve with his community organization for between 20 and 25 hours throughout the semester. He was able to schedule his engagement to fit smoothly into his existing class and work schedule, and the location of his community partner organization was within biking distance, which helped him to feel less stressed about the experience. During his time in the playroom, Alexander would engage with children ranging in age from toddlerhood to young teens, and needed to adapt his support accordingly. He described many hours of playing Legos with young children and time supporting the older students with their homework. At the beginning of his engagement experience, Alexander felt nervous and hesitant on how to best interact with the children. He was unsure of the community organization's procedures and

expectations, and he ended up calling on his past employment experience working with groups of younger children to help him through some of the challenging moments. Over time, he began to build a rapport with the children who would show up regularly to the playroom, and this helped Alexander to feel more at ease.

Alexander described some stressful interactions that he had with the children during his engagement. He shared a story about a young toddler who escaped the playroom because she was very upset to be left by her mother. Alexander had to chase after the child through the building. Alexander worked with another volunteer to persuade the toddler to return to the playroom. He felt like he didn't know what he was doing in the moment or the best way to handle the situation. He also described another experience in which a pair of siblings would often fight with one another during their visits, and he had to work hard to keep them occupied and separate from one another. Alexander felt these experiences stood out because they were stressful and pushed him outside of his comfort zone. "I'm the guy who likes to plan everything out. I'm the one who needs to know what's happening or like, have a way to control what's going on… And I can't really predict what the kid's going to do." Even though some of these interactions felt stressful, Alexander did feel good knowing that he was contributing to the organization. He also felt that the parents he interacted with appreciated the service that was being provided. He valued the opportunity to engage directly with community members as opposed to doing more "behind the scenes" service such as stocking a food pantry.

In addition to his interactions with the community members, Alexander talked about how his in-class experiences impacted him. Specifically, he appreciated the in-class discussions that pushed him to think critically about his understanding of systemic inequalities and helped him to directly apply his engagement experiences with the children to these conversations. In fact, he

stated that these in-class discussions really helped him solidify his decision about what major he would like to pursue. He also credits these open and supportive in-class discussions with providing space for him to develop meaningful relationships with some of his classmates. He feels that he was able to establish very important friendships as a result of this class.

Overall, Alexander described his community-engaged learning experience as being nerve-wracking, emotionally-taxing, and challenging. He felt pushed outside of his comfort zone often, would question his abilities after interacting with the children, and would often feel helpless - both while he was engaging in the community and during discussions in the classroom when he would consider the larger systemic issues that were impacting the community members and their families. However, Alexander still believes that his experience was good for him. He gave credit to his family for teaching him to have perspective, and to think through what was in his control today. He also appreciated the in-class reflections that encouraged him to think longer term about his ability to impact these issues he was engaging with, and to think differently about his own positionality and sphere of influence. Additionally, Alexander felt hope while reflecting on his experience in the company of his classmates because he knows that there are other young people like himself whose goals are to have similar social impact for good, both while they are students and as future professionals.

Emma

Emma is an Asian-American, female-identified, sophomore majoring in biology. Emma plans to continue on to medical school after completion of her undergraduate degree. She participated in community-engaged learning as part of an undergraduate studies/ multidisciplinary course during her freshman year. This course was not a required part of her course of study, but she had a friend who participated in a past semester and they recommended

she take the class. Emma participated in the course and the community-engaged learning portion in-person. Emma served at a nonprofit organization that provides holistic support for women. Emma served weekly in the clothing closet program, where she supported community members in finding clothing to wear for job interviews.

Emma described her community-engagement as being an exciting and positive experience. She felt very welcomed by her community organization, both the organization staff and the community members, and felt supported by her course faculty. This experience was her first time leaving the university campus for any meaningful amount of time or purpose. She felt nervous about navigating the logistics of getting to her organization every week, fitting her engagement into her existing schedule, and meeting the expectations of her community partner. On her first day of engagement, she had a difficult time finding the community partner site and felt nervous about the safety of the surrounding neighborhood. During her orientation at the community partner site, her supervisor shared stories about the community members she would be working with and potential issues she may be encountering, such as domestic violence. Emma recounted this conversation as feeling intense, and it prompted her to think about the seriousness of her involvement and the responsibility she felt to the community members she would be engaging with. She felt the need to demonstrate respect for the community members and she wanted to do everything she could to support them.

After her initial visit to the community organization, Emma began to feel less apprehensive about her time there. She described the organization as “really beautiful”, and she felt embraced by the organization staff as well as the community members they served. She felt inspired by the community members’ stories about their experiences and the strength they exhibited in the face of so many challenges. She recounted a time when a community member

came into the organization and shared that after ten years they had finally received a restraining order against their abusive partner. Rather than this being a negative or overwhelming experience, Emma instead felt encouraged with how the community organization turned the interaction into an impromptu celebration, pulling out whatever food was in the refrigerator and taking time to hold space for the individual and their experience. Throughout her interview, Emma voiced gratitude for these moments and shared that she felt inspired and empowered by them.

Another piece of Emma's experience that was important to her, was the development of relationships with her classmates. Emma had a classmate that served at the same location so they were able to travel and serve together. Emma described riding the bus home with this classmate and how they would use that time to process their experience together. By the end of the semester, Emma described this individual, in addition to a few other classmates, as becoming her closest friends. She stated, "...I don't even know where I'd be if I hadn't done [this class]. Honestly, because literally my closest, like my entire friend group is from there…I'm so so thankful for it." Emma describes these students as her biggest supporters, and she did not expect that outcome from participating in this course.

In addition to her community partner and classmates, Emma also described the impact of her in-class experiences. Specifically, Emma recalled the in-class discussions that addressed topics such as social identity, power, and privilege. Emma, as an "ethnic-minority from an immigrant family", felt connected to and represented in the content of the class discussions. She felt she had a place to share her story in a way that was relevant and valued. She felt that her classmates could relate to her experiences and that she learned from their unique experiences and stories as well. There were moments when classmates would share personal stories and Emma

felt empathy and heavy emotions in response to those stories. However, she also felt grateful for the opportunity to share this community-engaged learning experience with her classmates. Emma felt that her overall emotional health and wellness improved as a result of this experience, that her social wellness was improved through the building of strong friendships, and that it solidified her career choice in a way that gave her a positive boost in terms of professional wellness.

Jordan

Jordan is a White, transgender male-identified, senior majoring in engineering. He participated in community-engaged learning as part of an engineering course during his junior year. Jordan knew that community-engaged learning was a component of the course when he decided to enroll but did not realize the scope of the community engagement project. Jordan participated virtually in the course and the community engagement. Jordan was the only study participant who had a virtual course experience. For his community engagement, Jordan and a small group of his classmates completed a project in partnership with a non-profit organization. Jordan and his small group worked with the community organization to develop an experiential learning curriculum that could be accessed and used by similar non-profit organizations across the state. This involved a series of virtual meetings with the community partner representative, but most of his time was spent on project development with his group.

Jordan spent the first portion of the semester learning about community engagement principles and practices in class, forming his small group, and getting to know the other members of his team. Jordan was happy about their pairing with the community partner because it was with an organization and in a field where he hoped to work in the future. The community-engaged project did not start until midway through the semester, and this resulted in Jordan feeling overwhelmed by the scope and timeline of the project. He was concerned that there

would not be enough time to complete it. He felt intimidated. Jordan's small group had a hard time coming up with a direction for their project, and he felt early on that there would be difficulty making this happen. Jordan felt incredibly stressed by the project, felt they had very little time with the community partner, and felt unsupported by his teammates.

This sense of overwhelm led Jordan to meet with his faculty member. He stayed after class and ended up crying because he was so stressed out. He felt very supported by his faculty and felt much better after their conversation. He said he "knew that [they] had my back" and that they understood that he was putting in his best effort. It felt important to Jordan that his faculty knew that. However, he did not feel that his group dynamics improved at all, even with the support of his faculty. He felt a lot of weight to carry his group and he felt a lot of responsibility to show up as professional and well-prepared with their community partner, even when other members of his group were sometimes not even showing up for those meetings. During this time, Jordan described himself as feeling "pretty amped up," "angry, frustrated, and disappointed" and "definitely overwhelmed," but also stated that he was excited about the project they were working on and felt that it was "really cool."

Jordan felt that most of his discomfort came from stress about how others were perceiving him or fearing that he was not meeting others' expectations. Specifically, he did not want his faculty member or his community partner to look down on him. He didn't want to appear needy or pushy to his group members. He had a hard time trying to navigate these relationships, knowing how to define his role, and showing up as a leader. He specifically remembers a time when the community partner complimented him in front of his group, and how it helped him to feel good about the work he was doing but also self-conscious in front of his classmates.

In order to manage their stress, Jordan turned to coping strategies that worked for him in other areas of his life, including talking about his experiences with his partner and with his family. Jordan would spend time journaling, and even wrote positive thoughts on sticky notes and put them up around his room. Jordan also called on his faculty member for support, and reports that he always felt better after talking with them. He felt safe, connected, and supported by them. When the semester was over, and the final project was turned in, Jordan felt a sense of relief but struggled with feelings of closure. He doesn't feel like he was able to debrief his group experience with his classmates or have any sort of final moment with the community partner. He felt physically and emotionally depleted. However, with some space and time to look back on his experience, he stated that he does feel "quite proud of what we accomplished and what I personally accomplished." He said now he was "basking in like, I made it. I made it through. And I learned a lot from it." He was proud of himself for not walking away and not giving up.

Mark

Mark is a White, male-identified, sophomore majoring in engineering. He participated in community-engaged learning as part of a social science course during his freshman year. This course was not a required part of his course of study. Instead, he enrolled because he knew that community-engaged learning was a component of the course, and he was excited to learn more about the community surrounding his campus. Mark participated in the course and the community-engagement in person. Mark served weekly at a local preschool, supporting the classroom teacher in classroom management and student instruction. Of all the participants in this study, Mark felt the least emotional about his experience. Mark shared many details about his time at the preschool but had a hard time describing how he felt about his time there, or how his emotions were impacted throughout.

Mark chose his community partner, and his community engagement position, because he felt like early childhood was an important time in a person's life and there was an opportunity to have a meaningful impact. Mark ended up working with the 4 and 5-year-olds at the preschool and really enjoyed interacting with them. He felt responsibility to keep the children safe and to make sure they were playing nice with one another. Mark had never worked with young children before, so he felt nervous to get started. Once he started interacting with the students, he began to feel more comfortable, and saw them as "less scary" and "more cute".

Mark described an evolution in his relationship with the staff at the preschool. He felt that the teachers were a bit skeptical of him at first, wondering why he was volunteering there if he was not an education major and did not have plans to work in education in the future. He felt that they gave him tasks in the classroom, but that he was not really part of the group. Over time, he discussed feeling as though he had proven himself through his interactions with the children, by taking initiative in the class, and by showing that he could be trusted. He knew he was doing a good job when one day he was tasked with helping a cranky 4-year-old. He helped her feel better and improve her mood by working on reading with her. He recalled feeling very excited, and effective, when he realized she was understanding the words on the flashcards. Another time, a student who was not even in his class came running up to him while yelling his name and gave him a big hug. One of the teachers who was nearby complimented him on developing relationships with the students.

Mark had some stand-out moments in his campus classroom as well. He recalled a group discussion, wherein he and his classmates talked about how their presence in the community may be impacting community members either positively or negatively. His classmates began sharing very personal stories about their experiences growing up in their schools and communities, and

some of the difficulties they had gone through. He felt connected to his classmates during that conversation and felt like he had a “kind of aha moment” wherein he was able to connect his personal experiences to his classmates' experiences as well as to his time at the preschool.

The end of the semester was difficult for Mark because he had developed an attachment to the children at the preschool and to his classmates. He felt sad about leaving. When discussing his overall experience, Mark described feeling a bit stressed because he felt pressure to do well with the children and to keep them safe. He also felt that this responsibility was a positive experience, because it forced him to be present, to work hard, and to really engage with the community members he was serving with. He gained a new perspective about what his time and effort means, and why it is important for him to continue his education so that he can continue to make a bigger impact in his community.

Melody

Melody is a White, female-identified, senior majoring in english. She participated in community-engaged learning as part of an english course during her junior year. This course was not a required part of her course of study. Melody participated in the course and the community engagement in person; however, the first three weeks of the semester were online due to a rise in campus and community COVID numbers. Melody served weekly in a local community center where she met with community members to review and provide feedback on whatever projects they needed assistance on. This could include items such as homework assignments, writing, and professional materials such as resumes and job applications. Melody’s classmates all served at the same location at the same time. Melody and her class also worked as a whole group with their community partner to plan and implement an end-of-semester celebratory event open to the community.

Melody described this course as one of her favorite classes. There were a small number of students in the class, and she said it helped the experience feel intimate and helped her classmates develop a level of respect and care for one another. She really enjoyed "connecting and sharing ideas with people in a safe environment." In terms of those shared ideas, the course spent time covering topics like critical race theory, power inequities, and what it means to be engaged in ethical ways. These were ideas that Melody had not discussed in a course before and she felt interested and invested in the course conversations. She often thought to herself, "I can't believe I get to study this."

Melody was excited to engage with the community, so she was happy when the visits to the community center began. Some weeks there was a lot to do, and many community members to work with. She recalled feeling inspired by the community members who came to her for help, particularly one teenager who asked for feedback on a novel she was writing. Melody was impressed with not only the writing itself, but the fact that the teen was doing this project on her own. Melody enjoyed these busy weeks and interactions, but some weeks it felt there wasn't much happening. During those down times she would talk with her classmates. She was able to develop some very meaningful relationships with her peers, and she felt supported and safe with her classmates. She felt like this opportunity to connect with her peers, particularly after COVID quarantine, was very important to her. This connection helped her to feel a sense of "calming and peaceful, like a weight off my chest."

In addition to the weekly engagement, Melody and her class planned an end-of-semester celebratory event that was open to the broader community. This was a more stressful experience for her as it required a lot of logistical planning and a public presentation. Melody felt nervous about her contributions to the experience, and felt some concern that she wouldn't live up to the

level of performance being set by her classmates. Once her portion of the event was complete however, she was able to enjoy the experience. She thought it was "beautiful" to see the community and her classmates come together. The connection that she felt to the community center and its members helped Melody to feel more connected to her campus as well. She talked about how proud she was of the course and the engagement project she was participating in, and how that pride also became associated with her identity as a student on her campus as well. This was very powerful for Melody because she often doubted whether she had chosen the right campus, and had often felt like she might not belong there. This experience helped her to feel like she had made the right choice, empowered her to look for other campus involvement opportunities, and overall helped her to feel validated, comforted, and welcomed.

Sonia

Sonia is a Hispanic/ Latina, female-identified, senior majoring in pre-law. She participated in community engaged learning as part of a Chicano/ Latino studies course during her senior year. This course was an elective course as part of her minor program. Sonia chose this course because she wanted to educate herself about the culture and the realities of the latino community. She did not know that community-engaged learning was a requirement of the course when she registered. Sonia participated in the course and the community-engaged learning portion in person; however, the first three weeks of the semester were online due to a rise in campus and community COVID cases. Due to disruptions related to COVID, the community engagement portion of this course transitioned over the course of the semester, starting with a project focused on community building with local youth and ending with a storytelling project with local community leaders. Sonia's semester already felt pretty stressful as she was taking 18 credits and had to get special permission to sign up for this class. This was the last class she

needed to complete her minor before graduating, so she felt it was worth the extra enrollment hours. She described her community engagement experience as “an interesting ride” due to the complications, changes, and messiness of the semester.

Sonia felt a lot of confidence in, and respect for, her course faculty and trusted her to guide their class through the semester changes. She appreciated the group-building experiences that were facilitated in class, and really credits those activities with providing a space that allowed trust to grow between group members. It helped her to feel less stressed because she knew she wasn’t “taking on the community engagement alone.” This trust and community-building helped set this group experience apart from other class experiences she had in that she felt connected to her classmates and felt a sense of responsibility to them. She felt like they were accountable to one another and that their bond ended up developing beyond the assignments of the course. Her group bond, and her exploration of class content, felt like it was on a deeper level. She felt this was the first time she had this level of community outside of her family. This meant a lot to her and helped her to take a new perspective on what community meant. She stated:

> I was able to further define it, and really learn about what community meant, and then learning that it just can go beyond what I grew up with...It meant a lot because I found, I guess, a family in this community…

In addition to her bond with her classmates, Sonia credits the community partner her group engaged with as being essential to her experience. He was a Latino male community leader, who facilitated deep discussion with her group from the first time they met him. She recalled the very first conversation with him, wherein he talked about gender roles, ethnicity, and community expectations that are wrapped up in those identities. Sonia described herself and her

group members as being “flabbergasted” and “speechless” by his directness. But she also said it felt “organic and authentic”, and this level of unfiltered discussion helped to “mark them as a group” and allowed them to move beyond surface conversation. There was a feeling of respect within the group. This bond created a space where Sonia felt comfortable pushing herself to share more than she usually would, and to trust her group members. This felt important to Sonia because it was outside of her normal experience, and outside of how she normally shows up in a class. Sonia described the end of her semester, and saying goodbye to her community partner, as being full of nerves but also gratitude. She wrote her community partner a letter to thank him for everything he had done for her and what he meant to her. She was nervous to be this vulnerable, but was so grateful for the relationship they had built.

Perhaps Sonia’s most impactful emotional-experience related to this course was the way it allowed her to reflect on, and gain perspective on, her experiences with her family. Sonia is a first-generation college student and stated that while her parents have always been very supportive of her emotionally, they have not been able to help or support her in other ways. She has always known that she was on her own, and has learned to depend only on herself as a result. She also felt a sense of responsibility to support her parents emotionally and to find ways to provide back to them. She maintained daily contact with her parents while she was in school, checking on them, and offering them insights and anecdotes about her life as a student. She was often fearful of losing her connection to her family. This class, and her community engagement experience, provided the space for Sonia to explore her family’s story, and to begin thinking critically about the familial and cultural expectations of her as a first-generation student. She was so moved by her course experience that in her next semester she used the storytelling skills she had learned to interview her parents and tell their immigration story for a class assignment. She

felt this course and her community engagement experience helped her to feel “refreshed” and “liberated.”

Xile

Xile is a Hispanic/ Latina, female-identified, junior majoring in social work. She participated in community-engaged learning as part of an arts and humanities course during her junior year. This course was an elective course as part of her minor program. As a first-generation college student and child of immigrant parents, Xile chose this minor as a way to learn more about her community and her experience as a latina. She chose this course specifically because she had heard good things about the faculty member, including how supportive she was, and Xile wanted to take a course with a minority, female-identified faculty. Xile was interested in taking a course with a faculty who shared these components of her identity. She did not know that community-engaged learning was a requirement of the course when she registered.

Xile participated in the course and the community-engaged learning portion in-person; however, the first three weeks of the semester were online due to a rise in campus and community COVID cases. Due to disruptions related to COVID, the community engagement portion of this course transitioned over the course of the semester. After spending the first few weeks of the semester online, the class attempted to start working with local youth on building community and storytelling. COVID continued to disrupt plans however, resulting in multiple location changes, and ultimately a lack of youth participants. The class changed course and ended up creating small groups that were matched up with local community leaders and the students were eventually able to work on their storytelling project.

Xile had never taken a community-engaged course prior to this experience, but said she ended up really enjoying it. She appreciated the small size of the class, and the fact that the class members, the faculty, and the content of the course reflected her identity and background. Xile was excited about the original community engagement plan as she had a lot of work experience with elementary-aged kids, and really enjoyed it. She felt nervous about the logistics of the experience as she wasn't sure how she was going to get to the community partner site, and she didn't know anyone in the class yet so she didn't feel comfortable reaching out to anyone to travel together. She felt worried to engage with the youth at first because she felt a lot of pressure to make sure she was helping them to feel comfortable and to make sure they would have fun. As the semester continued, and the class decided that the youth engagement project was not going to be feasible due to COVID, Xile felt disappointed that they had to change plans.

The next iteration of the community engagement involved matching small groups with community leaders to interact and work on storytelling projects. Xile's community leader did not show up for their first meeting, so she and her group members had to join other groups. She felt nervous and uncomfortable because she had not done any group bonding or had any meaningful interaction with these new group members prior. However, she felt like this lack of relationship actually provided her with a feeling of anonymity, and she ended up sharing a lot about her personal experience and story. She felt hesitant at first but then decided, "why not?". She called back on earlier class sessions wherein her faculty had talked about the importance of sharing your story and the potential impacts of that process. She realized that her story was important and unique and decided that it might help others if she shared it.

The process of sharing her story was very emotional for Xile. Xile is a first-generation college student and the daughter of immigrant parents. Even though her father is physically

present, she describes her mother as a single-parent, noting her father's struggles with alcoholism and his lack of emotional or financial contributions to the family. Xile's relationship with her mother is complicated. Xile often feels emotionally responsible for her mother, helping with childcare for her younger sibling and often serving as interpreter as her mother does not speak English. Xile used her class space, and the interactions with her community partner, to share stories about her experience that she had not talked about in a classroom setting before. She recalls feeling physically shaky while sharing and felt like she was re-experiencing the emotions from the stories in real-time. She said it felt really good to get those experiences out, and she felt safe and validated when her classmates and community partner would share similar stories. However, she also felt some guilt, and was concerned that she was exposing her mother in a way that she wouldn't appreciate.

Xile felt vulnerable during her storytelling experiences but believes that this process allowed her to think about her life experiences in a different way. The more she talked about what she has been through, the more comfortable she became - not only in the telling of the story, but also with the fact that those experiences are a part of her story. She began to feel less shame about who she is and where she comes from and began to feel a sense of confidence and control over her narrative. Xile stated that "through me sharing, I've also processed a lot of those emotions." Xile felt proud of herself for fully embracing the course and the community engagement experience. She was happy that she was able to explain her experiences and felt excited about finding other ways to continue to work on improving her mental health as it relates to her history. She states, "I think this class has really helped me navigate through that, and I might get a step closer to where I want to be mentally. And I think it was really powerful."

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has shared the community-engaged learning experiences, particularly those experiences that related to participant mental health and wellness, of seven undergraduate students. This chapter also provided a description of participant selection as well as an introduction to the study participants. Research question 1 was explored through a rich description of each participant's lived experience of community-engaged learning, specifically as relevant to their mental health and wellness. In the next chapter, the researcher will present the data collected through semi-structured interviews with the seven participants, the data analysis process, and the results of that process. Research question 2 will be explored through a description of themes and subthemes and relevant narrative passages and rich descriptions pulled from the participant data will be used to demonstrate the themes and subthemes.

CHAPTER 5: STUDENT MEANING MAKING

The purpose of the current study was to illuminate the lived experiences of undergraduate students who participated in academic community-engaged learning, specifically as those experiences relate to mental health and wellness. The two research questions that guided this IPA study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of undergraduate student participants of academic community-engaged learning, specifically as they relate to their mental health and wellness?
2. How do undergraduate student participants of academic community-engaged learning make sense of the impact of these pedagogical experiences on their mental health and wellness?

The previous chapter provided an in-depth description of the participant selection process and continued with the detailed telling of each participants' story as relevant to research question 1. This chapter presents the data collected through semi-structured interviews with the seven participants, the thematic analysis process, and the results of that process. Research question 2 will be explored through a description of themes identified through the data analysis process. Relevant narrative passages and rich descriptions pulled from the participant data will be used to demonstrate the themes and subthemes.

Thematic Analysis

As described in chapter 3, all interviews were transcribed, reviewed, coded, and themed. The researcher followed IPA analysis steps as outlined by Larkin & Thompson (2012). While free coding resulted in hundreds of free codes, the researcher began to identify and define sub

codes in the data. This theming process was iterative, wherein the researcher looked for themes within and among the participants.

Categories began to stand out in the data, including the impact of classmates, instructors, and community partners on student mental health and wellness, the importance of exploration of self-identity, sense of belonging, and empowerment, as well as the impact of the physical location and logistics of the experience. These first categories were considered in relation to the existing scholarship as well as the researcher's conceptual framework as identified in chapter 3. The researcher began thinking through how these potential categories were (or were not) representative of each participant's experiences. The researcher also began thinking through how these potential categories were (or were not) represented in the researcher's conceptual framework and struggled with how to incorporate physical location and logistics into the coding. Additionally, these initial codes did not necessarily include the nuances found in the data surrounding vulnerability, connection, compassion, and care which seemed to flow throughout each category. As such, the final fifteen subcodes, which the researcher further synthesized and collapsed into a set of nine sub themes, moved away from the potential categories that were shaped around relationships and logistics, and instead surfaced the nuances of vulnerability, connection, compassion, and care as the starting point for consideration.

Finally, after considerable time and reflection, three main themes were identified - informed by the researcher's conceptual framework - that provided a meaningful way to talk about the experiences of all the participants. The three major themes include 1) Identity (Head), 2) Belonging (Heart), and 3) Agency (Hands). Relationships among and between sub themes and themes became visible, and the final structure provides for the most holistic representation of the

phenomenon of academic community-engaged learning, specifically as it relates to participant mental health and wellness. Table 2 provides a visual representation of this analysis process.

Table 2

Code Mapping: Three Iterations of Analysis

Code Mapping for Undergraduate Academic Community-Engaged Learning Experiences: Mental Health and Wellness of Student Participants								
Themes								
1. Identity (Head)			2. Belonging (Heart)			3. Agency (Hands)		
Sub Themes								
1A. Restorative Conversations Around Identity			2A. Creating Space to Be Vulnerable			3A. Developing Voice		
1B. Reflection on Personal Experience and Identity-Based Trauma			2B. Developing and Modeling Empathy and Compassion			3B. Sense of Purpose/ Impact		
1C. Validation of Self			2C. Connection & Sense of Belonging			3C. Pride & Gratitude		
Sub Codes								
1A. Conversations connecting identity to power & privilege			2A. Building trust			3A. Practice in problem solving/ Taking ownership		
1B. Felt seen, supported by community (i.e. Faculty, Peers, Community Partner)			2A. Practicing vulnerability			3A. Opportunities to make choices that fit personal needs		
1B/C. Validation of self through shared identity and/or experience			2B. Connection to others around shared experience			3B. Intentional action and involvement		
1C. Exploration of Self in Relation to Others			2B/C. Connection of CEL experience to broader student experience			3B. Perspective and understanding of capacity		
			2C. Recognition of others' experience			3C. Gratitude for experience		
						3C. Felt proud of involvement		
Free-Coding								
Free-Coding Data	Free-Coding Data	Free-Coding Data	Free-Coding Data	Free-Coding Data	Free-Coding Data	Free-Coding Data	Free-Coding Data	Free-Coding Data

Research Question 2: Thematic Description

How do student participants of academic community-engaged learning make sense of the impact of these pedagogical experiences on their mental health and wellness?

The following section provides a detailed description of the three major themes identified in the data analysis process: 1) Identity (Head), 2) Belonging (Heart), and 3) Agency (Hands). Relationships among and between sub themes and themes will be explored, and quotes and rich descriptions directly from the participants will be shared. These themes, and the supporting participant experiences, seek to answer research question 2, or how the participants of community-engaged learning made meaning of their experiences. These themes make clear the process by which participants made meaning of their mental health and wellness experiences, and elucidate what participants understood as meaningful and important to their process.

Identity (Head)

The first theme, Identity (Head), was composed of three sub themes including 1a) restorative conversations around identity, 1b) reflection on personal experience and identity-based trauma, and 1c) validation of self. All participants discussed ways that their community-engaged learning experiences, both while in the classroom and in the community, allowed space for the exploration of personal identity. They also all described the importance and impact of these explorations on them personally. Some examples that participants described included in-class readings and reflection activities that encouraged intentional thought about topics related to social identity such as gender and race. Some students even commented that this was the first time they had explored these ideas in a college course. Melody, a senior majoring in English who served weekly in a local community center, stated:

> We did a lot of critical race theory [in class], which was really enlightening. And we had a lot of great conversations about that. We talked a lot about power dynamics and power structures. It was actually the first time that in any kind of education, higher education and secondary, that I had talked about the power dynamics that exist between teachers and students or tutors and students or peers or whatever. And, like, we never addressed that never.

When discussing her course and the included reflection activities focused on the exploration of identity, Xile, a junior majoring in social work who engaged weekly with a local Hispanic community leader, stated:

> So knowing like my background, I never really read material that I could relate to personally. So having that class and being around people who, I guess speak the same language as me and, I guess, look the same as me almost. It was just a very important class.

These opportunities to read scholarship focused on identity, to participate in critical reflections and discussions around identity, to see their identities represented in their faculty and community partners, and to gain perspective on their own identity-related experiences were very powerful and emotional for the study participants.

Restorative Conversations Around Identity. Participants described the course reflection activities as intentional and guided components that encouraged the students to engage in restorative conversations around identity. The reflections on identity were restorative in that students were not left to process their community-engaged learning opportunities on their own, but rather instructors and community partners facilitated critical reflection that encouraged the students to make meaning of their experiences as they related to identity. Sonia, a senior

majoring in pre-law, shared an example involving her community partner and group members, where they grappled together with ideas around gender and ethnicity as part of their time together. Sonia's small group consisted of herself and two of her female classmates, one of which was Hispanic and one of which was Caucasian. Sonia's community partner was also Hispanic, but he identified as male. During their discussions together, they all worked to make sure their non-Hispanic group member was included in the conversation and could relate to what was being discussed. They also discussed topics of gender from their differing experiences as male and female-identified. They worked to find ways that they could all connect across identity groups:

> At the end of the day, she [classmate] didn't have a personal connection to this like Hispanicness. And so we really worked as a group, even like [our community partner] did. He really found a way to find this cross cultural aspect that goes beyond the culture. And then… us realizing that like, sexism is cross-cultural, and it goes beyond the Hispanic community. Even though it's so defining for example, for the Mexican community, it really goes beyond culture. And so we, we really started talking about him as a man and then us as women.

These group discussions were really a meaning-making process which invited students to use their community-engaged learning experiences to begin thinking in disruptive ways around their own identity, and the identities of others. This meaning-making process around identity ended up being an emotional experience for the students. Xile discussed how emotional it was for her to reflect on, and think differently about, these aspects of her identity:

I know that this really did bring out like a lot of emotion to things that I've been through. I've never seen it be categorized in a specific way. But it has, has really helped me figure out myself and who and how I am.

The students' emotional health and wellness experience, as it relates to reflection on identity, seemed to follow the ups and downs of the learning cycle as described in Kiely's (2005) Transformational Service-Learning Process Model. Kiely's (2005) model, recognizes that students' experiences are shaped by their unique personal and historical experiences, and highlights that a full learning cycle is completed when students move through the phases of dissonance, personalizing, processing, and connecting. The participants of this study felt emotional discomfort during the dissonance and personalizing phases in which their preconceived notions of their world were challenged, as they began to acknowledge that challenge, and as they began to ask questions about how this was related to their lives. The participants then came to feel a sense of closure and positive emotions during the processing and connecting phases of the learning cycle in which they began to seek new ways to understand their context and to make sense of their understanding of identity. These conversations around identity seemed to be most restorative when students could complete the phases of this learning cycle, process their emotions, and ultimately gain new knowledge or perspective as it relates to their identity and identity-related experiences.

Reflection On Personal Experience And Identity-Based Trauma. Even though these critical reflections around identity were facilitated and guided, the participants still shared how emotional it was to discuss and share their stories. Most participants shared very personal stories and experiences about their families-of-origin during their community-engaged learning course. The telling of these stories resulted in a sense of reliving the original emotion of the experience.

Xile shared an experience where she spoke with her classmates and community partner about her life as a child of immigrants:

> I was really like, I felt really emotional. Wow, like, I guess those emotions that I felt initially, it felt like I was in that moment again. I was reliving it as I was telling it. I remember the way I was feeling. So it's like a replay of the emotion. And it just felt like I was there again. So I was feeling the, I guess, the painful part of it and the excitement part of it. So it's just like a mix. I can hear my voice cracking when I share sometimes, but I've gotten better at sharing it and more comfortable with that.

These emotional explorations of personal identity allowed students to develop a better understanding of self. Specifically, most participants discussed the impact of their critical reflection activities on their understanding of their identity. Jordan, a senior majoring in engineering who is transgender-male identified, discussed his experience of reflecting on identity as part of his community-engaged learning course, and his resulting thoughts around gender roles in relation to his group work with classmates:

> It did highly inform my experience, with like gender roles, in terms of my being a trans person. And how that shapes my interaction with my teammates who were two women and one man. And how that, in general, informs my understanding of leadership. And how I speak to people and like, I think that it's just important to know that, I felt very aware of how I've been socialized for years as a woman, and finally, feeling free to not embody those expectations. But how that has brought up a whole host of different questions and concerns I guess, in terms of how I continue to be perceived more of the masculine presence, and how does that affect how I need to be.

Jordan was able to explore these new emerging portions of his identity in relation to his classmates, resulting in new questions around and understandings of his identity. As Jordan interacted with his classmates, through the group work required of his community-engaged project, he gained a clearer understanding of who he was (and was not) in relation to those around him.

Additionally, it seems it was nearly impossible to remove the emotional experience from the course reflection on identity, even when it was not specifically required by the course work to focus on identity and/or emotions. Sonia shared her emotional processing and reflection on identity that occurred organically during her course:

> But at the end of the day, I think when it came to understanding, making sense of myself, like obviously the reflections, were making sense of like, group discussions, and there was a lot of self-reflection in there too. But I think when it came specifically to my emotions, just because there were usually no prompts of like, emotions in there, but for me, it was definitely a lot of like, self-work, really working on myself and just making sense of those emotions.

Xile, Jordan, and Sonia's examples highlight that they were unable to remove the emotional experience from their reflections around identity. Even when questions around emotions were not specifically asked, they still found themselves returning to, and re-experiencing, deep and sometimes painful emotions.

This emotional experience can be seen as corresponding to the personalizing phase of Kiely's (2005) Transformational Service-Learning Process Model, in which the learner begins to make connections between the course material and their own experiences. The participants of this study began to ask questions, such as "what does this mean for me and how does it impact

the way I understand myself?". The faculty of the community-engaged learning courses facilitated this reflection process in a variety of ways, including in-class discussions, reflection papers, and discussion board entries. For example, Sonia's faculty invited the students to write their community partner a thank you message at the end of the semester, and encouraged the students to think about how their interactions with that partner had impacted them personally, essentially inviting the students to reflect on their experience and the impact it had on their understanding of self. Sonia said the following about that letter-writing experience:

> Getting to know myself and like this new version of myself, like college has been really evolutionary for me just because I've come out of a lot of complexes that I've had growing up. And so I think it [this letter-writing experience] was another way of me getting to understand myself, and for so long, it was really hard to understand myself. So I think this has been very self-reflective in the sense that I've been able to really understand how I'm evolving and how to make sense of what I'm feeling.

The participants' experiences also highlight the importance of being thoughtful when facilitating reflection in community-engaged learning experiences because of the potential of activating students' existing trauma. Students need to be protected from further retraumatization, and reflections on identity need to be structured and supported in such a way as to be restorative.

Validation Of Self. Providing space for restorative conversations around identity wherein students reflected on personal experience and identity-based trauma, as well as processed the emotions that came along with those reflections, resulted in participants gaining a sense of validation of self. In sharing their stories with classmates and community partners, student participants came to realize that they were not alone in their experience. Emma, a

sophomore majoring in biology who served weekly at a women's nonprofit organization, discussed her moment of validation:

> Again, just feeling really thankful for the resources that I did have growing up but also being able to identify that I have gone through some of the topics that we discussed in the class, like that we talked about. We did touch a little bit on gender disparities. We talked a lot about like ethnic households, that those things really pertain to me and I just had never really discussed it in detail before. So I'm just, like, identifying that my feelings were valid. Like okay, I'm not the only one experiencing these things. Like it's not all in my head.

In fact, not only were students realizing that they were not alone in their experiences, but they were also able to extend those understandings to make connections with peers around ideas that were meaningful to them. This connection with their peers also contributed to feelings of validation. Melody described an experience where she chose to share with a classmate and felt validated in the exchange:

> I mean, it was like a pretty personal moment, but me and one of my classmates kind of connected on something. It was like that shared similarity and oh, you know, like, I can share things about myself. And it's cool to do that. There are people that understand. It was just like a great sharing being vulnerable. Just kind of wanting to talk to other people who were in the same boat as me and hearing that validated my feelings. Like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing.

This process of sharing pieces of their identity with one another, and receiving positive feedback, helped to develop new ways of thinking about themselves. Xile discussed the importance of having opportunities to feel validated in her identity and mental health experiences:

> So I guess it felt easier to share my story knowing that like, oh, I don't know, it just felt a lot easier. So we talked about what it was like to be at a PWI [primary white institution]. Since all of us were also first gen and like struggled with mental health as well. We were talking about the fears that we had coming here such as like our parents not having citizenship. So like having all that pressure as well as providing for them. So it's just like a lot of things that I was like, wow, like I never knew someone else felt this way.

Sonia also shared an experience where she processed an existing trauma with her classmates, and she came to realize that she can share and be seen in the process:

> I think that's something too that I was scared of like people not caring. And I know, they always tell you like don't care what other people say, but I'm definitely guilty of it. Just because for a long time I, I mean, I was bullied growing up and so for me it was something that where for so long people didn't care. And so the fact that I, I started realizing that there's a lot of people, that just because a lot didn't care doesn't mean that others won't. And so it's stuff like that where I realized that I can tell my story. I'll be heard and people will actually care about them.

Sonia participated in a restorative conversation around identity with her classmates where she reflected on her personal trauma and felt validated in the space. Sonia felt heard and accepted by her peers in the classroom, which was in opposition to the bullying she had experienced while she was growing up. Her peers in her community-engaged learning class did not bully her, and instead listened to her stories and provided positive feedback, resulting in feelings of validation and acceptance for Sonia. This validation of self resulted in the creation of new knowledge,

wherein Sonia developed new ideas around how people can and will show up for her and that not all people are bad or dangerous.

The participants' experiences highlight that reflection on identity, and knowledge development around identity, are essential parts of the mental health and wellness experience of community-engaged learning. As part of their community-engaged learning experience, the student participants engaged in active learning opportunities outside of their classrooms which introduced them to new people, new interactions, and new environments. The students then returned to their classroom spaces to process and reflect on those experiences, and during those reflection sessions, spent time focusing on identity. The reflection experiences (in-class discussions, papers, discussion boards, etc.) intentionally focused on student and community partner identity, and asked students to explore their pre-existing understandings of who they are, and what that means for their interactions in community. Reflection activities guided students to question who they are, and who they are in relation to others. The participants' experiences further highlight that this exploration of identity is inherently emotional, even when guided and facilitated. The processing of emotions that come along with community-engaged learning is crucial to helping students move through a full learning cycle, ultimately resulting in a transformative emotional experience. It is important that these reflection experiences be restorative, give space to explore personal identity-based trauma, and provide opportunities for validation, so that participants are more likely to feel safe enough to continue exploring new ways of thinking and knowing.

Belonging (Heart)

The second theme, Belonging (Heart), was composed of three sub themes including 2a) creating space to be vulnerable, 2b) developing and modeling empathy and compassion, and 2c)

connection and sense of belonging. Every participant discussed the importance and impact of the relationships they were able to build (or not build) during their community-engaged learning experience. Participants discussed building relationships with faculty, community partners, and classmates, but the building of relationships with classmates was the primary relationship discussed. Most participants had very positive experiences with classmates, with the exception of Jordan. This peer relationship development was important to each participant in that it helped them create a feeling of connection and a real sense of belonging in their community. Alexander, a sophomore majoring in political science who served weekly in the playroom of a local family shelter, shared how these relationships helped him to feel a sense of belonging, "Yeah, I think, connections [with classmates] and the community feeling made me feel more like I belonged. And then I think it gave me confidence to join other student organizations as well." Emma also described how the development of peer relationships was a very important experience for her sense of belonging:

> I don't even know where I'd be if I hadn't done [this class] honestly, because all, literally my closest, like my entire friend group is from there. Like that's where I met [my best friend], including four or five other people. All due to that. So I'm so, so thankful for it.

Soria et al. (2012) defined sense of belonging as a student's sense of connection and affiliation with their community. Participants' connection to their peers resulted in a sense of belonging that helped them feel important to others in their community and to feel valued in that space.

Creating Space To Be Vulnerable. Much like the participants' exploration of identity, their relationship development was also facilitated through intentional decisions by their faculty and community partners. The participants spoke specifically about how important it was for the classroom space to support vulnerability and trust among classmates. This safe space was created

by acknowledging and supporting individuals in their unique identities and experiences, encouraging conversations around power and social identity, and respecting students holistically as real people. Jordan discussed sharing his trans-male identity in a reflection assignment and the importance of their faculty providing a safe space for them to do so:

> I felt nothing but support from everyone. I never felt any sense of like, I don't feel safe as a trans person, or I don't feel safe like her [faculty member] knowing that I'm a trans person. Like none of that at all. Yeah, just felt totally supported. I think that the only thing is just like I think that stronger connections are formed through shared vulnerability and like openness. And so even my saying, like from my covering that or her reading about it, like that is a vulnerable piece of me and that, that she responded to really openly. And I think that in general that makes her really, that like, opens up the ability to have a stronger connection.

Jordan's efforts in being vulnerable were rewarded by his faculty, he felt more connected to his faculty, and he felt valued in that classroom space. This ultimately resulted in Jordan feeling more likely to continue to connect throughout the semester.

Melody also discussed her thoughts regarding the safe classroom space created by her faculty member and how it helped her to feel understood and valued. Specifically, Melody highlighted the importance of her faculty recognizing her and her classmates as holistic humans with needs and multiple expectations to fulfill outside of their community-engaged learning class:

> Well, she overall as a person is great, she's lovely. I think I really admire her as a leader and a person, the way that she walks into the room. Like, whoa, she is cool. I just really respect her as a person but I think the way that she goes about her class is very, let's break

it down, the power dynamics and power structures. Maybe that's just her. She's just great. But, yeah. Just be empathetic to the fact that, you know, we're all full time students, that she's just being really, really understanding [of] due dates, turning in. But she provided that space to have some flexibility, to feel understood. She had empathy for where you were and what was happening.

Creating a space to be vulnerable, heard, supported, and connected pushed the student participants to engage with the course in ways that were outside of their comfort zone. Acknowledging and supporting students' unique identities and experiences, encouraging conversations around power, privilege, and social identity, and respecting students holistically, created spaces where students felt safe to practice vulnerability in new ways. Sonia discussed her experience being vulnerable with her classmates and what it took for her to be comfortable doing so:

> For me, it's just always been very hard to be vulnerable outside of my family. And so the fact that I could just speak my mind really and not having to filter myself and be like, oh, that's too much for me to say like, I don't feel comfortable saying that. Yeah, I just, I felt unfiltered for what's like, I'm not going to be fake in the first place like I'm very much myself, but I guess I was able to fully be myself. And them getting to see beyond what I present to people because at the end of the day I think we all have a front and so for me, it's very much defined. And I think that lends to other experiences that I have. But the fact that I was able to put down my front and show people beyond what I usually do, for me is what makes them stand out. Just because it's, it's not something that I get to do habitually, like, it didn't feel normal to me. And so the fact that I was able to do that was refreshing and enlightening at the end of the day.

Creating space to be vulnerable, both in the classroom with their peers as well as in the community with community members, was a key piece of each participants' experience. Simply by being in a new physical space while engaging with the community, students were able to practice vulnerability in that they were meeting and interacting with new people, learning new skills, and engaging in new cultures. Students were then able to bring that vulnerability back to the classroom wherein they shared with their classmates and their faculty about their experiences in community, and how those community interactions were helping the students to make meaning about themselves and to expand and challenge their broader understandings of the world. These safe spaces acknowledged unique identities, facilitated discussion on power and social identity, and recognized students as whole people. Student participants felt compelled to practice vulnerability in these spaces and pushed themselves to engage in ways that were outside of their normal student experience.

Developing And Modeling Empathy And Compassion. One result of these safe classroom spaces was that students felt moved to be vulnerable with their classmates. They trusted, and felt trusted by, their classmates and ultimately shared more as a result. Much like the participants' experiences with restorative conversations around identity and the impact this had on their validation of self, the opportunity to practice empathy and receive compassion from their peers resulted in feelings of belonging and validation as a member of their community. In hearing others' stories, and gaining a new understanding of the other, participants came to see these separate individuals as members of a larger community. Mark, a sophomore majoring in engineering who served weekly at a local preschool, shared an in-class moment when he realized the importance of what was happening amongst his classmates and the impact of the class as a safe space:

> One of the things that felt very impactful to me is that people, whether they're from different communities, different cultures, some identities that they held, whether that was like their sexuality and stuff like that, was never accepted. And they, this was one of their first times being in a group that would accept the identity of them. And I think that was very impactful. To me to see and see the emotions and the backstory of them as people. It was such a common occurrence.

This in-class vulnerability and sharing provided ample opportunity for participants to see empathy modeled for them, and to practice empathy and compassion themselves. However, it did not only exist in the classroom, but with community partners as well. Emma discussed a moment where she was able to practice empathy with, and see compassion modeled by, her community partner:

> Again, just like talking to [the community partner] and then how they're able to, they told us right off the bat they're like, there are going to be heavy experiences. People come in with really, really heavy stories. And you might not be comfortable with hearing all of it all the time. But the way that [the community partner is] able to take something positive from every experience and convert it into either a way to help or get a way to be celebrated, I feel like that definitely helped a lot in terms of processing all of it and being able to, you know, actually take it all in and be able to move on with it. And do whatever I can as a part of the community-engaged learning or as part of the volunteering, so yeah, just taking the time to take something positive from every experience that we hear about.

Emma continued, specifically commenting about how this impacted her emotionally:

> First, I was like genuinely just shocked because again, I just didn't expect to hear

> that. Oh, these are the people that I'd be able to like talk to, interact with and like get a perspective from and if I'm able to have a different lens, I'll be able to help them. And that did turn into a positive emotion like, oh, I'm here and I can, I can learn about this. I can do this. So just another way for me to be involved at the same time.

Witnessing peer and community member experiences and vulnerability, and practicing empathy and compassion for those experiences, was just as powerful for participants as the sharing of their own story. Much like their personal identity exploration and reflection on personal trauma resulted in validation of self, participants' gained a similar emotional impact from the witnessing of other's vulnerability, empathy, and compassion, resulting in a validation of community identity. It was through this vulnerable sharing and practice of empathy and compassion, and the reciprocation of that compassion, that participants felt connected to the community.

Connection And Sense Of Belonging. During their community-engaged learning experience, student participants felt a sense of connection to one another, to the classroom community, to the campus at large, and even in some cases to a larger professional community as well. This sense of belonging developed because of the safe classroom environment in which vulnerability and the practice of empathy and compassion were encouraged. As a result, participants felt validated by their peers and faculty. Emma discussed how she developed relationships with her classmates and how important they have been to her sense of belonging:

> And I really think that they've formed a huge support system for me and just being able to go to them and even or just like, sit there and study with them or just kind of just having them there to talk to was such an amazing part. And then like, honestly becoming some of my biggest supporters like these people, it's so crazy to think like, a year ago, I was

finishing senior year in high school. I had no idea who these people were, and now it's like, I'm calling them every day. It's crazy.

For Emma, this sense of community extended beyond the community-engaged classroom as well. She discussed how other students from her campus, who were not enrolled in her course, were serving as interns at her community partner organization. She was able to develop relationships with these individuals as well, and they helped her to feel a sense of community:

> I remember some of the interns, they were like juniors and seniors at [my university]. I was talking to them. They really welcomed me in the talk. They talked to me as if they'd known me their entire life. And it was so funny because they just right off the bat started talking to me about their boyfriend problems. But in addition to the work they were doing, but it was, it was really great. Like they just kind of like okay, yeah, you're here. You're part of our community now.

Participants also described how this sense of community extended beyond their peer relationships, specifically referencing the impact on their professional networks. Sonia appreciated the ability to develop a network, both personal and professional, during her course, ultimately resulting in a stronger sense of belonging:

> And so it's nice knowing that I have that network just because again, being first generation like I'm over here trying to build it and so it is really nice to know that I can look back and say I have these two professionals that I know and then like these friends now that I have.

Perhaps one of the most powerful impacts on sense of belonging was discussed by Melody. Melody shared details about how she was having a very hard time being a student on this campus and had even considered transferring out. Melody was concerned that her campus

did not represent her values and beliefs in a way she could be proud of. She did not feel like part of the community, and she felt challenged and stressed by this dissonance between who she believed herself to be and how others perceived her based on her student-status at this university. Melody gave credit to her community-engaged learning experience for helping her decide to stay, and shifting her understanding of belonging:

> I had a lot of sadness, and you know, who am I? What do I want? What am I doing? Why am I here? I really just didn't feel great about my education, like continuing. I really wanted to drop out. We all have, everyone's had that moment. And, you know, coming out of that, and being in this class, where I felt like, you know, I don't know what I'm doing, but I feel like I'm supposed to be here. And that's comforting. I don't know, it just allowed me to have more respect for knowing that this kind of program is at an institution that has a bad rap for certain, so I mean, my hesitation to even go to [this campus] was very large. I did not want to go because of the reputation it had, it's the way that I feel but I mean, personally, it was just the best choice for me. So I kind of carried that with me throughout and kind of like, oh, I shouldn't be proud of where I go to school. And then you know, things would keep happening. This is kind of like what we represent, but, is this who I represent? And like it just was so unhappy. I kind of wanted to transfer… But I mean, I think that because [this campus] has such a bad history of things [concerning how some students have been treated in the past], so many things have happened, I think it's really important to invest in things like the writing, community engagement activities, things like that, because of the harm that the institution has caused.

Melody was able to identify and align with positive aspects of her campus community as a result of her community engagement experience. She felt so much dissonance between who she

believed herself to be and who she believed her campus to be, and this experience helped to resolve some of those feelings. She still recognized the negative aspects of her campus, but felt comfort in knowing that there were aspects she could be proud of and be active in.

There was only one participant who discussed having a hard time connecting with their classmates and struggling with whether they belonged in their group. Jordan's class and community-engaged learning experience was online, and this may have led to some of their difficulty connecting with their peers. As discussed in chapter 4 of this study, Jordan had a positive experience, and felt supported by and safe with, his faculty. However, Jordan did not feel validated or supported by his peers, and often felt that he was left alone to carry the responsibilities of the group. Jordan found this to be a stressful experience.

> It was coming from my teammates. It got to the point where I was like, this feels just inconsiderate. Because at the end of the day, regardless of how you, whether or not you care about the project, you're not. I don't expect you to go above and beyond. If you don't care about it, like I may be because I do, I like the concept. I don't expect that. But at least fulfill what you have said you would do. I was pretty frustrated with my team throughout the course of it. I remember there was one morning where one of my teammates just didn't show up to her meeting with our partner, just didn't show up.

Jordan felt angry, hurt, and frustrated by his teammates and had to find ways to process his feelings:

> So I did a lot of journaling. And I think that that was really helpful. Really. I think that my outlets for all of the emotions that I felt were like, chatting with my partner, and journaling. And there was a lot of that because I felt that I walked away from meetings, either explicitly or like blatantly frustrated and angry. Or I remember this, like not the

exact moment, but there was a moment where I was like, I'm so tired of being angry, like, I can't be angry anymore. There's just nothing left. I can't even really be frustrated.

Jordan's experience stands out because he is the only participant to discuss difficulty with his classmates, but also because it highlights the importance of developing those safe and validating relationships with classmates and peers in academic community-engaged learning experiences. Without this connection to peers, Jordan did not see the benefits of validation of self, did not see empathy or compassion modeled for him by his classmates, and ultimately did not develop a sense of belonging. In fact, he had to actively seek validation, empathy, and compassion from other sources including his faculty and his existing relationships with his partner and family.

The participants' experiences highlight that developing a sense of belonging is an essential part of the mental health and wellness experience of community-engaged learning and also supports the existing scholarship that highlights this connection between community-engaged learning and sense of belonging (Kuh, 2008; Ribera et al., 2017; Soria et al., 2003). Participants' connection to one another, to their classroom community, to the campus at large, as well as the broader community was facilitated by the practice of vulnerability, empathy, and compassion. These activities were not only supported in their classrooms and communities, but were intentionally facilitated in the course design. Participants were impacted greatly by the experience of being validated and cared about as well as having the opportunity to validate and care for others. Their community-engaged learning experiences improved participants' connection to community, sense of belonging, and ultimately had a direct impact on their mental health and wellness.

Agency (Hands)

The third and final theme, Agency (Hands), was composed of three sub themes including 3a) developing voice, 3b) sense of purpose/ impact, and 3c) pride and gratitude. In addition to the first two themes, identity (head) and belonging (heart), all participants discussed how the community-engaged learning experience impacted their feelings of agency. Attree et al. (2010) defined student agency as "the feeling that they are being useful to others, feeling in control of events, being able to express ideas and having an awareness of individual rights" (p.252). Developing a sense of agency can be difficult because the process of community-engaged learning can be logistics-heavy and often feels messy, which can be stressful for student participants and can result in them feeling a lack of control over their experience. Alexander talked about one of these 'messy' moments in which he had to make a choice about his schedule, and felt he didn't have much control over his options:

> I'm pretty sure I skipped one of my classes because the [community partner] orientation times are all in the morning. I was like, okay, which one can I pick where I won't miss too much. It was a little stressful because the class I ended up missing was, it's like, I would equate it to recitation. So I might have missed out on a little bit of participation points. But it was a tough decision to make I guess. But I knew I had to get the orientation.

Mark also experienced this feeling of lack of control over his experience due to logistical details. He voiced concern about his transportation to his community partner site:

> And to get there I took the bus because I don't have any transportation. I don't have a car on campus. So I would take the bus there, which I was very nervous about being off campus and I did not have experience with that.

Alexander and Mark's examples, which were echoed in similar ways by the other participants, show what the lived experience, or day-to-day, looks like for students participating in community-engaged learning. Again, students can be left feeling stressed, uninformed, and frustrated by trying to make the course requirements fit in their already-scheduled lives. It was important for their mental health and wellness to find ways to develop a sense of agency in their process.

Developing Voice. Even though these situations felt stressful, the participants were able to understand how these logistics, and 'messy' moments, allowed them to practice making decisions, taking ownership, and ultimately developing their voice. Emma talked about how this process of taking ownership impacted her confidence over the course of the semester:

> I'm just, in general like the difference between now and when I first started, just being able to walk in and know exactly what I'm doing. Say hi to all the people as if I'd been there my entire life and just getting to work on whatever they need. Just going about it like it's a normal part of my day. Just makes me realize that yeah, I've come a long way from when I first started to now because like, I just feel like I'm more part of this community.

The participants described their community-engaged learning experiences as presenting multiple opportunities to make small decisions in the moment. These may not feel like important moments when they are happening, but Emma's example describes how these add up over time, ultimately resulting in the students developing a feeling of confidence.

Sonia's sense of confidence also developed over the course of the semester as she was able to practice telling her story and engaging with difference. Sonia discussed an improved

sense of voice as a result of participating in her community-engaged learning course, and how emotionally freeing that was for her:

> [This course] made me more confident. I think I just became more vocal and like almost careless. In the sense that for so long I cared about what people thought and I was scared about upsetting people and like, having push back but there were a lot of people that pushed back like almost trying to deviate from the points that I wanted to point out. I stood my front and I really do have to thank [this class] for that because, again, building a community through this idea of storytelling, really makes my entire life now a story, like I'm just telling my stories for like, free for all. And so yeah, like it's just been very liberating for me. Which for so long, I was always so enclosed, so that I can, it just felt really free which was different from like my entire past.

Her classroom became a safe space to practice standing her ground, and ultimately resulted in her feeling ownership over her own story. Sonia felt in control of events, and she was able to express ideas as she desired.

Even Jordan, who had a difficult time with his classmates, talked about how the challenges of his situation resulted in his feeling more confident in his ability to handle difficulties in the future:

> I think that it was in many ways, it was very affirming, of my ability to navigate this more complicated interaction. So like I feel it's an experience that I will look back on and be like this or, or as I, as I continue to move forward and I have difficult situations arise, it’s like, okay, remember how it was handled here and how it turned out, and how three weeks later I've already moved on.

Jordan's experience exemplifies how he was able to practice problem solving in a safe environment, and ultimately worked toward the development of his own voice. All participants voiced feeling positive about this journey of developing their voice, ultimately bolstering their emotional and mental health.

Sense Of Purpose/ Impact. While all participants shared a sense of developed voice that they felt positive about, they also talked through how they struggled at times to understand their purpose, or their ability to exert this developed voice to make a broader impact. In addition to feeling control over a situation, agency also includes the feeling that one is being useful to others (Attree et al., 2011). This process of finding a sense of purpose, or understanding impact, was sometimes frustrating and disheartening for the students, particularly if the student was unable to gain perspective about their abilities or sphere of influence. Alexander shared a moment in which he struggled with understanding his impact:

> But then if I think in the bigger scheme about like, why they're [community member] in [a homeless shelter] right? Like the circumstances they're in. If I think about their time, outside of the playroom or outside of school. So, if you think about the circumstances as a whole plus like they're in there probably because they lost housing previously, which is not a good thing when you're, especially when you're a kid you need the structure in the home. … And then that'd be my take away. The positive emotions are immediately following the moment when I'm having fun with the kids and the kids are enjoying themselves. But when I zoom out to look at the grand scheme of things, it's more negative because it does feel like making an impact, yes, but there's so much more that needs to be done.

Mark also talked through how he attempted to make sense of his potential to make an impact:

> I think it goes back to the idea of the impact that I can have with my effort and my time within a community. I think that has changed my idea of thinking about what my time and effort means and what me continuing my education can mean for being able to make a bigger impact to our community.

This struggle to understand impact seemed to be influenced by the life phase that the students were in. As students, they didn't feel their sphere of influence was large enough to make a difference. They also were concerned that they didn't have enough information to fully understand the scope of the situation. This led to some of the participants looking to the future instead, which felt more hopeful. Specifically, many talked about how this struggle to understand their impact during their community-engaged learning experience affected their thoughts about their future career path. Emma, who engaged in a women's center for the semester, talked about the moment she felt a sense of purpose and clarity regarding her future professional goals as a result of her community engagement experience:

> It just kind of all clicked for me like, yeah, I knew I kind of wanted to go into medicine already. But specifically, I do want to advocate for gender health equity, like that's something that I'm really big on. I'm getting some opportunities for the fall semester that have to do with gender health and that type of equity and I just feel like it just, it's just good to know where I'm heading and what I'm doing.

Mark, who served with a local preschool, also talked about a renewed sense of purpose and clarity in his career path as a result of his experience:

> I think a big thing was, to relate it to my occupation, is that [the community-engaged learning experience] does not seem to connect at all. Right? But the idea of getting, especially kids in inequitable and worse situations, to get excited about things like

> science and education, I think is a very important thing to me. And that's something that I hope to do in my occupational career. I think that was maybe an idea before this, but a much more meaningful thing and thing that I want to do moving forward because of this experience.

The participants all seemed to be challenged by the idea of what it means to make an impact, how they can come to terms with the limited impact they may be able to make during their course experience, and even whether or not they should be trying to make an impact in the first place. Jordan talked about this challenge:

> I had to be really intentional about finding those little moments of like, Oh, that's great. Or working on not being so wrapped up in the difficulty of it. That I wasn't, I was very frequently returning to like, [thoughts about] this is why I'm doing this.

Melody echoed Jordan's thoughts:

> It was like, I don't know. It just really put everything into perspective for me about how little of a deal things were. It was more than just a class, it was like a spiritual, like psychological experience.

The participants used these moments as an opportunity to think about the future and to identify ways they could continue their engagement, and or incorporate their experience into their overall purpose. This ability to have a realistic perspective about their impact seemed to alleviate some of the emotional distress that they were feeling. Ultimately this struggle to understand their impact resulted in the feeling that they are in fact being useful to others, even if in just small ways.

Pride And Gratitude. It is evident that participants felt they grew from their experience in many ways, and that they gained perspective about their world as a result of their community-

engaged learning experience. It is also clear that participants felt a variety of emotions, from joy and validation, to connection and belonging, to anger and frustration, but all participants came to express pride and gratitude for their experience. Alexander talked about how he was grateful to have this opportunity as part of his course work:

> Um, I think the biggest one would be like being grateful that I have the opportunity to do this kind of experience because, I mean, a lot of students aren't volunteering as part of their classwork. Yeah, I guess I'm very grateful that I had the opportunity to do [the community engagement] and then the class as well, because, as we've talked about, it has impacted me in all these other ways, and has had a lasting impact on me as well. So yeah, yeah. Gratitude, I suppose.

Emma discussed her gratitude and the resulting excitement for the rest of her college experience:

> I'm really glad that I did it and I feel like it kind of set me up for the next few steps that I want to take throughout my undergraduate years and it, I mean, of course I'm going to keep volunteering there. I'm glad that I did it. I feel like it was a really good way to start college and definitely, I got involved right off the bat, which was great… But also it's just helped me form a lot of friendships as well, and overall I'm really thankful for the experience.

Even Jordan, who expressed the most difficulty in his course, voiced his pride and gratitude for the experience and for his faculty:

> And this moment, I'm basking in like, I made it. I made it through it. And I learned a lot from it. I would not do it again. I'm glad that I did it, just joy and pride that we made it through and that at the end of the day, we did help, like our group did help. And like deep, deep, continued gratitude for [my faculty].

Sonia talked through the emotional journey of saying goodbye to her community partner, but also the sense of gratitude for the experience:

> I am very sensitive, like a very emotional person, so I really don't like goodbyes. And so I always say this isn't goodbye, it's see you later. Like these are what I always say. So I was really sad on our last meeting just because we really did get really close to [our community partner] and I really got close to the other girls [classmates]. And so for me, it was like an emotional experience. Like I really tried to keep it together and I managed. So I'm pretty proud of myself. But um, yeah, it was sad but at the same time it was like a happy moment.

The participants' experiences highlight that agency is an essential part of the mental health and wellness experience of community-engaged learning. Agency exists when students feel useful, in control, and can express their ideas (Attree et al., 2010). Participants took full advantage of the safe space in their classrooms and with their community partners to practice taking control over their environment and telling their stories, which resulted in the development of their voice. Participants also struggled with what it means to have impact, whether their impact was even needed, and ultimately worked to understand their sense of purpose. This process was frustrating at times, hopeful in others, but in all instances, participants voiced a sense of pride and gratitude for their experience and the opportunity to develop their agency.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has shared the community-engaged learning experiences of seven undergraduate students, particularly those experiences that related to participant mental health and wellness. The data were organized into themes and sub themes, and included direct quotes from participants to help elucidate the essence of the themes. Overall, participants

discussed having very positive and meaningful experiences that allowed for the investigation and exploration of personal identity, the development of meaningful social relationships and their sense of belonging as a student at large, as well as the advancement of their own sense of voice and agency. In the next chapter, the researcher will reflect on lessons learned from the data and how these lessons are informed by the existing scholarship in this area. This discussion will include implications for future practice and future research.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was to illuminate the experiences of undergraduate students who participated in academic community-engaged learning, specifically as those experiences related to student mental health and wellness. Understanding the nuances of the lived experiences of community-engaged learning participants will help higher education institutions (HEIs) to better understand their role in supporting these students, ultimately maximizing potential positive impacts and mitigating potential negative impacts on student mental health and wellness. These insights are needed in order to create trauma-informed, healing-centered, and resilience-focused community-engaged learning practices, which are important not just for the student participants but also for the communities with which they engage as well. Ultimately, the findings of this study will lead to a better informed and nuanced, macro-level strategy that HEIs can use to impact the state of student mental health and wellness broadly.

The previous two chapters provided an in-depth description of the participant selection process and continued with the detailed retelling of each participants' lived experience as relevant to research question 1, "What are the lived experiences of student participants of academic community-engaged learning, specifically as they relate to their mental health and wellness?". Next, the researcher presented the data collected through semi-structured interviews with the seven participants, the data analysis process, and the results of that process. Research question 2, "How do student participants of academic community-engaged learning make sense of the impact of these pedagogical experiences on their mental health and wellness?" was then explored through a description of identified themes. Relevant narrative passages and rich descriptions were pulled from the participant data to demonstrate the themes and subthemes.

This chapter will include a summary of the findings of the current study and existing scholarship will be used to interpret those findings. This interpretation will include relevant implications for practice. The chapter will close with a discussion of limitations and directions for future research.

Summary of the Study Findings

Seven undergraduate students participated in semi-structured interviews for this study. The student participants were selected to ensure representation from multiple courses and disciplines, as well as varied demographic backgrounds, in order to ensure that the phenomenon under study was considered from multiple perspectives or lived experiences. All participants had completed an academic course that included community-engaged learning experiences that were semester-long, required as part of the course, and fully integrated into the course. Following interviews and transcription, IPA analysis steps were followed as outlined by Larkin & Thompson (2012). This analysis resulted in the identification of fifteen sub codes, which were further synthesized and collapsed into nine sub themes, which ultimately resulted in three main themes. These themes, Identity (Head), Belonging (Heart), and Agency (Hands), provided a meaningful way to talk about the experiences of all the participants. See Table 3 for a summary of these themes.

Table 3

Summary of Findings

Theme	**Summary**
Identity (Head)	● Reflection and knowledge development around the topic of identity are essential parts of student participants' mental health and wellness experience. ● Intentional facilitation of reflection activities focused on identity allowed students to explore their pre-existing understandings of who they are as individuals, and who they are in relation to others. ● Reflection and knowledge development on the topic of identity are inherently emotional experiences. ● In-class discussions, and opportunities to share personal stories, allowed students to explore their personal identity and develop a new understanding of self. ● Providing space for restorative reflection around identity, and the opportunity to process these reflections with others in the class, resulted in participants feeling a validation of self.
Belonging (Heart)	● Developing a sense of belonging is an essential part of the mental health and wellness experience of community-engaged learning participants. ● Intentional facilitation of opportunities to practice vulnerability, empathy, and compassion as well as opportunities to observe others doing the same, helped participants' to feel connected to one another, to their classroom community, the campus at large, and the broader community. ● Feeling validated and cared about by their peers, faculty, and community partner(s), as well as having the opportunity to validate and care for others, improved participants' sense of belonging and ultimately had a direct impact on student mental health and wellness.
Agency (Hands)	● Developing agency is an essential part of the mental health and wellness experience of community-engaged learning participants. ● Students developed their voice in the classroom and community by making decisions and telling their stories. ● Students developed a sense of purpose by struggling with the concept of impact, including what it means to be impactful as well as questioning their own ability to make an impact. ● Ultimately, this process of developing agency resulted in a sense of pride and gratitude for their experience and had a positive impact on student mental health and wellness.

Although the details of the participants' backgrounds (age, major, race, gender identity, etc.), and course experiences (discipline area, online vs. virtual, community-engagement implementation strategy, etc.) differed, each of the three identified themes were salient in all of their community-engaged learning experiences. The following section will explore each of these three themes and discuss the relationship between the findings and the existing scholarship in these areas.

Identity (Head)

This study's findings that reflection on, and knowledge development around, identity are essential parts of community-engaged learning participants' mental health and wellness are supported by the existing literature. Critical reflection is identified as a key component of community-engaged learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Jacoby, 1996). Reflection should be intentional, rigorous, and substantive (Eyler et al., 1996). This reflection process is where students make meaning from their engagement and can lead to knowledge development and behavior change (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Jacoby, 1996). Further, Bronsteen (2016) highlighted that critical reflection should help students understand their circumstances, and more specifically, help them understand their position in relation to the community - in other words, help them reflect on their identity. Bronsteen (2016) also highlights that critical reflection should be focused on the cultivation of compassion for others. The experiences of this study's participants would also support the idea that critical reflection on identity should be focused on the cultivation of compassion for self as well. Participants described the impact of participating in restorative conversations around identity with their peers, faculty, and community partners wherein they felt encouraged to disrupt their existing perceptions of their social identities and

their associated histories. This was an important part of their mental health and wellness experience.

Community-engaged learning students come to these academic experiences with their own set of social identities and the resulting impacts of oppression and injustices that can come with those identities. For some students, these identity-based experiences have resulted in histories that are painful, traumatic, and feel out of their control. These same students are then asked to enter communities that are experiencing their own community trauma, impacted by the daily stressors of poverty, structural racism, sexism, etc. (Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Pinderhughes et al., 2015). Ultimately, these identity-based traumas, both individual and communal, begin to exclude people from the dominant community and erode their sense of empowerment (Kulick et al., 2017). The participants in this study all identified their in-class reflections in which they discussed their community-engaged learning experiences, focused on their identity-related experiences, participated in the telling of their stories and the processing of the emotions that came with those stories, as important and meaningful components of their experience. This process of reflecting and sharing stories resulted in a positive impact on their mental health and wellness. The participants were able to personalize their experiences and make connections between their course material, their community engagement experiences, and their own identity-based experiences. Students began to challenge their preconceived notions of not only the larger community but also their preconceived notions of self, challenging their existing narratives, and developing a new understanding of who they are and what they are capable of. Personalizing is an emotional process, but it is necessary for students to develop new knowledge and to take action on that knowledge (Kiely, 2005; Mezirow, 1997).

Identity exploration, or identity reflection, seemed to be the most emotionally impactful for this study's participants who identified as a member of a marginalized social-identity group (Emma, Jordan, Sonia, and Xile). In contrast, the study participants who identified as a member of predominantly dominant social identity groups (Mark and Alexander), seemed to be most emotionally-impacted by listening to their classmates' reflections on identity-based experiences rather than through reflecting on their own identity-based experiences. This upholds the findings of scholars who argue that students experience community-engaged learning differently, and gain different outcomes, based on their prior experiences related to their social identities, particularly race (Barrett & Jenkins, 2018; Carter Andrews, 2009; Ghosh, 2021; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). Additionally, existing scholarship supports the findings of the current study that personal wellness is very much impacted by conditions of oppression and injustice, and these conditions are much more likely to impact individuals who identify as part of a marginalized identity group (Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Pinderhughes et al., 2015; Prilleltenskey, 2012).

The lived experiences of the participants of this study suggest that having a culturally-informed curriculum and diverse faculty representation in the classroom is important to their mental health and wellness. Participants remarked on the importance of having a faculty member with a shared identity, the importance of reading scholarship written by someone with a shared identity, hearing the story of someone with a shared identity, and the impact of working with a community partner of the same identity. These findings support scholarship from Miller et al. (2022) and Leath and Jones (2022) who state that a lack of culturally informed mental health services, and a lack of representation in mental health staff for LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, and students of color, negatively impacted the students' experiences. It is clear that

in order for students to have a positive mental health and wellness experience in their community-engaged learning classroom, they need to have space to reflect on their identities, explore personal trauma associated with those identities, and to see representation of those identities in the classroom space. As Chavous et al. (2022) stated, “Acknowledging the diverse experiences and intersecting social identities of a person is critical in order to develop policies and practices that will support the mental health and emotional well-being of people from marginalized communities" (p. 4). Identity-based trauma requires identity-based healing, and community-engaged learning practices need to intentionally support this process.

Belonging (Heart)

This study’s findings that developing a sense of belonging is an essential part of the mental health and wellness experience of community-engaged learning participants is supported by the existing scholarship. Soria et al. (2012) defined sense of belonging as a student’s sense of connection and affiliation with their community. In university communities, a sense of belonging is thought to develop in a variety of different ways, but scholars agree that being intentional about developing and implementing strategies that promote a sense of belonging for students can positively impact student retention and success (Kuh, 2008; Soria et al., 2012). High impact practices (HIPs) are seen as one method of developing a sense of belonging, and community-engaged learning practices are identified as one type of HIP (Kuh, 2008). In fact, multiple scholars, in addition to the findings of this study, provide research support that involvement in community-engaged learning results in students feeling a stronger sense of belonging to their campus community (Flanagan & Bundick, 2011; Ribera et al., 2017; Soria et al., 2012). The participants of the current study all discussed the various ways in which their community-engaged learning experience contributed to their sense of belonging. They specifically

highlighted the relationships they were able to build with their classmates and how those relationships helped them to feel connected and important to others.

The participants of this study also highlighted that their developed sense of belonging did not just happen by chance. Rather, they noted the impact of in-class reflections and in-community experiences that helped them to practice vulnerability, empathy, and compassion for others. As noted earlier, Bronsteen (2016) suggests that reflection activities should focus on the cultivation of compassion for others, and that this growth of compassion rather than defensiveness is what leads to improved mental health and wellness. Participants of this study noted that as a student, they often entered classrooms with feelings of otherness and a sense of disconnect, and it was through the telling and sharing of their own stories and the listening to others' stories in their community-engaged learning course that they began to move from a sense of 'other' to a sense of belonging.

Morton and Bergbauer (2015) describe a similar process which they call the "communalization of grief", wherein individuals share their stories in an environment where they can trust others to show up and listen. For some, this is a new experience, and works to counter the feelings of isolation, lack of emotional support systems, and feelings of exclusion that can come from both individual and community-based traumas (Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Kulick et al., 2017; Pinderhughes et al., 2015). Students feel empowered by the process of sharing and listening, challenging the narrative that they do not belong (Kulick et al., 2017). Simply by speaking their experiences aloud, and by hearing and observing the experiences of others, participants began to break down their understandings and began to develop new ways of thinking about their community and their place in that community. For example, Sonia and Xile both expressed that their course experience helped

them to develop new understandings around their definitions of community and family. Melody was able to transform her understanding of her place on campus, moving from wanting to transfer to another institution to deciding to stay and actively seeking out new leadership opportunities.

It needs to be noted, however, that being vulnerable and showing compassion for others, was only half of the scenario. Participants in this study also highlighted the importance of a reciprocal experience with their peers, faculty, and community partners. They not only shared vulnerability, they also witnessed vulnerability; they not only showed care for others, but they felt cared for by others as well. Students not only practiced vulnerability and compassion, but they were met in-kind with shared vulnerability and compassion from others. This adds to Morton and Bergbauer's (2015) concept of communalization of grief, where individuals share their stories in an environment where they can trust others to show up and listen, but expands it to include an expectation that others also share and that others actively show compassion as well. Van der Kolk (2015), a psychiatrist who has studied and treated trauma for decades, also points out the importance of this type of reciprocity and the impact it has on healing:

> Social support is not the same as merely being in the presence of others. The critical issue is *reciprocity*: being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else's mind and heart. For our physiology to calm down, heal, and grow we need a visceral feeling of safety. (p. 81).

This highlights the importance of a facilitator who is intentional, alert, and involved in the learning experience, in order to ensure this reciprocation of compassion is occurring. If students were to share vulnerability and compassion only to be met with no response, or worse, rejection and a confirmation of their feelings of otherness, this could in fact be quite detrimental.

As this is such an important part of the student experience, it cannot be left to classmates alone to fulfill this need. Jordan, the one study participant who did not feel validated by his peers, is a good example of how this lack of reciprocity can negatively impact student mental health and wellness. Thankfully, Jordan did feel reciprocal compassion and validation from his faculty throughout his community engagement experience and cited that relationship as being crucial to his success. Accordingly, the findings of this study suggest that faculty need to be intentional about course design and in-class activities that center topics such as vulnerability, empathy, and compassion. Faculty need to adequately prepare students to engage in these conversations in healthy and effective ways. There are guidelines and practices that faculty can call on, such as establishing ground rules and guidelines, providing readings and supportive material that provide language to social justice concepts, and alert students that these will be topics of discussion in class (Coles-Ritchie et al., 2022).

In addition to their inclusion in course content and design, these acts should also be modeled by the faculty and community partners as well. This modeling can include direct acts of support, empathy, and compassion, but can also come from faculty who use a student-centered approach to their teaching and course design. Faculty who see students as holistic individuals and are aware of their unique learning needs will be more likely to build learning experiences that are empathetic and compassionate by nature (Cornelius-White, 2007; Wright, 2011). Harrison et al. (2020) encourage faculty to move beyond modeling alone and implement a culturally-responsive, trauma-informed pedagogy in the classroom. Trauma-informed pedagogy includes practices that recognize trauma in learners, promote the creation of safe classroom and campus spaces, and shifts focus away from deficit-based thinking to asset-based, supportive policies and practices (Davidson, 2017). There are resources, frameworks, and models that can

be used to guide this trauma-informed pedagogy in community-engaged learning classrooms (Cless, 2017; Davidson, 2017; Harper & Neubauer, 2020; Harrison et al., 2020; Henshaw, 2022; Wood, 2021).

Facilitating this type of in-class reflection, including the sharing of personal trauma and the holding of space for others' trauma, is an important responsibility for the faculty-practitioner and should be managed in a way that does not further traumatize the student. Therefore, Arao and Clemens (2013) encourage faculty to take this concept past 'safe spaces' and instead work toward the establishment of 'brave spaces'. Safe spaces are described as classroom spaces where students are comfortable talking about and struggling with difficult personal concepts and work to create authentic interactions around issues such as power, privilege, and identity. In contrast, brave spaces acknowledge that students come to classroom spaces with identities and identity-based experiences that do not allow them to feel safe, regardless of the efforts put forth by the faculty or the course design. Faculty who work to create brave spaces, alert students that there are occasions where learning will involve risk, particularly when it comes to personal vulnerability, and that issues of power, privilege, and identity exist and are at play in the classroom space. Arao and Clemens (2013) provide examples of how to actualize this idea in the classroom such as the inclusion of the term brave space in the course materials, facilitating ground rules, and engaging students in discussion around their personal definitions of brave space.

Mitchell et al. (2016) and Morton and Bergbauer (2015) also raised the importance of reciprocating compassion as part of the larger campus culture as well, highlighting the importance of an environment where students can trust others to show up, listen, and engage in authentic interactions whether inside or outside of the classroom. Developing campus cultures

that intentionally show care for students, acknowledge the diverse experiences and social identities of students, and implement supporting policies and practices that exemplify this care, are crucial to the mental health and wellness of student participants at large (Chavous et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2016).

Agency (Hands)

This study's findings that developing and practicing agency is an essential part of the mental health and wellness experience of community-engaged learning participants is supported by the existing scholarship. Attree et al. (2010) defined student agency as "the feeling that they are being useful to others, feeling in control of events, being able to express ideas and having an awareness of individual rights" (p. 252). Community-engaged learning experiences have been shown to increase a student's sense of agency, or empowerment, and produce greater feelings of control over their learning experience (Attree et al., 2010; Swaner, 2007). High-pressure academic environments with high levels of stress and anxiety can actually result in students disengaging from their learning experience (Swaner, 2007). Scholars point out that developing a sense of empowerment and control can help students to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety that they may otherwise be feeling and thus, they are more likely to remain engaged in the classroom (Jorgensen et al., 2018; Kulick et al., 2017; Soet & Sevig, 2006; Swaner, 2007).

The participants of the current study all discussed some of the ways that their community-engaged learning experience contributed to their sense of agency. Specifically, students noted that this sense of agency resulted in part from having the opportunity to make decisions about their engagement experience and having the opportunity to tell their stories. When students were allowed to have some control over their experience, for example by selecting their community partner position, choosing which reflection activity they would like to

complete, and even something as simple as picking which orientation day and time to attend, they were able to feel more in control of what can otherwise be a stressful and disorienting process. Students also noted that the opportunity to tell their personal story, and to make decisions about how much of that story to tell, was influential in their development of agency. The results of this study have already shown how the telling of student stories was important to exploration of identity, but the process also allowed the students to take some control over what they shared, how they shared it, and who they shared it with. This act of exerting control over their personal narrative resulted in feelings of empowerment and voice, and a sense that their story was important and meaningful.

The findings of this study also noted that students developed a sense of agency by grappling with the idea of impact, including questioning both what it means to be impactful and their ability to generate their desired impact. The existing scholarship in this area shows some conflicting findings. Kulick et al. (2017) found that students who participated in very low or very high levels of engagement were likely to experience higher rates of depression. They attributed this to the idea that students either didn't have enough time in community to feel effective, or they spent too much time in community and were exposed to greater amounts of community trauma resulting in students questioning their ability to be impactful. This contrasted with Conway et al.'s (2009) finding that greater intensity and duration of engagement would produce greater self-efficacy outcomes. All of the participants of the current study were involved in their community-engagement for a similar amount of time, however, each student discussed their sense of "intensity of engagement" in varying ways. Intensity for each student was mostly a result of how strongly they felt emotion during the experience rather than how much time they were engaged. The findings of the current study indicate that the development of agency comes

from the students' meaning-making processes about their experiences and the connected emotional process, including the ways they are considering impact and their own ability to be impactful, and not necessarily from the amount of time spent in community or the intensity of that time.

The participants of the current study struggled with understanding their purpose in relation to the community experience. They asked questions about why they were engaged in community, what they could do while they were there, and how they may be able to further their impact in the future. It was the reflection on these questions, and the ability to make sense of them, that ultimately led to students feeling empowered rather than stuck. Community-engaged faculty can help students develop agency by including in-class discussion and reflection around their "why". Helping students to find a personal connection to their community-engagement experience, and walking them through reflection around what impact means and looks like to them, can help students to understand their purpose. This puts some of the control back in the students' hands, again allowing them to make decisions about what is important to them and what they can do about it. This act of exerting control while personalizing their experience allows students the chance to add to their personal narrative, expanding their experiences beyond their history and into the creation of a potential path for their future.

Finally, students' development of agency seems to be in part the result of processing the mixed emotions that were felt during the community-engaged learning experience. The participants of the current study reported a mix of emotions from frustration to hope, but in the end all participants voiced a sense of pride and gratitude for their experience. Community-engaged learning pedagogy creates tension that can decrease student mental health and wellness in the short term (Attree, 2011; Kulick et al., 2017; Swaner, 2007). This emotional experience

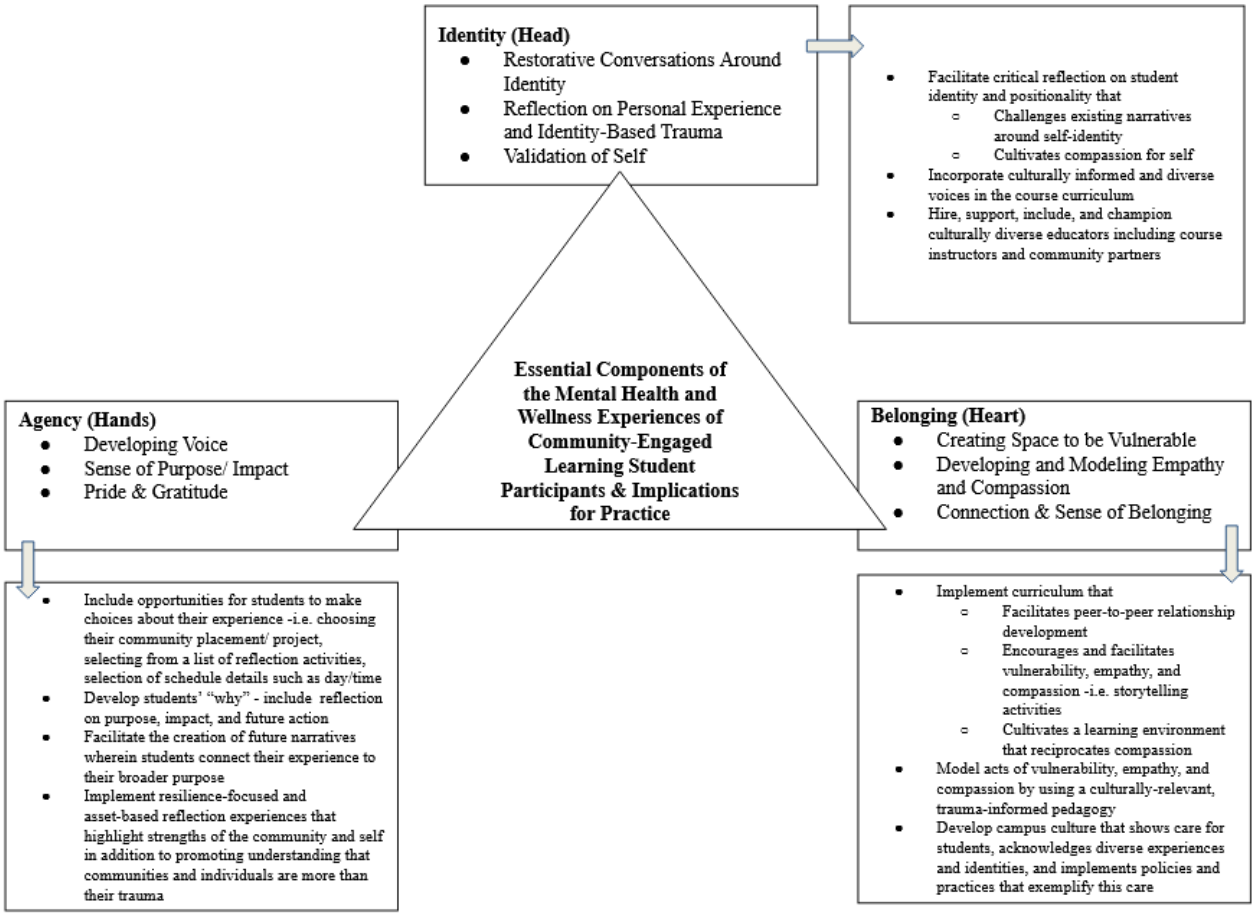
can be processed, and reframed, through the intentional use of resilience-focused and asset-based reflection opportunities. These types of reflection opportunities pose questions, or engage students in readings or other activities, that help them to understand that individuals and communities are more than their trauma and instead focus on individual and community strengths rather than deficits (Ginwright, 2018). This type of reflection experience encourages students to notice and highlight the strengths of the community, their own strengths as well as their classmates, and encourages the understanding that individuals and communities are more than their trauma (Ginwright, 2018). When it comes to mental health and wellness, as Bronsteen (2016) suggested, the way a person thinks about their circumstances may be more important than the circumstances themselves. Critical reflection activities that highlight strength and resiliency frame large systemic issues as something that can be impacted or changed. It can move student understanding of trauma from something that is permanent, defining, and isolating to something that is just one part of an individual's or communities' experience. This reframing of students' personal experience as well as their understanding of their communities' experience, is crucial to developing their sense of agency. This feeling of being useful to others, and feeling a sense of control, is an important part of the mental health and wellness experience of student participants.

Implications for Practice

Relevant implications for practice were noted throughout the Interpretation of Findings section above. This section summarizes and briefly outlines those relevant implications so they are succinct and in one place. Figure 4 summarizes these essential components of the mental health and wellness experiences of community-engaged learning student participants and the resulting implications for practice. Additionally, implications for higher education practice broadly will be elaborated.

Figure 4

Essential Components of the Mental Health and Wellness Experience of Community-Engaged Learning Student Participants & Implications for Practice



Implications for Identity (Head)

Community-engaged learning faculty-practitioners should facilitate critical reflection on student identity and positionality. Further, this reflection should challenge students' existing narratives around self-identity and work toward cultivating compassion for self. This reflection process should allow space for students' to share their own stories and hold space for the processing of emotion that will inevitably be tied to the sharing of those stories. Additionally, faculty-practitioners should incorporate culturally-informed and diverse voices into the course

curriculum. This can, and should, be incorporated through scholarship and readings, testimonies, community partners, and the faculty themselves. Thus, in order to increase the likelihood that students will see themselves represented in their classroom faculty, HEIs should hire, support, include, and champion culturally diverse educators throughout campus.

Implications for Belonging (Heart)

Faculty-practitioners who are facilitating community-engaged learning experiences should implement curriculum that facilitates peer-to-peer relationship development. These relationships can then be used as a base for facilitating vulnerability, empathy and compassion between classmates. Critical reflection activities should be designed to incorporate these acts of vulnerability and help students learn to develop empathy and compassion for others. Faculty-practitioners should focus on the cultivation of a learning-environment that reciprocates compassion and should not leave this reciprocation up to chance. Reflection activities should be developed and implemented to ensure this reciprocation is happening. Additionally, faculty-practitioners should be student-centered, should incorporate trauma-informed pedagogy in the classroom and broader campus, and consider the inclusion of brave space concepts and practices. These frameworks exist in the literature and can be used as a guide (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Cless, 2017; Davis, 2017; Harper & Neubauer, 2020; Harrison et al., 2019; Henshaw, 2022; Wood, 2021).

Implications for Agency (Hands)

Faculty-practitioners should include opportunities for students to make choices about their community-engaged learning experience. This could include choosing their community partner/project, choosing which reflection activities they will complete, having a voice in the due dates and timelines of the course, etc. The reflection activities in the course should help students

think about their "why," including questions around their purpose, their definitions of impact, their understanding of their own impact, and future action. This can be done through the facilitation of future-focused narratives, wherein students connect their community-engaged learning experiences to their broader goals and purpose. Finally, faculty-practitioners should implement resilience-focused and asset-based reflection experiences that highlight the strengths of the community as well as students' own strengths as an individual. These reflections should be intentional in helping students understand that individuals and communities are more than their trauma.

Implications for Higher Education Institutions Broadly

In addition to these implications surrounding identity, belonging, and agency, there are implications to be considered for HEIs broadly. First, as the results of this study have shown, community-engaged learning as a pedagogy, has the potential to be incredibly emotionally impactful, particularly if critical reflection is included that explores identity-based trauma and community trauma. There is the potential for in-class activities around vulnerability, empathy, and compassion to impact students in negative ways. As such, faculty who choose to include community-engaged learning pedagogy in their courses should do so intentionally and thoughtfully. This type of classroom learning requires a commitment from the faculty-practitioner, and thus, it should not be considered an "add-on", but rather a fully-integrated course component.

Second, there are similar implications for campuses to consider when making decisions around setting graduation requirements around HIPs such as community-engaged learning. There are very real-world implications to community-engaged learning experiences, for both students and community partners, and therefore it is important to consider faculty motivations for the

inclusion of community-engaged learning experiences in their courses. If faculty are required to include community-engaged learning, but are not personally motivated to facilitate this type of curriculum, it is possible that the intentional care needed to support these learning experiences may not exist. Additionally, if there is a campus requirement, then the campus also needs to consider how they are providing the financial and human resources needed to support this work, how they are training their faculty in these areas, how they are supporting and removing barriers for student participation (i.e. transportation, financial support for work release, etc.), and whether the community partners are interested and/or ready to support that scale of student involvement. This same level of consideration should be taken by HEIs when including community-engagement and community-engaged learning in campus strategic plans and other visionary work.

Finally, there are implications from the findings of this study that relate to community partners and site selection. Community partners are considered co-educators in community-engaged learning experiences, and as such, they have a similar set of responsibilities for student learning, student support, and in the case of this study, student mental health and wellness. There is often a focus on faculty training and support at HEIs for this type of pedagogy, but we also need to consider the training and support that our community partners receive in regard to their role as co-educators. Community partners and HEIs need to have clear expectations around partner roles, and what the responsibilities are for taking on these students as learners. Similar consideration should be taken for community partner orientation and training as we are taking for faculty-practitioners. Additionally, HEIs need to provide the financial and human resources needed to support these partnerships and the orientation, training, and support required to work toward student learning objectives together.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study that should be considered when implementing any of the above recommendations for practice. These limitations include that it was a single-site study, there was a limited sample size, potential researcher bias, participant self-selection, and the fact that it was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, this study took place at one institution. The findings then may be place-specific, or certainly informed by the details of the campus culture, campus size, campus community, etc. It would be of interest to explore the research questions at other institutions with differing characteristics and students. Second, the sample size for the current study consisted of seven participants. A small sample size allows the opportunity for individual stories to be told. These stories can be powerful for the participant, the researcher, and the reader and can capture and reflect broader implications for social, and cultural understandings. However, the small sample size limits the ability to generalize to broader audiences. It would be helpful to expand the sample size to include broader diversity of location, discipline, age, campus-type, etc. Third, the researcher is a practitioner in the field of community-engaged learning, and thus entered this research process with a framework of understanding based on professional experience. For example, as part of my work as a community-engaged practitioner, I facilitate faculty and student workshops that are heavily focused on identity-based reflection activities. As such, this experience may have shaped the level of importance I assigned to the participants' identity-based reflection activities they participated in. In an effort to address these biases, the researcher used journaling to record researcher thought processes. Member checking of transcripts was also used as a method to increase trustworthiness, or validity, of the data. Fourth, the participants of this study self-selected into the study. It is possible that students who had a positive, and meaningful

experience, were more likely to be interested in sharing their stories as part of the research. It is also possible that those students who had negative, or perhaps emotionally painful experiences, were less likely to want to talk with the researcher. This self-selection of participants could have shaped the findings of this study and skewed findings. Finally, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a time of increased mental health and wellness distress, personal and community disconnect, and individual and community trauma. It is difficult to know what impact this may have had on the students' experiences, as well as on the classroom and community environment. In an effort to address these limitations, implementation of the recommendations in this study should be paired with support from other relevant findings in the existing scholarship and other assessment methodologies that address the limitations from the current study.

Directions for Future Research

The findings of the current study, the implications for practice, as well as the limitations of the current study have informed the development of ideas for directions for future research. First, due to the small sample size of the current study, and the fact that it was conducted on one campus, future studies should expand their scope. This could include using a larger sample size, looking at different types of campuses, incorporating multiple campuses, and including greater diversity of students and student experiences. This expansion could also include studies that look at specific types of community-engaged learning implementation strategies (i.e. advocacy, community building, philanthropy, etc.), different curricular models of inclusion (required, extra-credit, one-time vs. semester-long, etc.), and different course modalities (virtual vs. in-person). Additionally, research questions that look at whether community-engaged learning projects were conducted individually versus in small groups could be considered. This expansion could also

include the use of different research methodologies to consider the same research questions. For example, how might a researcher look at the mental health and wellness of community-engaged learning participants using a quantitative approach?

Second, a next relevant step in the research could include an examination of the impact of community-engaged learning experiences on students who are already experiencing existing mental health and wellness difficulties, or specific mental health and wellness diagnoses such as anxiety, depression, and/or substance abuse. As discussed, the number of students who are struggling with mental health is very high and continuously rising (Felber, 2019; Jorgensen et al., 2018; National Council, 2017). Having a better understanding of their experiences, including supports and detriments in the classroom, would be helpful.

Third, future research could consider the impact of community-engaged learning practices on community and societal wellness. As discussed, these impacts were outside of the scope of the current study. There are existing models of trauma-informed community engagement that focus on the prevention of further retraumatization of community members, and therefore future research on the implementation of these frameworks, the impacts on community members, and on community mental health and wellness would be indicated (Becker-Blease, 2017; Falkenburger, 2018; Pinderhughes et al., 2015; Weinstein et al., 2014). Further study of community-engaged learning practices and community trauma would allow for the creation of community-based mental health and wellness interventions that could work to disrupt the current systems of power and rebalance the system in favor of community agency and empowerment (Atkinson et al., 2014; Becker-Blease, 2017; Falkenburger, 2018; Ginwright, 2018; Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017; Pinde).

Finally, future research could focus on the pedagogical implications listed in the Implications for Practice section of the current study. Multiple recommendations were made for the inclusion of specific reflection processes that produce desired learning outcomes, but further research is needed in order to know which reflection activities best produce the desired outcomes. What are the best pedagogical methods to enact the recommendations from this study, and do those pedagogical methods produce the desired student outcomes? In other words, what are the best ways to facilitate critical reflection around identity? What does it look like to encourage empathy and compassion in the classroom? What activities best produce a reciprocation of compassion? There is much variance in pedagogical choices, and future research can help faculty-practitioners have more information about which strategies best produce the outcomes they desire for their students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to illuminate the experiences of undergraduate students who participated in academic community-engaged learning, specifically as those experiences related to student mental health and wellness. Data analysis resulted in three main themes, including Identity (Head), Belonging (Heart), and Agency (Hands), which provided a meaningful way to talk about the experiences of all the participants. The study results concerning the lived experiences of community-engaged learning participants will help HEIs to better understand their role in supporting these students, and to create trauma-informed, healing-centered, and resilience-focused community-engaged learning practices.

The participants in this study shared openly and vulnerably about their community-engaged learning experiences and the impact those experiences had on their mental health and wellness. The researcher was, at times, surprised by the level of honesty the participants shared,

and is grateful for the contribution of their stories and experiences to this study. It is likely that this level of vulnerability was cultivated as the students practiced this skill in their community-engaged learning course. I must express my gratitude for their participation in this study, and I attest that I have done my best to capture the essence of their experiences in this analysis.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Student,

I hope you are well! I am reaching out to you because you were enrolled in the courseXXX with Dr. XXX during the 20XX-XX academic year. As you may recall, community-engaged learning was an integral part of this course. **This makes you eligible to participate in a research study and earn Amazon gift cards!**

My name is Stephanie Brewer and I am conducting this study on community-engaged learning as part of my PhD course work with the College of Education at MSU. I am looking for students to talk with me (virtually) about their community-engaged learning experiences. Specifically I am interested in looking at the impact that community-engaged learning has (if any) on student mental health and wellness.

As a participant you will be asked to:

- Meet with me (virtually) 1-3 times (60-90 minutes each)
- Talk about your community-engaged learning experience and its impact on your health and wellness
- Be **compensated with a $15 Amazon gift card for EACH interview!**

As a participant you will **NOT**:

- Be asked to share personal or confidential information about your mental health or wellness

If you are willing to participate, please submit your name and email address here: link.

If you want to learn more or have any questions please contact me at sbrewer@msu.edu. I look forward to talking with you!

Best,

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Study Title: Community-Engaged Learning and Student Mental Health and Wellness: Understanding Lived Experiences of Undergraduate Student Participants
Researcher and Title: Stephanie Brewer, PhD Candidate
Department and Institution: College of Education, Michigan State University
Contact Information: sbrewer@msu.edu
Advisor: Dr. Ann Austin, aaustin@msu.edu

BRIEF SUMMARY
You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation including why you might or might not want to participate, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to discuss and ask the researcher any questions you may have.

You are being asked to participate in a research study of the lived experiences of students who have participated in community-engaged learning, specifically as those experiences relate to student mental health and wellness. You will be asked to participate in 1-3 individual interviews, resulting in about 2-3 hours of your time. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms, or fake names, prior to analysis and all identifying information will be removed from the data prior to analysis.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH
The purpose of this qualitative study is to illuminate the experiences of students who participate in community-engaged learning, specifically as those experiences relate to student mental health and wellness. By interviewing student participants, this study will describe the student participant's experience of community-engaged learning. As a result of this study, higher education institutions can better understand the role they play in support of students who participate in community-engaged learning, and how to maximize the positive impacts and minimize potential negative impacts on student mental health and wellness.

WHAT YOU WILL BE ASKED TO DO
Participants will be asked to complete a demographics and information form that will be used to gather details about their community-engaged learning experience. This will include such information as course title, implementation strategies used (direct-service, advocacy, research, etc.), modality used (in-person vs. virtual), community partner, and other relevant details of their experience. Participants will then be asked to participate in two to three (2-3) 60-90 minute virtual interviews. Interview questions will cover details of participants' community-engaged learning experience and information about what impact (if any) this experience had on participants' mental health and wellness. Participants will be asked to share an example of a course assignment they submitted as part of the community-engaged learning portion of the course.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS
There are potential benefits to you for taking part in this study including: learning about the research process, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the field of education, and having the opportunity to reflect on your experience as a student.

POTENTIAL RISKS
It is expected that there is minimal risk for participating in this study. If risk exists, the most likely are potential feelings of anxiety or discomfort. As part of this study, participants will be asked to talk about their learning experiences and how those experiences relate to participants' mental health and wellness. Participants will **not** be asked to disclose personal or confidential information about their mental health and wellness status, such as information related to diagnoses, symptomatology, or treatment. However, participants will be asked if their mental

health and wellness were impacted in positive or negative ways. Discussion of this impact has the potential to result in feelings of emotional discomfort. Please visit https://caps.msu.edu/resources/index.html to see a full list of mental health and wellness resources available to MSU students.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The interviews will be video and/or audio recorded using the virtual meeting technology (Zoom), but participants can request that the researcher turn off the recording at any time. Recordings will be kept in a secure location until three years after this study is completed, at which time they will be erased. Notes that indicate participant name, contact information, and chosen pseudonym, will be maintained by the researcher in a secure location until three years after the end of the study, when it will be destroyed. This information will be kept in a separate secure location than that of the digital recording. Participant identity will remain confidential in all transcribing, analyzing, and reporting of data. Because this study involves face-to-face interviews (virtually), the researcher cannot provide anonymity to participants. However, participant privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

I agree to allow audiotaping/videotaping of the interview.

☐ Yes ☐ No Initials_____

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW

You have the right to say no to participate in the research. You can choose not to participate at all, or not answer some or all of the questions. You can stop at any time after the interview has started. There will be no consequences if you choose to stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you would receive from participation.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY

There are no costs to you as a participant, other than your time. Participants will be compensated with a $15 Amazon gift card at the end of each 60-90 minute interview session.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Participants are welcome to request a copy of the final results of the study, a bibliography of resources, or both.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the researcher: Stephanie Brewer, sbrewer@msu.edu, 616-617-0964.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT.

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

_____ _____

Signature Date

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

My name is Stephanie Brewer and I am a Doctoral student in the College of Education at Michigan State University. You are being asked to participate in this research study as part of the completion of my doctoral studies. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you can end your participation at any time. You should feel free to discuss and ask me any questions you may have at any time.

You are being asked to participate in a research study of the lived experiences of students who have participated in community-engaged learning as part of a course, in your case that is related to your course _____ with ____ (faculty member). Specifically, I am interested in learning more about the relationship between community-engaged learning experiences and mental health and wellness.

You will not be asked to disclose personal or confidential information about your mental health and wellness status, diagnoses, symptoms, or treatment. Instead, I will be asking questions about whether your mental health and wellness were impacted in positive or negative ways, and how you made sense of those experiences. If the discussion results in feelings of anxiety and/or discomfort, again please know you can end your participation at any time, or choose not to respond. I will also provide a link to campus resources as well: https://caps.msu.edu/resources/index.html.

Questions below indicate topics to be addressed and may not reflect exact wording or order. Follow-up questions will be asked dependent upon the course of the interview. Questions will be asked over a series (1-3) of 60-90 minute interviews.

Interview Questions

1. Mental health and wellness is a very personal experience, which tends to be shaped by a lot of different factors including culture, identity, and life experience. For the purposes of my study, I am defining mental health as a psychological, psychiatric, emotional, or mental state that has an impact on educational performance. In addition to mental health, I've also included the idea of wellness in my study, because I believe it allows for a broader understanding of experience. I am defining wellness as a series of dimensions in addition to emotional health that exist on a continuum, including occupational, physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual wellness.
    - Can you tell me how you would define the concepts of mental health and wellness?
    - Are there any terms, or words, other than mental health and wellness that you would like us to use for our conversation today? Words that are more meaningful for you?
2. In addition to making sure we're using language that works for both of us, I am also wondering if there are any identities or other information that you'd like me to know in relation to our conversation today? Anything that would be helpful for me to know or understand?
3. So you were asked to participate in the study based on your enrollment in ___ (course). Can you tell me about that course?
    - Subject, Instructor, Semester

4. Why did you choose to take this course?
    - Did you know there was a community engaged component of this course when you enrolled?
        - If so, what were your thoughts about that component?
        - If not, tell me about when you found out about the community engaged learning component of the course.
            - What were your thoughts? How did you feel?
5. Tell me about the community engaged component of the course.
    - What did you do? What were the expectations of you as a student? What were the goals? Who were your community partner(s)? What did the timeline look like?
6. Describe a typical engagement experience for this course. What did it look like?
7. Tell me about a specific engagement experience that you think is a good example of your overall experience. Tell me in as much detail as you can remember.
    - Why is this a good example?
8. What do you remember about your very first time participating in community engagement in this course? Tell me about that experience in as much detail as you remember.
    - The first time you interacted with the community partner?
9. When you think about your community engagement experience for this course, are there any small moments that stand out in your memory?
    - Why does that moment stand out? What did you learn from/ take away from that moment?
10. What activities did the course instructor ask you to do as reflection activities for this course (paper, journal, discussion board, in-class workshops, etc.)? Tell me about those assignments. What stands out to you? Why does it stand out?
    - You mentioned ___ assignment. Can you tell me more about that assignment? What was that like for you?
11. Were you able to submit an example assignment in the Qualtrics form/ via email? Would you be willing to submit the assignment you just discussed now?
12. What do you remember about the end of your community engagement experience - perhaps the last time you engaged with the community partner. Tell me about that experience in as much detail as you remember.
13. Did you have any emotional response during, or in response to, your community engaged learning experience?
    - If not, how did you separate your emotions from your community engaged learning experience? Why do you think you didn't have an emotional response?
    - If so, tell me about a time you had an emotional response during, or in response to, your community engaged learning experience. Why do you think you had this response?
        - What about your community engaged learning experience impacted your emotions in a positive way? In a negative way?
            - Can you discuss an experience you had in which you felt this way? Why do you think your emotions were impacted in this way?
        - What role did your classmates play in your experience of community engaged learning? Your instructor? The community members? Can you provide an example?

14. Did your community engaged learning experience have any impact on your ____ wellness? (occupational, physical, social, intellectual, and/ or spiritual)
    - If not, how did _____ wellness remain separated from your community engaged learning experience? Why do you think this remained separate?
    - If so, tell me about a time _____ wellness was impacted by your community engaged learning experience. Why do you think this impact existed?
15. As you think back on your community engagement experience now, what thoughts and emotions does that bring up for you?
    - Why do you think those thoughts and feelings are coming up now?
16. How has this community engaged learning experience influenced the way you think about yourself? Tell me about a time you thought that way.
    - Why did this experience impact you in this way?
17. Is there anything we have not discussed that you would like to tell me about?