

Students' Lived Experiences in Women's College Classrooms: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Several positive student academic outcomes are associated with women's college attendance, yet little is known about how women's college students make meaning of classroom practices, experiences, and interactions. The purpose of this study, a qualitative research endeavor in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, was to achieve a better understanding of the nature of the lived classroom experience at a women's college and the meaning women's college students made from their everyday lived classroom experiences. The sample consisted of 10 participants at a single women's college in the southern region of the United States who had completed at least 60 credit hours at the institution and were enrolled as full-time residential students. Data were collected through a series of three interviews conducted with participants and reflection essays authored by participants.

Study participants described the women's college classroom environment as a place where professors encouraged student participation in classroom discussions and where students could voice ideas, experiences, and uncertainties in an accepting space. The women's college students in this study indicated they received individual reaffirmation and intellectual validation from professors and peers, and over time became more likely to take risks with their thinking, aloud, in the classroom environment. Study participants made meaning from their classroom experience by actively reflecting on how these experiences fostered personal growth, comparing lived experiences to preconceptions, and imagining how their undergraduate experience would have been different had they chosen to attend a coeducational college.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In the 1960s, there were more than 200 women's colleges in the United States. In 2016, there were fewer than 50. Despite this reduction, women's colleges offer unique educational environments (distinctly different from those at coeducational institutions) and provide qualitatively different experiences for their students, and thus deserve our attention (Astin, 1993; Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, Umbach, & Kuh, 2007; Sax, Lozano, & Vandenboom, 2015; Sebrechts, 1999; Smith, 1990). In addition, women's colleges serve an increasingly diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged population of students (Langdon & Giovengo, 2003; Sax et al., 2015).

For more than a decade, women's colleges have enrolled a higher percentage of low-income, racially diverse and first-generation students than traditional coeducational colleges and universities, public or private (Hammond, 2014). More than one quarter of students enrolled at today's women's colleges identify as African American; Latina students represent 14.2% of women's college attendees (Sax et al., 2015). Additionally, women's college students as a group enroll slightly more international students than coeducational private colleges. Research by Sax, Lozano, and Vandenboom (2015) indicated that as of 2011, 6.8% of women's college students did not identify as United States citizens, as compared to 4% of students at coeducational private four-year colleges. The unfinished agenda for women's colleges is the "education and advancement of women across all ethnic, racial, age, and socioeconomic groups both within our country and around the world" (Creighton, 2007, n.p.).

Although research on women's colleges tends to identify commonalities among these institutions, contemporary women's colleges are a diverse group of institutions, ranging in size,

selectivity, and student demographics. Some are urban while others are rural. A few have strong religious ties. Many cater to adult women students aiming to complete the baccalaureate degree. The study of women's colleges does not "automatically mean a certain level of selectivity, a specific size, or even a fixed retention rate" (Langdon & Giovengo, 2003, p. 18). Indeed, these institutions differ distinctly from each other in their "history, profile, student body, and strengths, and internally diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, and life experiences of their students" (Sebrechts, 1999, p. 41).

Although women's colleges may have distinctly different characteristics, they are united in their commitment to promote and expand educational opportunities for women and encourage students to create positive change in the world (Creighton, 2007; Sebrechts, 1999). Women's college attendance is associated with a variety of positive outcomes including enhanced academic engagement (Kinzie et al., 2007; Riordan, 1994; Tidball, Smith, Tidball, & Wolf-Wendel, 1999), abundant leadership opportunities (Whitt, 1994), fulfilling faculty mentoring experiences (Kinzie et al., 2007; Hardwick Day 2012; Smith, 1990), and increased likelihood of graduate school attendance (Hardwick Day, 2012; Miller-Bernal, 2000). Alumnae of women's colleges generally report a high degree of satisfaction with their undergraduate experiences (Langdon, 1997; Hardwick Day 2012). A more detailed description of this and other academic literature on women's colleges is included in Chapter Two.

Statement of the Problem

Although women's colleges have proven benefits for students, relatively little is known about the classroom practices at these institutions that are effective in engaging students (Harper, 2006; Kinzie et al., 2007; Miller-Bernal, 2000). To better understand students' educational experiences at women's colleges, scholars require more insight into how women's college

students experience the classroom environment (Harper, 2006; Kinzie et al., 2007). Researchers know relatively little regarding how women's college students perceive and make meaning from their undergraduate classroom experiences and interactions. In addition, little is known about how classroom experiences and interactions shape women's college students' beliefs about themselves and others. The unstructured nature of this problem demands a phenomenological approach. The present study, a qualitative research endeavor in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, aims to address deficiencies in the knowledge base by producing critically needed information on the meaning women's college students make from their lived classroom experiences.

Importance of Studying the Classroom Experience

Enhancing students' classroom experiences is a chief concern not only for women's college faculty members, who teach an increasingly diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged student population, but also for women's college administrators, who seek to enhance student retention and persistence. As Tinto observed, colleges must attend not only to the way classes are structured and taught, but also the way classes are "experienced by students especially those who have not fared well in the past" (Tinto, 2012, p. 6). The classroom is the center of student education and life, and therefore the primary target for institutional action (Tinto, 2012).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to achieve a better understanding of the nature of the lived classroom experience at a women's college and the meaning women's college students make from their everyday lived classroom experiences. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study investigated the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of the lived classroom experience for undergraduate students who attend a contemporary women's college?
2. What meaning do undergraduate students make from their lived classroom experience at a contemporary women's college?
3. How do undergraduate students at a contemporary women's college make meaning from their lived classroom experiences?

Definition of Terms

Gender: the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity

Gender identity: a personal identification with a particular gender and/or gender role in society

Hermeneutic phenomenology: the study of experience together with its meanings

Meaning-making: the process of how individuals make sense of knowledge, experience, relationships and the self

Phenomenology: the study of experience, particularly as it is lived and as it is structured through consciousness

Women's college: an institution with an undergraduate population composed exclusively or almost exclusively of women; an institution whose primary mission is to promote and expand educational opportunities for women

Theoretical and Philosophical Orientation

In this study, I focused on the meaning made from everyday experience. My theoretical orientation was influenced by the combined scholarship of Marcia Baxter Magolda and Patricia King and by the work of Robert Kegan. Meaning-making, as viewed by Baxter Magolda and King (2012), and Kegan (1982, 1994), is a dynamic phenomenon that can evolve over time to

become increasingly complex. Our feelings and attitudes come not only from what we know but how we know (Kegan, 1994). Accessing a student's meaning-making structures is critical to interpreting student behavior, and equal attention must be paid to learner characteristics and situational characteristics (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

My philosophical orientation in this study was influenced by the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Max van Manen, and Clark Moustakas. As these scholars observed, a genuine desire to understand the lifeworlds of others is an essential component of any phenomenological undertaking; one should aim to adopt an attitude of wonder about the phenomenon of interest. Gadamer, van Manen, and Moustakas (1994) emphasized the critical link between reflecting on lived experiences and making meaning from lived experiences.

Methodology

Consistent with my philosophical orientation, I employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach using guidance from Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990, 2014). This approach calls for a focus on "consciousness and experience" (Moustakas, 1994) and an approach that includes an "abstemious reflection on the basic structures of the lived experience of human existence" (van Manen, 2014, Kindle location 729). Simply put, hermeneutic phenomenology is "the study of experience together with its meanings" (Freisen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012, p. 1).

To guide data collection, I used Seidman's (2013) model of interviewing, which focuses on the experiences of participants and the meaning they make from their experiences. In keeping with the hermeneutic tradition, I focused on interpretation and understanding (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen 1990, 2014). The ultimate goal of this study was to arrive at an understanding of the lived classroom learning experience of students attending a contemporary women's college.

A purposeful sample of students aged 18-25 at a contemporary women's college described their experiences in a series of three interviews. The sample size was not predetermined before initiating the study. Because I sought to select information-rich cases (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2015), participants were selected based on their perceived ability to illuminate the phenomenon of learning in the women's college classroom context. I sought first to uncover, and then to understand and interpret, the phenomenon as seen through the eyes of women's college students.

In three distinct in-depth interviews spaced carefully apart, I asked participants to explore their experiences and reflect on the meaning of those experiences (Seidman, 2013). In the first interview, I encouraged participants to reconstruct their earlier academic experiences, including secondary school classroom experiences. This was important because I ultimately wanted to place participants' experience in the women's college classroom in the context of their life history (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, having participants reflect on their earlier classroom experiences was an essential part of the process of making meaning from their current classroom experiences (van Manen, 1990). Thus, the first interview included a review of the participants' previous learning experiences leading up to the current point in time.

In the second interview, I asked participants to focus on the concrete details of their present lived experience in the college classroom. Rather than asking participants for their opinions, I inquired about the details of participants' experiences. For example, I asked participants to talk about their interactions with other students and faculty in the classroom setting. The second interview was focused on gathering a description of participants' everyday classroom life. After the second interview, I asked all participants in the study to complete a short reflective essay on a college classroom experience they deemed especially meaningful.

In the third and final interview, I invited participants to reflect on the meaning of their college classroom experiences. The goal of the third interview was to obtain a better understanding of the significance of classroom experiences for participants. In the interactive and cumulative three-interview series, each interview provided a foundation that illuminated the next (Seidman, 2013).

Interviews were generally spaced between one and two weeks apart. The approximate duration of each interview was between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview protocol was developed after conducting a pilot study that allowed me to test the interview design and revise as appropriate after discussion with a community of practice. I identified elements of my interview technique that supported the objectives of the study and those that detracted from it. Because in-depth interviewing is essentially open-ended, careful planning was essential.

By using this technique, I attempted to understand participants' truths as I asked them to reconstruct their experiences and reflect on the meanings of those experiences. As van Manen (1990) observed, reflecting on past experience is an essential part of meaning-making. My desire to interview students in an open-ended, unstructured fashion stemmed from a genuine interest in their stories. There are many unanswered questions regarding what constitutes the ideal environment for teaching and learning in general, and for the teaching and learning environments at women's colleges in particular. Women are not a monolithic group. Educational researchers have much to learn from students' stories.

Significance of the Study

Significance for Practice

This study was significant for at least four constituencies. First, faculty members and administrators at the women's college in the study will benefit from enhanced information about

how students perceive the classroom environment and what students describe as meaningful about their classroom experiences. Faculty members may use findings to inform teaching techniques, classroom structure, and other course-level decisions. Faculty members might also use findings to inform classroom assessment techniques.

Second, findings may also benefit faculty and administrators at other women-only undergraduate institutions in similar ways. In designing a learning environment for women, institutional faculty and administrators address fundamental questions of *what* should be learned as well as *how* it should be learned. Notions of what should be learned, and how, inform general education curriculum structure, overall and within-major academic program requirements (e.g., courses, internships, and study abroad experiences), course sequencing, and classroom design. Findings from this study provide insights about both *what* and *how* students learn at a contemporary women's college with a focus on the classroom context. Accordingly, women's college faculty and administrators might use findings to modify multiple aspects of learning environments, including pedagogical practices, curriculum, program requirements, and classroom design.

Third, study findings may benefit students considering attending a women's college. Prospective students may find it useful to obtain an enhanced understanding of the nature of the classroom experience at a women's college. Study findings may also benefit other individuals involved in the college choice process, such as family members of prospective students and high school guidance counselors and college counselors. The stories of participants could shed light on their college choice decisions.

Fourth, study findings may have important implications for women students enrolled at coeducational colleges and universities. Women college students at all institutional types may

benefit from a greater understanding of the perceived benefits and challenges of being in an all-women's educational environment, from the perspectives of study participants. Women at coeducational institutions may in turn consider what possible benefits being in an all-women's professional, scholarly, or co-curricular organization may offer to them.

Significance for Policy

Institutional policymakers may be influenced by the findings of this study, particularly when making decisions about funding for teaching and learning grants and classroom technology upgrades. Findings from this study may also influence institutional policy regarding learning accommodations, academic advising, and academic assessment. It is also possible that study findings will be significant for institutional policies on capping course enrollment.

Significance for Research

The present study, which explored the nature of the lived classroom experience for undergraduate students at a contemporary women's college, also has implications for future research. For example, this study explored the ways in which traditional-aged undergraduate students perceived their experience at a single institution. Future studies might examine how adult students perceive the experience at a women-only undergraduate institution. Other studies might examine how students of color perceive the experience at a predominantly white, women-only undergraduate institution. Future research might also address the lived experiences of international students at women's colleges. Such a study would expand on the limited information available about the nature of international students' academic experiences at women's colleges.

Delimitations and Boundaries

As with all research, initial delimitations were present in this study. An important delimitation relates to sample. All participants in this study were students at the same college, and it is possible that students at this institution differed in some important way from students at other colleges and universities. The goal of this study was to better understand the complexities of participants' lived women's college classroom experiences, not to generalize the findings to a larger population.

Another delimitation of this study was the fact that students' out of classroom college experiences and interactions may influence how students experience the classroom environment and/or the meaning students make from their classroom experiences. For example, some students may spend a significant amount of time in extracurricular activities, internships, undergraduate research, volunteer work, or work for pay. However, the women's college classroom experience is the gap in the literature that this study seeks to address.

Organization of the Study

This study was designed to explore the nature of the lived experience at a contemporary women's college and the meaning students make from their everyday classroom experiences. The study is presented in five chapters. In the first chapter, I introduce the phenomenon under investigation, describe the purpose of the study, and list research questions. I also outline the significance of the study, and describe preliminary study delimitations.

The second chapter contains a thorough review of the literature relevant to the study with particular attention to texts relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Chapter Three describes the methodology of the study. I discuss sampling techniques, participant selection, means for gathering lifeworld texts, and the procedures used to collect, synthesize, and analyze

the data. The third chapter also includes a more detailed discussion of why and how hermeneutic phenomenology is an appropriate method to address the research questions articulated in the study.

In Chapter Four, I describe the findings of the study and illuminate the essential themes of the phenomenon, which emerged from participant conversations, reflections, and discussions. In the fifth and final chapter, I bring to light implications of this study for pedagogy, administrative practice, policy, research, and theory.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

This phenomenological study examined the lived classroom experiences of students attending women's colleges. Three bodies of literature were relevant to this study. First, I reviewed literature on meaning-making, the process of how individuals make sense of knowledge, self, experiences, and relationships with others. Second, I reviewed literature on the nature of the college classroom experience. Third, I reviewed literature on women's colleges.

Literature on Meaning-Making

Scholars have conceptualized meaning-making through a variety of lenses. Consistent with the focus of this study, I reviewed scholarship that approached meaning-making with a hermeneutic phenomenological orientation and through a constructive-developmental lens. As this study focused on college-going women, I also reviewed literature on women's patterns of meaning-making.

Meaning-Making in Hermeneutic Phenomenology

First, I reviewed literature that conceptualized meaning-making as an essential component of hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology, an art and a science, is "the study of experience together with its meanings" (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012, p. 1). In this context, meaning is not viewed as stable or final. Rather, meaning is conceived as being "continuously open to new insight and interpretation" (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 1). Hermeneutic phenomenology concentrates on everyday, experienced meanings rather than theoretical meanings (van Manen, 2014).

In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, researchers and participants co-engage in the meaning-making process as they discuss and reflect on participants' lived experiences (Moran,

2000; Sokolowski, 2000; van Manen, 1990, 2014). As a methodological approach to making sense of lived experience, hermeneutic phenomenology allows participants to reflect on their experiences both “up close” and “at a distance” (Strong, Pyle, deVries, Johnston, & Foskett, 2008, p. 121). The ability to reflect on one’s lived experiences is essential to describing, interpreting, and making meaning from those experiences (Seidman, 2013; Strong et al., 2008; van Manen, 1990, 2014).

Clearly, the phenomenon of meaning-making is central in hermeneutic phenomenology. Meaning-making is also a critical component of any learning environment, including women’s colleges. However, the concept of meaning-making among women’s college students has not been explored very much in the literature.

Meaning-Making in the Constructive Developmental Context

Next, I reviewed literature that approached meaning-making through a constructive-developmental lens. In this context, meaning-making is generally described as a process that evolves as individuals move from childhood to and through adulthood (Kegan, 1982, 1994). This process of making sense of knowledge, experience, relationships, and self is not static, but dynamic (Ignelzi, 2000; Kegan, 1982, 1994). Human beings continually construct knowledge to make sense of experience and “continually test and modify these constructs in light of new experiences” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197).

Meaning-making as described by Kegan and Baxter Magolda. Two scholars, Robert Kegan and Marcia Baxter Magolda, offer extensive scholarship with respect to college students’ modes of making meaning from their lived experience. As Kegan (1982, 1994) observed, all human beings engage in the process of making sense of lived experience. Thus, elements of one’s social identity such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political view, and religious

affiliation influence how individuals make meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Individual meaning-making structures can be challenging to assess (Baxter Magolda, 2009, 2012).

Kegan (1994) conceptualized meaning-making as occurring in five developmental stages or orders of mind: Impulsive Mind (first order), Instrumental Mind (second order), Socialized Mind (third order), Self-Authoring Mind (fourth order), and Self-Transforming Mind (fifth order). According to Kegan (1994), the majority of the adult population (from late adolescence through adulthood) makes meaning between the third order (Socialized Mind) and the fourth order (Self-Authoring Mind). In the third order, one tends to rely on authorities for direction and is strongly influenced by what he or she believes others want to hear. In the fourth order, an individual is more of an independent-self-directed thinker and is able to critically regard his or her culture. College students are described by Kegan as often being in the third order developmentally, yet asked to conduct more intellectually demanding fourth-order activities (1994).

Expanding Kegan's work, Baxter Magolda (1998, 2009, 2012) examined college students' meaning-making structures. She found that college students tend to grapple with epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal questions of who they are, what they know, and how they wish to construct relationships with others (Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2009, 2012; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Baxter Magolda has extensively examined the process by which young adults in general, and college-going students in particular, become self-authoring. Self-authorship is "the capacity to internally define a coherent belief system and identity that coordinates engagement in mutual relations with the larger world" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, p. xxii). Viewing students as capable of exploring and interpreting knowledge, situating

learning in the student's own experience, and allowing students the opportunity to work through ideas collaboratively results in powerful learning experiences (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

In reviewing the combined works of Kegan and Baxter Magolda, three important themes emerged. First, all humans engage in the process of meaning-making (or making sense of lived experience), although they may not identify it as such. Second, meaning-making is generally viewed as a life-long activity. Third, individuals engage in meaning-making in unique ways (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Kegan, 1982; 1994).

Placing these themes in the context of my study, I recognized that all participants make meaning from their lived experience, yet some (or many) may be unfamiliar with the term "meaning-making." In addition, I recognized that participants are on a life journey of meaning making and I would only be able to converse with them in finite amounts of time. Finally, I recognized that study participants' modes of meaning differ from each other. Drawing on the literature on meaning-making as a developmental process, I viewed participants in this study as individuals dealing with questions of identity, authority, and knowledge.

Women and Making Meaning

Because this study focused on the lived women's college classroom experience, I reviewed literature on women's ways of making meaning. Although I recognized that each participant in this study would bring a unique way of understanding to her lived experience, it was important to explore the scholarship related to gender-related themes and patterns in meaning-making. Research demonstrates that as each woman develops her inner voice, she continues to make meaning from her life experiences (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996; Sax,

2008). Giving women an opportunity to discuss their academic experiences allows for them to reflect on internal issues that could potentially be a part of their identities (Josselson, 1996).

Belenky et al. (1986) examined epistemologies among a socioeconomically diverse group of women ranging in age from 16 to 60 in an effort to describe the ways of knowing that women have cultivated and learned to value. The authors identified five developmental knowledge positions through which women view themselves and their relationship to knowledge: Silence, Received Knowledge, Subjective Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge, and Constructed Knowledge. In the course of their research, which involved interviews with 135 women, the authors found that women “often feel alienated in academic settings and experience ‘formal’ education as either peripheral or irrelevant to their central interests and development” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 4).

Although Belenky et al. (1986) and Goldberger et al. (1996) presented intriguing pictures of women’s ways of knowing, learning, and valuing, with particular attention to themes of connected versus separate knowing, it is unclear whether women have a collectively defined pattern of making meaning from life experiences. What is clear, however, is that women’s ways of making meaning are influenced by a variety of cultural, historical, and social dimensions.

Because this study focused on the lived experiences of women’s college students, it was essential to review the literature on both hermeneutic phenomenological and constructivist developmental approaches to meaning-making as well as literature on women’s ways of making meaning and knowing. Next, it was important to review literature on the nature of the college classroom environment, a critical setting where meaning-making occurs in the college context. The everyday lived classroom experiences of women’s college students were the central phenomenon under investigation in this study.

Literature on the College Classroom

The classroom environment is defined by Urdan and Schoenfelder (2006) as the “general class atmosphere including attitudes toward learning, norms of social interactions, acceptance of ideas and mistakes, and learning structures set by the teacher” (p. 340). For institutions of higher education, classroom experiences lie at the center of educational activity (Tinto, 1997).

Classroom-based educational encounters are “a major feature of student educational experience” (Tinto, 1997, p. 599). The classroom environment and culture influence students’ patterns of learning, motivation, and engagement (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Spearman & Watt, 2013).

Meaning-Making in the Classroom Context

Classrooms are places where students “make meaning of their experiences and ideas in multiple ways: through individual reflection on reading and/or lecture, through social interaction with facilitators and other learners, and through various experiential learning opportunities” (Kern, 2006, p. 3). Students’ perceptions of the college classroom construct their realities (Spearman & Watt, 2013), and students in the same classroom may not perceive faculty, peers, or classroom culture in similar ways (Wolters, 2004). Minor adjustments in the classroom setting may lead to significant differences in student participation, perception, and meaning-making (Rocca, 2010). Despite the demonstrated influence of classroom context on student meaning-making, educational administrators and scholars lack a clear understanding of how students at women’s colleges make meaning from their interactions with faculty and other students.

Classroom interactions with faculty and peers. When investigating student-faculty interactions in the classroom setting, researchers have found that faculty behaviors and attitudes can dramatically affect student learning and engagement (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Even

the smallest mannerisms and behaviors that faculty members exhibit, as well as their more visible modes of interacting with students, influence the learning environment. College students are “clearly influenced by instructor communication patterns, providing further evidence of the importance of the instructor’s role in facilitating student participation” (Rocca, 2010, p. 207). When investigating peer-to-peer interactions in the classroom setting, researchers have found that positive associations with classroom peers are associated with a sense of belonging (Zumbrunn, 2014).

Women students’ classroom interactions with faculty and peers. Although the literature on college-going women’s interactions with faculty and peers is limited, some important findings are relevant to this study. First, faculty members have the power to influence women students’ sense of confidence and well-being in the classroom context (Sax, 2008). Second, when women students feel dismissed by faculty members in the classroom setting, this can have long-term negative consequences with respect to their academic goals and intellectual self-esteem (Sax, 2008). Third, attending to learning styles that emphasize thinking and feeling may encourage women’s participation in the classroom setting (Salter & Persaud, 2003; Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005). A more nuanced understanding of the women’s college classroom environment, and how women’s college students make meaning from their classroom interactions with peers and faculty, would fill a noted gap in the literature.

Literature on the Women’s College Experience

In this section, I review how women’s colleges are described in the literature. I summarize existing scholarly research on the women’s college experience, emphasizing three themes: student characteristics, academic environment, and classroom interactions. I conclude

by summarizing what is known and not yet known about women's colleges, and relating the existing literature to the need for the present study.

Women's Colleges

Women's colleges typically market themselves as places where undergraduate female students can enjoy an exceptional liberal arts education, engage in self-exploration, embrace leadership opportunities, and find their voices. Nearly all are private independent liberal arts colleges. These institutions generally describe their academic programs as rigorous as well as customizable. Women's colleges are not a monolithic group. Rather, "contemporary women's colleges are diverse institutions – distinct from each other in their history, profile, student body, and strengths, and internally diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, and life experiences of their students" (Sebrechts, 1999, p. 41). Women's colleges may have distinctly different organizational structures, but they are united in their commitment to women's learning (Sebrechts, 1999).

Declining enrollment at women's colleges. Although many laud women's colleges as models of best practice, these institutions are declining in number. Once numbering more than 200, fewer than 50 remain. Women's colleges enroll a decreasing share of all college-going women. Women's college attendees represent less than 1% of all college-going women (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). In 2004, 8.7% of women who enrolled in all private colleges (single-sex and coeducational) enrolled at women's colleges. In 2012, this figured dropped to 7.9% (Women's College Coalition, 2014).

Women's colleges are frequently depicted in higher education news and scholarly literature as suffering from shrinking enrollment, being forced into coeducation, and facing uncertain futures (Burton, 2010; Harwarth et al., 1997; Kratzok, 2010; Schemo, 2006). The

higher education environment is “increasingly challenging for single-sex education” (Thomas, 2008, p. 575). The recently announced closure and eventual reopening of Sweet Briar College, a Virginia women’s college established in 1901, sparked further debate about the relevance of, and need for, women’s colleges in today’s society (Carlson, 2015; Gray, 2015).

Criticism of women’s colleges. Although women’s colleges enjoy many advocates, most significantly in their student and alumni networks, not all hold these institutions in high esteem (Burton, 2010; Marine, 2009; Renn, 2014). Some individuals believe that segregating genders for educational purposes is not an effective way to achieve gender equality, and that students at women-only institutions will be inadequately prepared to thrive in mixed-gender world (Burton, 2010; Renn, 2014). Others have suggested that as women continue to advance in society, the number of women’s colleges will continue to decline (Burton, 2010). Despite these criticisms, staunch supporters continue to regard women’s colleges as institutions that help “instill in women a sense of competence, confidence, and agency” (Creighton, 2007, p. 9).

Women’s College Student Characteristics

Much of what scholars know about the demographic characteristics of women’s college attendees comes from data collected through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey (Astin, 1977; 1997; Kim, 2002; Sax, 2014). Since 1996, CIRP has collected data on more than 10 million incoming college students attending more than 1,600 colleges and universities. In 2011, 49 of these institutions were women’s colleges (Sax, Lozano, & Vandenberg, 2015).

In a recent comprehensive study, Sax et al. (2015) analyzed CIRP Freshman Survey data to identify characteristics of contemporary women’s college students and how those characteristics have changed throughout the last four decades. The research team analyzed

responses of 262,722 female students who entered women's colleges between 1971 and 2011, comparing these responses to those of more than 4.4 million women entering nearly 1,000 historically coeducational institutions during the same time period. Two categories of findings are particularly relevant to this study: student demographics and academic expectations.

Student demographics. Women's college attendees are racially and ethnically diverse. Among the entering women's college cohort in fall 2011, 26.9% identified as African American, 14.2% as Latina, 11% as Asian/Asian American, and 3.3% as American Indian. An additional 4.6% of students identified as "other" race/ethnicity. Sax and her colleagues noted that the decline in the White/Caucasian population, evident across all categories of institutions, was more pronounced within women's colleges. Additionally, nearly 30% of women's college attendees indicated their home neighborhood was "mostly or completely non-white" (Sax et al., 2015).

Women's college students are also increasingly socioeconomically diverse. Sax et al. (2015) determined that the 2011 median family income for women's college attendees was approximately \$84,000, compared to a median family income of approximately \$100,000 for women students at coeducational private colleges. Additionally, women's college attendees were the most likely of all college-going women to be first-generation college students (Sax et al., 2015). The dramatic shifts in women's college enrollment patterns indicate a need for renewed attention to, and investigation of, the women's college student experience.

Academic expectations. Contemporary women's college students have high academic aspirations. Incoming women's college students are more likely than women attending coeducational institutions to believe they will communicate regularly with professors and work with a professor on a research project (Sax et al., 2015). Women who attend women's colleges are more likely to have advanced degree aspirations than women who attend coeducational

institutions (Astin, 1977; Miller-Bernal, 2000; Sax et al., 2015; Smith, 1990). More than one-quarter of incoming women's college students plan to earn either a Ph.D. or Ed.D. (Sax et al., 2015).

However, contemporary women's college students have also expressed a clear need for academic resources. Sax and others' recent analysis of CIRP data revealed that 40% of women's college attendees anticipated a need for tutoring in college. In addition, when compared to women attending coeducational institutions, women's college attendees express lower levels of math self-confidence (Sax, 2014).

Clearly, a substantial body of work has been devoted to documenting the demographic characteristics and academic expectations of women's college students. It is also evident that the academic experience at women's colleges holds a fascination for several researchers. In the next section, I discuss how previous scholarship has examined the nature of the academic environment at women's college, paying particular attention benefits and outcomes associated with attendance.

Academic Environment

The earliest women's colleges were not known for their progressive learning environments (Thomas, 2008). In contrast, contemporary women's colleges are generally perceived as places where women can focus on academic excellence and spend significant amounts of time engaged in academic pursuits (Kim & Alvarez, 1995; Kinzie et al., 2007). Findings by Smith, Wolf-Wendel, & Morrison (1995), though dated, suggest that women's college attendees may be more likely than women attending coeducational institutions to be concerned with student learning.

Benefits. A growing body of research suggests that women's college students evaluate their academic experience more positively than women who attend coeducational institutions (Astin, 1977; Kim & Alvarez, 1995; Kim, 2002; Kinzie et al., 2007; Miller-Bernal, 1989, 2000; Sax, 2014; Smith, 1990). When compared to women attending coeducational colleges, women's college attendees indicate experiencing higher levels of academic challenge, increased interactions with faculty, and greater opportunities to engage in active and collaborative learning activities (Kinzie et al., 2007; Miller-Bernal, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Sax, 2014).

Although earlier research by Tidball (1973) indicated that a large percentage of faculty members in women-only colleges might be related to academic and career achievement among women's college graduates, later scholarship by Kim and Alvarez (1995) suggested that having a high proportion of female faculty is not a significant predictor of women's self-reported academic ability. Women's colleges typically employ a greater percentage of women faculty members and administrators, yet women faculty members and administrators are not always automatic support systems for women's college students (Rice & Hemmings, 1988).

In addition, recent research indicates that the academic environment at women's colleges may not benefit all women equally. Kinzie et al. (2007) analyzed National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data to determine whether or not women's college attendees from different backgrounds differed in terms of their college experiences. Their findings suggest that women's colleges may need to address some shortcomings and should "attend to the climate for learning on their campuses for students of color" (Kinzie et al., 2007, p. 162). Specifically, analysis of NSSE data revealed race-related differences in student academic engagement. African American students and Asian Pacific American students reported less engagement and satisfaction with their college experience than White students (Kinzie et al., 2007).

Outcomes. Attendance at a women's college is associated with a wide variety of academic gains and educational outcomes, and women's college graduates generally report a high degree of satisfaction with their undergraduate experience (Astin, 1977, 1997; Hardwick Day, 2012; Kim, 2002; Langdon, 1997; Ridgwell, 2002; Sax, 2014; Smith, Wolf-Wendel, & Morrison, 1995). Several studies have focused on the presence of a comparative educational advantage offered by single-sex schools. Researchers have examined advantages in terms of leadership opportunities (whether or not women have more opportunities to be leaders at women's colleges, as compared to co-educational colleges), post-graduate pathways (whether or not women who graduate from women's colleges are more likely to enter graduate schools and/or male-dominated fields), and student satisfaction (in academic life and in social life).

Leadership opportunities. Women who attend women's colleges "assume positions of leadership that in most coeducational institutions are taken by men" (Miller-Bernal, 2000, p. 222). Social activism, a form of leadership, is especially prevalent at women's colleges. Women's college attendance is positively correlated with a desire to influence social conditions, and the culture at these institutions appears to encourage social activism significantly more than coeducational institutional culture (Kim, 2001). At women's colleges, although women inevitably hold all student leadership positions, there is a lack of empirical evidence with respect to the connection between these leadership opportunities and later-life achievement, increased self-confidence, or enhanced academic performance (Miller-Bernal, 2000).

Postgraduate pathways. Throughout the last several decades, researchers have attempted to document a women's college advantage by contrasting career outcomes of women's college graduates with their coeducational counterparts. Tidball (1980, 1985) found that women's college graduates were more likely than women graduates of coeducational institutions to receive

doctoral degrees and had the highest rate of entry into medical school. However, earlier research such as Tidball's did not account for important pre-college characteristics such as academic preparation and socioeconomic status. Stoecker and Pascarella (1991) attempted to remedy this deficiency in their study by controlling for both individual-level and institutional-level characteristics; they found institutional gender to have a nonsignificant impact on women college students' postgraduate educational, career, and financial gains. More recent research by Hardwick Day (2012) indicated that women's college alumnae are more likely than liberal arts college alumnae and alumnae of flagship public universities to complete a graduate degree as well as to indicate that a college network played a role in graduate school acceptance or finding a first post-graduate professional position. More research is needed to investigate the postgraduate pathways of women's college alumnae, and how these pathways differ among individual institutions.

Student satisfaction. Women's college graduates overwhelmingly report satisfaction with their college experience. Recent research by Hardwick Day (2012) indicated that graduates of women's colleges were more likely than women graduates of coeducational liberal arts colleges as well as women graduates of flagship public universities to be "completely satisfied" with the overall quality of their education. In addition, more recent women's college alumnae (those who graduated in the 1990s) were more likely to indicate complete satisfaction with their college experience than older women's college alumnae (those who graduated in the 1970s and 1980s) (Hardwick Day, 2012). Although women's college graduates have expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their overall college experience, they tend to be less satisfied with aspects of their social life (Astin, 1993; Smith, 1990; Smith, Wolf, & Morrison, 1995). Future

research is needed to investigate the dimensions of student satisfaction, and the experiences that lead to it, on individual women's college campuses.

Research suggests that women who attend women's colleges engage in a qualitatively different experience than women who attend coeducational institutions (Astin, 1977, 1993; Riordan, 1994; Sax, 2014; Sebrechts, 1999; Smith, 1990; Whitt, 1994). Attending a women's college is positively associated with academic achievement (Kinzie et al., 2007; Smith, Wolf, & Morrison, 1995), leadership development (Whitt, 1994), and pursuit of graduate-level education (Hardwick Day, 2012). However, the literature suggests that women's college benefits do not accrue evenly to all students. In addition, there is a lack of scholarship on how students experience the classroom environment.

Need for the Present Study in Light of Current Literature

Although several studies demonstrate the positive educational and career outcomes associated with attending women's colleges, relatively little is known about the programs, policies, and practices at women's colleges that are effective in engaging women (Kinzie et al., 2007). In addition, much of the scholarship on women's colleges is so dated that one questions the extent to which the findings of these older studies are still relevant for today's women's college student population – one that is more diverse racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically. As Sax, Bryant, and Harper observed, the “quantity of students’ involvement with faculty must be understood in the context of the quality that defines such interactions” (2005, p. 644). Although some suggest that women's colleges are able to tailor their curricular and co-curricular experiences to women's learning styles (Riordan, 1994), this has not been supported by the literature.

A significant body of research has demonstrated positive benefits associated with women's college attendance, yet less is known about the processes by which these benefits are accrued. Miller-Bernal (2000) has called for more nuanced understanding of the specific aspects of the women's college environment that encourage positive development among students. It is clear that the classroom experience is critically important to academic integration, yet "little has been done to explore how the experience of the classroom matters" (Tinto, 1997, p. 599). The meaning women's college students make from their classroom experiences is poorly understood.

The present study, by studying particular students in specific contexts, aims to uncover the qualitative dimensions of the women's college. Knowledge of how women's college students make meaning from their classroom experiences, as well as an enhanced understanding of how race, ethnicity, class, culture, and other dimensions of identity influence these experiences, is a next needed step in the research.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This study was designed to describe and understand how undergraduate students at a contemporary women's college made meaning from their everyday lived classroom experiences. In this study, I used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach featuring in-depth interviewing to investigate the central research questions. The central research questions that guided this study were:

1. What is the nature of the lived classroom experience for undergraduate students at a contemporary women's college?
2. What meaning do undergraduate students make from their lived classroom experiences at a contemporary women's college?
3. How do undergraduate students at a contemporary women's college make meaning from their lived classroom experiences?

This chapter contains a detailed description of the research plan for this study, including my theoretical and philosophical orientation, methodological approach, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, and steps taken to enhance quality and rigor. Consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990, 2014), I include (as Appendix A) a written description of my own process of turning toward the central phenomenon in this study: the lived classroom experience for undergraduate students at a contemporary women's college.

Philosophical Orientation

As I undertook this study, my philosophical orientation was greatly influenced by the works of Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990, 2014), each of whom emphasized adopting an

attitude of wonder about the phenomenon of interest and a genuine interest in understanding the lifeworlds of individuals. By reflecting on lived experience, we can make meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology allows us to become critically aware of our lives and the many dimensions of our understanding of lived experiences (van Manen, 2014). My philosophical orientation drove me toward my theoretical orientation.

Theoretical Orientation

My theoretical orientation in this study was influenced by the work of Marcia Baxter Magolda and Patricia King, as well as Robert Kegan. Meaning-making, as viewed by Baxter Magolda and King (2012) and Kegan (1982, 1994), is a dynamic phenomenon that can evolve over time to become increasingly complex. *How* we know is equally as important as *what* we know. By accessing our meaning-making structures and processes, we arrive at a heightened awareness of how we construct new knowledge and beliefs. My theoretical orientation led to my methodological approach.

Methodological Approach

A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study, which sought to understand the lived classroom experience of undergraduate students at a contemporary women's college. Qualitative research honors the notion that knowledge can be known by studying the subjective experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2013). In this study, I embraced the idea of multiple realities and aimed to adequately represent these realities in my findings (Creswell, 2013). Because it was my goal to understand the multiple realities of undergraduate women's college students, a phenomenological approach was appropriate.

Phenomenology is "the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 148). This type of inquiry

assumes there is a structure and essence to shared experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). The phenomenological attitude encompasses an orientation of understanding, and honoring, the whole of the phenomenon via the perspective of those who actually live it and make sense of it (Seidman, 2013). In phenomenological inquiry, the researcher reports the various ways that participants view, understand, and make meaning from their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Because this study focused on not only lived experiences of individuals but also the meaning individuals made from experiences, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was appropriate (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology as Method

The purpose and research questions in this study, my theoretical and philosophical orientations, and my constructivist and interpretivist lens drove me toward hermeneutic phenomenology as a method of inquiry. Hermeneutic phenomenology is the study of experience and the meanings of experience (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012). In this study, I employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach guided by Creswell (2012, 2013), Marshall & Rossman (2011), Moustakas (1994), and van Manen (1990, 2014). I focused on the basic structures of the lived experience of others.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, concentrating on lived experience helps participants articulate and make meaning from phenomena encountered in that experience (Laverty, 2003). Studies employing this approach must encourage participants to make meaning from their everyday experiences. Additionally, participants' meanings are viewed as being continually open to new insights.

Hermeneutic phenomenological studies begin with the development of a topic and question(s) that are "rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social

meanings and significance” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 103). The research proceeds through a series of steps and culminates in “a composite textural description, a composite structural description, and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104). Below, I elaborate on the steps I took to conduct this study, and how these steps were consistent with the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, using guidance from Creswell (2012, 2013), Marshall and Rossman (2011), Moustakas (1994), and van Manen (1990, 2014).

Sample Selection

Qualitative research generally demands a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2013). An investigator selects sites and individuals based on their ability to inform the research problem, questions, and central phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013). Although sampling may change during the course of the inquiry and a certain degree of flexibility is needed, it is important to craft a sampling strategy prior to undertaking the study (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative research, sampling decisions can affect the credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability of the study (Creswell, 2013).

In any phenomenological investigation, all participants must have experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013) and the ability to articulate their conscious experiences of the phenomenon being explored (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Participants may be located in a single site (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In phenomenological inquiry, specifying a sample size prior to undertaking the study is not necessarily appropriate (van Manen, 2014). Rather, researchers should aim to gather a sufficient number of rich oral or written experiential descriptions from individuals to explore the meanings of the phenomenon under investigation (van Manen, 2014).

Research Site and Participant Selection

Consistent with guidance from Creswell (2013), van Manen (1990, 2014), and Marshall and Rossman (2011), I selected a research site and participants in a purposeful manner. The research site in this study is a moderately selective institution of higher education with a women-only undergraduate student body located in the southern region of the United States. I will identify this institution using the pseudonym of “Carter College.” Selecting this institution made it convenient for me to conduct three interviews with each participant. At the time of the study, I held an administrative role at the institution; I held no teaching responsibilities and did not serve in a student advisory capacity.

The mission of Carter College, in place for more than two decades, emphasized the importance of a liberal arts curriculum in enhancing students’ intellectual and personal growth and a commitment to furthering human rights and social justice. Some of the commonly cited hallmarks of a Carter education are small classes, frequent interaction with faculty, and an emphasis on writing across the curriculum. Many undergraduate students at Carter participated in one or more student organizations, which ranged from literary journals to service societies to political groups.

Full-time, residential students constituted the overwhelming majority of the undergraduate student population at Carter College. During the academic year in which I conducted the research, the institution enrolled approximately 600 undergraduate students. Approximately 13% of Carter undergraduates identified as Black or African-American, approximately 7% identified as Hispanic/Latina, approximately 4% identified as having two or more races, and approximately 65% identified as White/Non-Hispanic. Approximately 5% identified as international students.

The undergraduate program at Carter has always been women-only. In recent years, Carter has clarified its policy on transgender issues. At the time the research was conducted, the existing institutional policy at Carter specified that only students who identified as women were eligible for admission into the undergraduate program, and that degrees would only be conferred to students who identified as women.

Participant criteria. To be included in the sample, participants were required to meet three key criteria. First, participants were required to be at least 18 years old. Second, participants were required to have completed a minimum of 60 credits at the institution. Third, participants were required to be currently enrolled as full-time, residential students at the institution. These criteria ensured that participants could draw from plentiful classroom experiences at the institution.

Access to participants. I gained access to participants by working collaboratively with the academic dean at Carter College, who served as the primary gatekeeper in this study. The academic dean sent an email on my behalf to students who met the selection criteria. This email message included the purpose of the study, expectations of participants, and identified tokens of appreciation that I would offer to participants. The email included my contact information, allowing potential participants to contact me directly. I also distributed flyers (see Appendix B) in high-traffic locations around the campus: the student center and dining hall, the post office, and academic buildings.

Students interested in participating first contacted me via email. Next, I arranged a phone call. During this call, I verified participants met the required criteria, would be comfortable talking about their classroom experiences, and were able to commit to a series of three interviews spaced from one to two weeks apart. A copy of the Participant Recruitment Screening

Telephone Verbal Script is included as Appendix C. Finally, I identified a mutually convenient interview schedule and a distraction-free, private, and neutral interview location. As I was an employee of the institution, I took steps to ensure that I had no previous relationship with the participants selected for the study.

Sample Size

In determining the appropriate number of participants necessary to inform the research questions, I embraced Kvale's (1994) suggestion that a researcher ought to interview as many participants as required to answer the research question and Creswell's (2013) recommendation for extended interviews with up to 10 people for a phenomenological study. My goal was to interview enough individuals to explore the meanings of the phenomenon of the lived classroom experience at a contemporary women's college.

I used a purposeful sampling strategy in this study and selected participants at a single site based on their ability to inform the research problem, questions, and central phenomenon under investigation. Throughout the research, I used a mixed approach to sampling to ensure that the sample reflected the diversity of the student population at the research site. I asked for referrals from campus gatekeepers. I also asked study participants to suggest other students who might have had classroom experiences either similar or different to their own. I intentionally sought to arrive at a sample that would reflect the socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial diversity of the research site. In the section below, I summarize data collection procedures used in this study.

Data Collection Procedures

In this section, I describe the steps I took to obtain participants' written informed consent, protect participants from harm, and protect participants' privacy. I then describe the interview protocol and additional data collection procedures used in this study. In gathering data from

participants and developing an interview protocol, I followed guidance from Creswell (2013), Marshall and Rossman (2011), and Seidman (2006, 2013).

Informed Consent

In the pursuit of knowledge, individual rights of participants must be protected. Prior to collecting data, I received approval from the institutional review boards at my home institution and the research site. Copies of these approvals are included in Appendices D and E. I obtained participants' informed consent in writing. Prior to beginning the first interview, I talked casually with participants, building rapport and briefly reviewing the relevant information obtained in the telephone pre-screening. Next, I reviewed the consent form (Appendix F) previously sent to participants via email. I then asked participants if they had any questions or concerns about participating in the study. I had participants sign two copies of the consent form; I kept one copy and provided the participant with the second copy. In addition to obtaining written consent at the initial interview, I reviewed the notion of informed consent with participants before the second and third interviews, reminding individuals that their participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any point. At the first interview, I also collected demographic information on participants including their preferred first name, their major(s) and minor(s), their college generational status, their geographic region of origin, and their preferred personal pronouns.

Protection from harm. As a researcher, it was critical that I identified, justified, and minimized the risks of real or potential harm to participants involved in my research. Prior to undertaking this study, no risks of physical harm (e.g. unnecessary discomfort, physical pain, etc.) were identified. No risks of social harm (e.g. damage to a participant's reputation or social standing) were identified.

I identified a potential risk to psychological harm: the possibility of emotional distress. I recognized that participants could respond positively or negatively to a request to discuss their life experiences and acknowledged the possibility that my questions about views, attitudes, and life experiences might generate a stressful emotional response. To minimize the risk of emotional distress, I maintained heightened awareness to signals of participant distress and emphasized responding to the needs of the individual. If necessary, I referred the participant to available on-site mental health and counseling services. Additionally, prior to undertaking the study I determined that if a participant disclosed Title IX-related stories or experiences to me, I would first consult with the faculty member serving as the co-principal investigator of this study and then consult with the human research review boards at both the researcher's home institution and the study site institution to ensure appropriate protocols were followed.

An additional potential risk identified prior to undertaking this study was a possible inconvenience to the participant due to the time involved in participating in interviews. To minimize the risk of inconvenience, I limited the frequency of interviews to no more than one per week. As a way to compensate for this inconvenience, I offered participants a token of appreciation in the form of a \$10 gift card to Amazon.com at the conclusion of each interview. Study participants received a maximum of three \$10 gift cards to Amazon.com.

Participant privacy. Consistent with guidance from Creswell (2013) and others, study participants were not misled in any way, and their privacy and dignity were protected throughout the study. Participants were presented with a written statement explaining the steps I would take to protect their confidentiality and keep the information they shared with me confidential. I strictly protected information that was traceable to participants. Personal data about participants

were not revealed to any third party or to the public in such a way as to make possible the identification of any individual participant.

Interview Technique and Protocol

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher must consider what form of interviewing will be most useful to understand the central phenomenon and answer the questions posed in the study (Creswell, 2012). In choosing an interview technique, qualitative researchers must also consider accessibility to participants, cost, and the amount of time available to conduct the study (Creswell, 2012). One-on-one interviews, though time-consuming and costly, are ideal for participants who are “not hesitant to speak, who are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably” (Creswell, 2012, p. 218).

In phenomenological studies, the researcher interviews participants to obtain accounts of their personal lived experiences to reflect on the meaning of these experiences (van Manen, 2014). Marshall and Rossman (2011) describe phenomenological interviewing as in-depth interviewing grounded in a philosophical tradition. In phenomenology, researchers must bracket off their experiences prior to beginning interviews with participants. This technique of bracketing off experiences, or epoché, is described later in this chapter.

In-depth interviewing is appropriate when one has an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience, and was thus the mode of interviewing that best fit the purpose of this study (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013; Seidman, 2013; Weiss, 1994, van Manen, 2014). In-depth interviewing allows participants to reflect on, and reconstruct, the compelling and/or significant experiences of everyday life (Seidman, 2013; Weiss, 1994). This interview protocol in this study was informed by assumptions drawn from

phenomenology and was designed to elicit information about what the classroom experience was like for women's college students.

Interview protocol. In developing the interview protocol, I followed Seidman's (2006, 2013) suggested model for in-depth, phenomenological interviewing and also relied on guidance from Creswell (2013), Moustakas (1994), and van Manen (1990, 2014). Consistent with Seidman's (2006, 2013) approach, the protocol used in this study calls for the researcher to ask open-ended questions, explore participants' responses to these questions, and have participants reconstruct their experiences within the topic under study in a three-interview series. As van Manen (1990) suggested, individuals must reconstruct experiences to access experiences.

The interview protocol was reviewed by members of the research committee and piloted with a small sample of full-time residential students who were not eligible to participate in the full study because they did not meet one or more of the three criteria. In the pilot interviews, an abbreviated 30-minute interview structure was used. The process of piloting the interview protocol with three volunteer participants from different academic disciplines helped confirmed my decision to utilize the three-interview structure for this study. After mutual respect and trust was established in the first interview, students seemed to be more forthcoming in the second interview. By the time the third interview was conducted, students seemed to have reconstructed several experiences upon which they could reflect, and from which they could make meaning. Piloting activities helped me realize the importance of securing a neutral space for the interview that offered privacy and was free of distraction. The pilot interview also helped me understand that it was most beneficial to ask participants to reconstruct their experiences.

Feedback from the pilot group was helpful as I prepared questions with accompanying probes to lend structure to the conversations with participants and to help establish continuity

between interviews. Pilot group participants indicated they appreciated knowing the intended focus of each interview in advance of our meetings. Based on pilot group participant feedback, I sent email reminders to study participants prior to our scheduled meetings with an idea of the topics of we would explore and the types of questions that I would be asking. Piloting activities also helped me to identify questions that seemed overly vague and difficult for participants to answer. Interview questions were informed by the existing research literature on the nature of the phenomenon under investigation as well as the content of previous interviews.

The interview protocol consisted of three thematically based interviews spaced from one to two weeks apart. In the first interview (Focused Life History) I attempted to place participants' college classroom experiences in context by first asking about their high school classroom experiences and how they came to attend a women-only undergraduate institution. Interview One protocol is included as Appendix G. In the second interview (Details of the Experience) I attempted to gather the concrete details of the participants' lived classroom experiences in the women's college environment, asking participants to describe their classrooms and the actors and activities occurring within them. Interview Two protocol is included as Appendix H. In the third interview (Reflection on the Meaning) I invited participants to reflect on the meaning of their classroom experiences. For example, I asked how their classroom experiences have influenced their present lives. The protocol for Interview Three is included as Appendix I. Spacing interviews approximately one to two weeks apart allowed sufficient time for both the participants and me to reflect on the content of our conversations, while also minimizing the risk of inconvenience to participants.

I collected data through three in-depth interviews with each participant. Interviews were conducted in person or via Skype, a widely-used video calling software. Interviews conducted in

person took place in a private, quiet conference room in either the university student center or the university library. I reserved conference rooms without windows to help ensure participant privacy.

I explained to each participant that, with their permission, I would digitally audio-record all interviews and that each interview would last between 60 and 90 minutes. Once an interview reaches the 90-minute threshold, interview quality may begin to diminish (Seidman, 2013). I also indicated to each participant that I would provide them with summary of findings and allow them an opportunity to check for errors and clarify the meaning of any of their statements. I sent summaries to participants via email (see Appendix J, Appendix K, and Appendix M).

Main questions, probes, and follow-up questions. To obtain thick descriptions of the phenomenon I used an interviewing guide consisting of three types of questions: main questions, probes, and follow-up questions (Geertz, 1973). Main questions helped to ensure each research question was answered. Probes were standard expressions designed to encourage participants to continue talking on a subject, providing examples and details. In follow-up questions, I asked participants to elaborate on key concepts, ideas, themes, and events.

In interviews, I encouraged participants to give the fullest possible description of their experiences. I asked participants about their recalled experiences and associated contexts, thoughts, feelings, images, and sensations. When follow-up questioning was needed to clarify details of an experience, I attempted to do so in a non-leading way.

Responsive interviewing. In this study, I practiced responsive interviewing, exploring topics in-depth and asking follow up questions based on participants comments, asking for details on how processes unfolded and the meaning participants made from experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I listened for participants' meaning, and when I could not clearly discern

meaning, I asked follow-up questions to gain enhanced clarity (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I also attended to speaker behavior and body language while listening for meaning. I recorded my observations, reflections, and insights about interviews in memo form. Some memos were handwritten during the course of the interview with a participant; others were typed immediately after concluding the interview. Memos varied in length, from a short phrase up to two pages or so. The process of writing and reading memos helped me to record what I began to see in the data.

In summary, one-on-one, in-depth interviewing was the most appropriate method to collect data in this study. The three-interview series, although time-consuming and costly, was necessary to gain insight into the meaning of the central phenomenon for those who experienced it. While in-depth interviewing was the primary method of collecting data in this study, I relied on one additional data source: participant reflection essays. This additional source of data is described in more detail below.

Additional Data Sources

During the course of a qualitative study, a researcher may collect public documents (e.g. public meeting minutes or reports) and/or private documents (e.g. personal emails, essays and letters) (Creswell, 2013). Depending on the nature of the study, works of art, poetry, and music might also be useful to include. Collecting reflective journals or essays from participants can be especially helpful when a researcher wishes to gain additional insight into participants' experiences and the meaning made from those experiences.

In this study, consistent with guidance from Creswell (2013), I asked all participants in the study to complete a short reflective essay on a college classroom experience they deemed especially meaningful. This essay was completed in between the second and third interview. By

incorporating the use of reflective essays into this study, I was able to gain additional insight into participants' thoughts, feelings, and ways of making meaning as they related to the phenomenon of the lived classroom experience.

Throughout this study, I carefully gathered data to inform the research questions. In the next section, I describe how I recorded my observations, reflections, and insights throughout the research process in the form of a research journal, field notes, and memos.

Research Journal, Field Notes, and Memos

To enhance the rigor of the study, I kept a research journal and recorded memos and field notes throughout the study (Morrow & Smith, 2000). The act of keeping a research journal helped to deepen my own understanding of the research process and maintain reflexivity throughout the study. Through writing journal entries, I was able to reflect on and document my personal experience of the research process. I recorded my thoughts, assumptions, behaviors, insights, decisions, reactions, and expectations. Using a research journal also helped me maintain awareness of observed biases and provided an outlet for any research-related anxieties. In addition to my research journal, I kept an audit trail to record decision points throughout the research process (Schwandt, 2007).

Field notes, initially created as handwritten notes to remember and record observations, impressions, events, and dialogue, were drafted within 24 hours of conducting each interview (Lofland & Lofland, 1999). All field notes included the date, time, and location of the interview. The process of writing field notes helped me to better examine my relationship to the research setting and participants as well as my own ways of making meaning.

Memos served as the primary way to capture my thoughts, ideas, and insights that occurred throughout data collection, condensation, display, conclusion drawing, and final

reporting. Memos varied in length, from a short phrase up to two pages. All were dated and titled for reference. Many contained subtitles with more specific information. Through writing memos in this study, I was able to keep my analysis separate from, but linked to, the material I analyzed. Memos helped me to record what I began to see in the data. Below, I describe how I used a popular qualitative data analysis computer software program, NVivo 11 for Windows, to manage, access, and analyze my data.

Data Management

In-depth interviewing is labor intensive, and an organized approach to data management was critical to this study. I ensured that written consent forms, digital audio recordings, transcriptions, the research journal, field notes, research memos, and other materials were stored in a safe place and labeled clearly and correctly (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). All data were kept in password-protected files stored on my home office computer. This helped to ensure participants' confidentiality.

Transcription

As part of data management, I attempted to transcribe each interview (or have it transcribed) within 24 to 48 hours after it was conducted. It was not possible to transcribe all interviews in the research process myself, as a 90-minute interview typically takes between 4 to 6 hours to transcribe. Thus, a portion of the audio files were transcribed by a paid individual who was given clear and explicit instructions for transcriptions. Express Scribe Transcription Software, which allows for variable speed playback, aided transcription. I assigned all transcripts an alphanumeric code.

Data Analysis

The aim of phenomenological data analysis is to “transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful” (van Manen, 1997, p. 36). The phenomenological attitude emphasizes understanding and honoring the whole of the phenomenon via the perspective of those who actually live it and make sense of it (Seidman, 2013). Thus, a phenomenological approach to data analysis requires a constructivist-interpretivist lens.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Data Analysis

Analytical methods in this study were developed from phenomenological and hermeneutical principles and largely informed by Moustakas (1994) with additional guidance from Creswell (2013), Marshall and Rossman (2011), Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), and van Manen (1990, 1997, 2014). Although there is not a singularly accepted approach to data analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology, the process offered by Moustakas (1994) is widely accepted and has been used in phenomenological studies across a range of disciplines. Consistent with guidance from Moustakas (1994), I followed four general steps of data analysis in this hermeneutic phenomenological study: epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and structural synthesis. In the next section, I describe each of these steps in more detail and how I followed them in this study.

Epoché. Qualitative researchers must remain sensitive to their own biographies and social identities, and the ways in which these shape the inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Consistent with guidance from Moustakas (1994) and others (e.g., Marshall & Rossman, 2011; van Manen, 1990, 1997, 2014), I composed a full written description of my own experience with

the phenomenon, bracketing off my experiences from those of participants. This self-examination, included as Appendix A, was an essential first step toward attaining epoché, described by Moustakas (1994, p. 90) as a “pure state of being required for fresh perceiving and experiencing.” The challenge of epoché is to be “transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). Through this self-examination, I gained greater clarity into my own preunderstandings and preconceptions about the central phenomenon in this study, the lived women’s college classroom experience.

Phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological reduction is the process of clustering data around themes that describe the textures of the experience (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). It involves “describing in textural language just what one sees, not only in terms of the external object but also the internal act of consciousness, the experience as such, the rhythm and relationship between phenomenon and self” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90).

In this study, the unit of analysis was lived experience of the participant. I attempted to gain an understanding of how individual participants experienced the phenomenon of the women’s college classroom, and the meaning participants made from their experiences. Consistent with guidance from Creswell (2013), I read each interview transcript in its entirety to gain a holistic sense of the data, adopting an open attitude. This was an important first step. Then, I read the interview transcript a second time, more slowly. Reading each transcript at least twice prior to beginning the unit labeling process allowed me to gain a more enhanced sense of the overall meaning of the data (Creswell, 2013).

Next, I loaded interview transcripts into NVivo. This software helped me to manage, access, and analyze data collected in my study. I used NVivo to organize and code all of my

transcribed material. NVivo also helped me to more easily code material by theme and record my insights, observations, and interpretations in the form of memos and annotations.

As I attempted to reduce, or condense, the data, I followed Moustakas' suggestion to engage in five steps of phenomenological reduction. First, I placed the dual focus of the research in brackets (the nature of the lived women's college classroom experience and the meaning women's college students make from their everyday lived classroom experiences). Second, I allowed each statement in a transcript to have equal value (a process referred to as horizontalization). Third, I attempted to identify the horizons that stood out as invariant qualities of lived women's college classroom experience. Fourth, I clustered the horizons into themes. Fifth, I attempted to organize horizons and themes into a coherent textural description of the phenomenon under investigation.

NVivo was extremely helpful as I attempted to reduce data collected in this study. All interview transcripts were subjected to at least two cycles of coding. Most sources were subjected to three or four cycles of coding. I applied a coding scheme that used descriptive codes (a word or phrase to summarize what I viewed as the primary topic of an excerpt of text) and *in vivo* codes (codes taken directly from participants words and placed in quotation marks). Coding helped me to condense textual data into meaningful units.

NVivo allowed me to not only code selected text to nodes, but also to create hierarchical structures using child nodes. For example, I created nodes labeled "classroom environment" and then created associated child nodes e.g. "classroom physical properties," "classroom culture," and "classroom interactions." As I categorized and arranged nodes and child nodes in NVivo, I was able to more easily identify invariant qualities (or horizons) of the lived women's college classroom experience and cluster those horizons into themes. NVivo also helped me to display

my data in ways that aided analysis. For example, I was able to better explore and visualize data through word clouds and word trees. I was also able to create concept maps in NVivo. These tools helped me to explore patterns in the data.

Imaginative variation. During imaginative variation, a researcher attempts to change certain details about an experience and see what remains similar in all variations. The goal is to arrive at invariant attributes – things essential to perception of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Through imaginative variation, I was able to test my insights into the meaning of the central phenomenon and its essential structures. I abstracted out essential aspects without which the women’s college classroom experience would not have been the same (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). I analyzed how participants described their physical surroundings, including characters and aspects of characters, objects, activities, interactions, and descriptive elements. I attempted to identify the essential aspects of the women’s college classroom experience, as conveyed by the participants. These analyses were stored in NVivo.

Structural synthesis. Structural synthesis culminates in a description of the essence and structures of the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This process involves seeking all possible meanings as well as looking for divergent perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The synthesis is never final; the essences are never complete. Rather, the articulated essences are related to a particular time and place as well as the researcher’s view following reflective study of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In the final step of this study, I synthesized and integrated composite textural and composite structural descriptions of the nature of the lived women’s college classroom experience.

Rigor, Authenticity and Trustworthiness

In qualitative research one aims to achieve rigor, authenticity, and trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry involves establishing credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility involves confidence in the “truth” of findings and may be established through peer debriefing, member-checking, persistent observation, triangulation, and other means (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative study is said to achieve authenticity if findings are an accurate interpretation of participants’ meaning (Creswell, 2013). Transferability indicates the findings are applicable in other contexts, and may be achieved through thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability, which may be achieved through an inquiry audit, means that findings are consistent and could be replicated. Confirmability, achieved through an audit trail, triangulation, and reflexivity, indicates the findings are shaped by participants rather than researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance the methodological rigor of this study, I also attempted to identify negative cases, or data that appeared to contradict patterns and explanations that emerged from data analysis, related to the research questions in this study (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Phenomenological inquiry demands additional actions on behalf of the researcher to establish legitimacy. Van Manen (2014) outlined four validation criteria appropriate to phenomenology. First, studies must be based on a valid phenomenological question (what a human experience is like or how a phenomenon is being experienced). Second, phenomenological studies must not deal with causal questions or theoretical explanations. Third, analysis must be performed on descriptive accounts. Fourth, the study must be properly rooted in phenomenological literature.

In addition to van Manen (2014), Polkinghorne (1989) offered helpful advice to researchers using phenomenology as a method of inquiry. Following the advice of Polkinghorne (1989), I asked myself five key questions at various points during this phenomenological study. First, I asked myself if I influenced participants' descriptions in some way that might lead to untrue reflections of participants' actual experience. Second, I asked myself if the transcriptions were accurate. Third, I asked myself if there were alternative conclusions that might have been derived in the analysis stage. Fourth, I asked myself it was possible to move logically from general structural descriptions to specific content in the original examples of the experience. Fifth, I asked myself if the structural description was situation-specific (Polkinghorne, 1989).

In this study, I employed the techniques mentioned as previously described in an attempt to portray a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under investigation, provide sufficient detail of the context of my fieldwork, and ensure my findings emerged from the data rather than my own predispositions. Frequent debriefing sessions with members of my research committee afforded me the opportunity to discuss alternative approaches, draw attention to flaws in the proposed research plan, refine my coding scheme, test ideas, and recognize my own biases and prejudices. In pursuit of rigor, I attempted to apply appropriate research tools to answer the research questions, worked with members of the research committee to review my research plan and interview protocol, and completed a pilot study.

Conclusion

In this study, I attempted to ensure adequate presentation of multiple understandings of the same phenomenon: the lived undergraduate classroom experience at a contemporary women's college. I gathered data rigorously in an intensive manner, made sincere attempts to strengthen the robustness of my work and contextualized findings to specific setting and

participants. I aimed to describe, interpret, and understand the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a unique and poorly understood phenomenon. Throughout the inquiry, I reviewed the meaning that I made of my own work, reflecting on the nature of the phenomenological inquiry experience, how I understood and made sense of the experience, and the connections that I saw between this analysis and other characterizations of the phenomenon, including prior research on women's colleges.

In summary, this study was designed to gain an understanding of women's college students made meaning from their lived classroom experiences. The methodology of this study was designed to provide data to inform the research questions. Study findings are presented in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four

Study Findings

The findings from my study describe the nature of the lived women's college classroom experience, the meaning women's college students made from their classroom experiences, and how women's college students made meaning from their classroom experience. It is important to note that this study, a qualitative research endeavor in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, did not involve causal questions or theoretical explanations. Rather, the purpose of this study was to achieve a better understanding of a lived experience and the meaning made from the experience. Study findings emerged from analysis of participants' descriptive accounts, gathered through interviews and reflection essays.

To arrive at study findings, I performed phenomenological data reduction and analysis, organizing significant statements into meaning units (referred to as "horizons of meaning" in hermeneutic phenomenology), then clustering meaning units into themes that constituted the "textures of the experience" (Creswell, 1998, p. 150). I analyzed how participants described their physical surroundings, interactions with others, activities, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. In my analysis, I first allowed each statement of participants' transcripts and reflection essays to have equal value. Next, I identified the horizons of meaning that stood out as invariant qualities of lived women's college classroom experience. I then clustered these horizons into themes. As a final step, I created a coherent textural description of the phenomenon under investigation that captures the essence of what participants experienced and how they experienced it.

Description of Participants

There were 10 participants in this study. All were enrolled as full-time, residential students at a women's college in the southern region of the United States, and all had completed at least 60 credits at this institution. Two participants were international students who traveled to the United States for the purpose of higher education. Six of the 10 participants were Caucasian, and the remaining four participants identified as Black, African-American, Asian-American, or biracial. With respect to the socioeconomic status, two participants identified as lower class, four participants identified as middle class, two participants identified as upper-middle class, and one participant identified as upper-class. Two participants indicated that neither parent had completed a college degree. All participants identified as women and used preferred pronouns she and her. The table below shows the academic majors of participants and their home residencies (In-State, Out-of-State, or International).

Table 1

Academic Majors and Home Residencies of Participants

Participant	Academic Major(s)	Home Residency
Allison	Biology	In-State
Cameron	Music	In-State
Iris	English and Creative Writing	In-State
Julianna	Biology	International
Kinsley	Sociology	In-State
Mariah	English and Spanish	Out-of-State
Natalie	Economics and Environmental Studies	International
Parker	English and Creative Writing	In-State
Riley	Dance and Psychology	Out-of-State
Sophie	Gender and Women's Studies	In-State

I present study findings as themes that emerged during data analysis. Findings are presented in the order of the main research questions that guided the study. First, I present findings related to the nature of the lived women’s college classroom experience. Second, I present findings related to what meaning students made from their lived women’s college classroom experience. Third, I present findings on how students made meaning from their lived classroom experience. I describe and illustrate themes with participants’ words from interviews and reflection essays.

The Nature of the Lived Women’s College Classroom Experience (Research Question 1)

My analysis of participants’ descriptive accounts resulted in two themes related to the first research question in this study. The first theme was Student Participation in Classroom Discussion Fostered and Prioritized. The second theme was Students Voice Ideas, Experiences, and Uncertainties in an Accepting Space. The table below illustrates how these themes emerged during data analysis.

Table 2

Research Question 1 (Nature of the Lived Experience) Themes

RQ 1 Theme	Horizons of Meaning	Participants Included
A. Student Participation in Classroom Discussion Fostered and Prioritized	1. Professors Actively Encourage Students to Participate in Discussion	Cameron, Iris, Kinsley, Natalie, Parker, Riley, Sophie
	2. Students Expect Themselves to Participate in Discussion	Cameron, Iris, Parker, Sophie
	3. Professors Use Silence to Encourage Discussion	Allison, Iris, Kinsley, Sophie
	4. Professors Intentionally Encourage Quiet Students to Participate	Allison, Kinsley

B. Students Voice Ideas, Experiences, and Uncertainties in an Accepting Space	1. Students Share Personal Opinions, Ideas, Feelings, and Experiences	Allison, Cameron, Iris, Julianna, Kinsley, Natalie, Parker, Riley, Sophie
	2. Students Ask Questions, Share Work, and Take Risks with Thinking	Allison, Cameron, Iris, Kinsley, Natalie, Parker, Sophie
	3. Students are not Judged by Others	Allison, Cameron, Natalie, Riley, Sophie
	4. Easier to Share Personal Stories in Upper-Level Classes Within Major	Natalie, Parker

Student participation in classroom discussion fostered and prioritized. Participants described the women’s college classroom environment as a place where professors welcomed and actively encouraged student participation in classroom discussions. Participants explained how professors fostered discussion in the classroom not only by directly encouraging students to share their ideas and opinions, but also by allowing for silence. Additionally, participants described how they expected themselves to engage in classroom discussions. Two participants shared their recollections of how professors intentionally and gently encouraged quiet students to participate in classroom discussions.

Professors actively encourage students to participate in discussion. Participants described how professors welcomed and encouraged their participation in classroom discussions, intentionally creating environments that encouraged students to talk with both professors and peers. Natalie explained how a professor in one of her major areas of study encouraged students to participate by always carefully listening to their ideas and creating an environment she described as “two-way learning”:

I think [Economics professor] is normally a professor that is always listening to students – to the ideas of students. He is always trying to create an environment that is very open... and sometimes that is exciting to think about different topics. And the way he interacts with students he is very like... What is it called? Like two-way learning. Like he is not only teaching but he is also showing that he is learning from students as well. So I think that is a very positive environment to be in (Natalie, Interview Two).

Cameron, Sophie, and Kinsley also described how professors facilitated dialogue in the classroom. As Cameron explained, the “teacher also gives input so it’s not like we are just talking the whole class period, so she is also doing work” (Cameron, Interview Two). Sophie recalled how a professor would begin class with a brief lecture and then “open up the floor” for students to have an “open discussion where you didn’t have to raise your hand, you could just speak up” (Sophie, Interview One). Kinsley offered additional details of how this phenomenon unfolds in the classroom:

Every once in a while [the professor] would throw in and say that sounds a lot like what [student] was saying... and [student] might go back... Or, if someone says something that you don't necessarily agree with you might say, “You know, that makes a lot of sense, but I have a different viewpoint.” Or they may say “I agree with that and here is something else that I was thinking about.” So it was very fluid and together, which I really, really appreciated. I felt like everyone in the class felt like they could speak up (Kinsley, Interview Two).

Students expect themselves to participate in discussion. Some participants suggested engaging in classroom discussion was something they expected of themselves. As Parker described it, “you have to make the class.” Parker also noted how professors typically initiated a

conversation and how students would attempt to keep the dialogue flowing, noting that “someone’s gotta speak up. Because, like, you can’t all just stare at each other.” Iris shared this horizon of meaning, noting “In classes so small it is just weird not to speak, to not have anything ready to say, just because you need to facilitate the class.”

Professors use silence to encourage discussion. Three students (Iris, Kinsley, and Sophie) described how professors allowed for silence in the classroom and used silence as a technique for encouraging student participation in classroom discussion. Iris described how a professor within her major program of study (English and Creative Writing) would allow for silence in the classroom by nodding his head while saying “Yeah” in response to a comment made by a student, and then remaining silent. She explained:

That’s why [professor] says “Yeah” a lot. Because a lot of people in class, if you say what you think something means, and he doesn’t have, like, a definite answer, that’s how you know that he is thinking about it, and it’s a definite possibility. Nothing has a real answer. That is why [professor] is like, “Yeah,” because everything is a real answer.” ... “He is not just ignoring it. He is letting you know that he is legitimately... Like, he will sit there, and you’ll be in silence, and he is legitimately thinking (Iris, Interview Three).

Kinsley also described how she observed silence in the classroom setting, in the form of a marked pause in between the time a professor raised a question and a student answered in response. Offering additional details of how this unfolds in the classroom, Kinsley explained:

Yeah - a marked pause. It may be like three to five seconds. The professor asks the question and everyone has a minute to kind of... and then they say it. ... There is a marked pause and people kind of like gather their thought[s] for a second and then someone speaks up and that person kind of like breaks the ice and the rest of it falls. I

think it's a longer pause than in other classrooms because I have been in mixed classrooms and it is a longer pause than I have experienced (Kinsley, Interview Two).

Sophie described how a professor would raise a question to the class as a whole, and then allow for silence as a way to encourage students to respond. As Sophie stated:

The way he did this class was there were questions based off of the reading and we would go over them in class... So, he'd go "Oh, number two, blah blah blah. What's the answer?" And then he'd literally just sit there. And if there was silence, there was silence. And whoever spoke up, spoke up. He never called on someone. It was always whatever you're comfortable with (Sophie, Interview Two).

Professors intentionally encourage quiet students to participate. Two students, Allison and Kinsley, observed how professors intentionally encouraged quiet students to participate in classroom discussions. Allison, a student who tended to be quiet in the classroom setting, recalled how a professor encouraged her to speak up in class:

[The professor] also tried to get everyone to talk in class, and she tried to get me to talk in class because I didn't really do that. She would just say, "What do you think?" Well, she would say it to someone and usually there were a couple people that would like to answer. And they would, and then she would ask someone that did not say anything (Allison, Interview Two).

Kinsley, a fairly outspoken student, observed how professors directly, yet gently, encouraged typically quiet students to participate in classroom discussions:

I have noticed that there are a lot more people who are very quiet and soft-spoken that professors really have to stay on to get them to like talk or say their whatever. But I have noticed that the pressure gets put on those students here in a women's classroom, which is

a good and bad thing. I definitely don't want anyone to be uncomfortable but, at the same time, this is a very empowering place. So, here is the deal, if you were going to say something, this is the place to say it because we are so open and... But not everyone feels that way and I understand. But I feel they receive a little bit more pressure than they would in other situations. I think that [Carter College professors] don't allow us to stay silent.

Negative cases related to student participation in classroom discussion. With respect to the theme of Student Participation in Classroom Discussion Fostered and Prioritized, data analysis resulted in two negative findings. For one participant, Mariah, the emphasis on student participation in classroom discussion was not always a positive aspect of the experience. Mariah perceived that two of her courses (one in social science and one in English) placed too much of an emphasis on discussion and not enough emphasis on lecture. In both courses, Mariah viewed her professors as experts in their respective disciplines and felt that lectures from these professors contributed more to her education than comments from other students. Mariah described her experience in the social science course this way:

I hated it. I hated it so much. She was another professor who really didn't lead the discussion at all. We just... The students just talked about the reading... It just seemed like such a missed opportunity for lecture. Like, she had so much knowledge that she could have shared with us and we were just sort of left to our own devices... But we weren't doing analysis, we were just like talking about it. And it just felt like we would have gotten the same amount of information if she hadn't even been in the room, because she didn't really teach us anything (Mariah, Interview Two).

Another participant, Julianna, generally seemed to enjoy classroom-based discussions but had negative experiences with classroom-based debates. Julianna described how in one of her natural science classes, students were not being respectful of each other in a classroom discussion that morphed into what she described as a heated classroom debate. As she explained in her second interview:

I find that, at Carter we have very strong, opinionated women there. And I feel like in debates, no one wants to be wrong. So people don't know when to step back and be like, "Oh, you are right. I should look into that." And that annoys me a lot. So I try not to get into debates in the classroom, because I just don't want to be in a position like that (Julianna, Interview Two).

Students voice ideas, experiences, and uncertainties in an accepting space.

Participants described how they were able to freely share their thoughts, opinions, and ideas in the classroom setting. Not feeling judged by others was closely related to students' ability to ask questions and take risks with their thinking, or guess aloud, in the classroom environment. Students enrolled in upper-level classes within their major program of study felt especially free to share personal details about their lives in these intimate settings.

Students share personal opinions, ideas, feelings, and experiences. For participants, sharing opinions, ideas, feelings, and experiences was an important part of their college classroom learning. Sophie noted in her second interview that "providing a safe environment where students can say how they feel is really important." In Natalie's second interview, she recalled students were able to share their "normal daily experience" in the classroom setting and how students used daily life experience to "create our ideas in the classroom."

Kinsley suggested that because peers listen without interruption, students are more easily able to share their experiences. As Kinsley described it:

I feel like that's something we do in a women's classroom in general, is just like welcome conversations and welcome input, rather than demand it. And, like, we welcome people to take the floor, rather than... Or like we allow... We welcome people to take the floor, and I don't know how to say like we welcome ourselves, but we, like, take the torch, and, like, take the floor, rather than demanding the floor – rather than pushing someone off the floor by, like, interrupting (Kinsley, Interview Three).

Students ask questions, share work, and take risks with thinking. Most participants described how they felt free to ask questions, share work, voice opinions, and take risks with their thinking in the classroom context. Allison talked about how her ability to ask questions in a small, all-women classroom setting helped her to understand course material:

I feel like I am at the same level as everyone, sort of, and when we are talking in groups, I feel like it is just easier when it is all women. I said this before but I feel like I can ask questions more. I feel like what comes with an all-women's school is the smaller classes, and that is what I like. I feel like that has had a good impact on what I am taking and what I am learning (Allison, Interview Two).

Iris reflected on how she felt the women's college classroom environment made it easier for her to speak up and ask questions aloud, noting:

Yeah, it's so much easier to talk in the classroom here and ask questions. Like, I feel like that gets said a lot but it's really, really true. It's true how easy it is, like to say things or even to say, like, analyze something and it probably be wrong. But also, like I am going to say it in class anyway, just to make sure. Which, I don't think I would have done in

high school, and I don't think I necessarily would do if I went to a co-ed school (Iris, Interview Two).

Students are not judged by others. Participants' readiness to speak up in the classroom context was closely related to a perception that others would not pass judgment on them. Natalie, in her second interview, described the classroom as a place where students could express their voices and ideas "without fear of being judged by others" and "feel more independent about and more responsible" about their ideas. In her reflection essay, Natalie indicated that her classroom experiences allowed her to practice and improve her public presentation skills "without worrying about grades and judgment." Allison echoed this sentiment in her third interview, suggesting that the women's college classroom was simply "less judgmental" overall. Cameron, in her second interview, noted that in a women's college environment "you can just be yourself."

Easier to share personal stories in upper-level classes within major. Two students, Iris and Parker, both English and Creative Writing majors, described how they shared personal details about their life experiences in courses they took as part of their major requirements. Iris described this environment as intimate and familial:

Having a class period like this is as intimate as you can get, without a one-on-one meeting. Creative writing workshop classes are often filled with personal details about the writers, even when submitting fiction. This last class made me realize that I had a space in the program here and in the world of writing. This class also just reminded me about the family that is created at Carter College, and through words especially in the creative writing program (Iris, Reflection Essay).

Parker reflected on how knowing everyone in the class made it easier to share her work:

Everyone had like super emotional things to write about. Well, I ended up writing about everything. I mean, like, a bunch of different stuff. So... I mean, I had taken [Creative Writing professor's] advanced class - or intermediate, I don't know... Anyway, I had taken a class with her. And I had written, like, a collection of poems about a miscarriage. So, that was like super personal, but I mean I knew most of everyone in there, so it was cool (Parker, Interview Three).

Meaning Made from the Women's College Classroom Experience (Research Question 2)

My analysis of participants' descriptive accounts resulted in two key findings, or themes, related to the second research question in this study: the meaning students made from their women's college classroom experiences. The first theme was Professors and Peers Genuinely Care for Students' Well-Being. The second theme was Students Receive Individual Reaffirmation and Intellectual Validation from Professors and Peers. Table 3 illustrates how these two themes emerged during data analysis.

Table 3

Research Question 2 (Meaning Made from Experience) Themes

RQ 2 Theme	Horizons of Meaning	Participants Included
A. Professors and Peers Genuinely Care for Students' Well-Being	1. Professors are Supportive, Caring, Approachable, and Available	Allison, Cameron, Iris, Julianna, Kinsley, Mariah, Natalie, Parker, Riley, Sophie
	2. Peers are Supportive and Caring	Allison, Cameron, Julianna, Kinsley, Parker
	3. Nurturing and Nourishing Environment	Cameron, Iris
B. Students Receive Individual Reaffirmation and Intellectual Validation	1. Professors Know Me as an Individual and Attend to My Unique Needs	Allison, Cameron, Iris, Julianna, Kinsley, Mariah, Natalie, Parker, Riley, Sophie

Professors and peers genuinely care for students' well-being. The women's college classroom, as participants described it, is a place where students receive support from professors and peers who expressed genuine concern for their well-being. All participants described classroom professors as generally caring, approachable, and available. Half of participants shared stories about how their classroom peers expressed support and care. Two participants described the classroom environment as nurturing and nourishing.

Supportive, caring, approachable, and available professors. The participants in my study described how their classroom professors supported them by expressing care and concern for their well-being, demonstrating empathy and understanding, being approachable and available, and showing kindness. These were all important dimensions of the women's college classroom experience. Mariah described how professors showed care and empathy for her when she was ill and had to miss several classes:

The time that I mentioned that I was very sick, [Modern Languages professor] was so flexible with me about turning in work. It was a bad week for me, and I missed a lot of class, especially because I took two of her classes, so I missed a full week of class, and she was very patient and flexible with me (Mariah, Interview Two).

Kinsley reflected on how a professor showed her support first by reaching out to her after she missed two consecutive classes to inquire about her well-being, and then by making sure she stayed caught up on course-related work after she returned to class:

If I am not there my teacher knows that I am not there. If I miss a lot, the teacher might reach out to me and be like, "Hey, you weren't there, do you need anything?" Or, "You weren't there for a week." I had the flu once and I reached out to a professor via email and I think it got buried in his inbox and I wasn't there for two class periods and he emailed me, "Is everything okay?" And I was like, "I sent you a message, and I attached it in a forward, and I said I have the flu and a doctor's note from the clinic, and I just can't come to class until my fever breaks, and it won't break." The professor was like, "No big deal, if you need the notes I can ask one of the students to send it to you." So the next class period, I was there, and he was like, "Does someone have the notes from Tuesday and Thursday to give to Kinsley so she can catch up?" He watched out for me (Kinsley, Interview Two).

Even small words of encouragement from a classroom professor, both in the classroom setting and in individual meetings, can have a significant positive impact for a student. Allison, in her third interview, recalled a time when she was nervous about presenting in a Spanish class and the professor showed her compassion and support in the classroom setting. Allison stated, "I had to present in Spanish, and I was like really, really scared and he was like, 'It's okay, just breathe' – like right before. [laughs] That's nice." Another student, Sophie, talked in her second interview about how, after letting her first-year seminar professor know that she struggled with anxiety, the professor would periodically and intentionally inquire about her well-being in their meetings and encourage her to take time for herself. Sophie noted that this professor would "go out of her way to say those kinds of things to me."

Students also indicated professors were easy to approach with questions and concerns about courses, academic planning, co-curricular interests, internship searches, and preparing for

graduate school and career opportunities. This sentiment applied equally to professors within participants' major program of study and to professors teaching courses students were taking for elective or general education credit. In Parker's second interview, she described her academic advisor, also her professor for several courses, as "extremely accessible" and quick to respond to any email questions or requests. Parker also talked in her second interview about how, when she was struggling in a non-major Spanish course, her professor was "very accessible" and "very helpful."

Natalie described how she felt she could approach professors for both course-related assistance and advice in other areas:

I can come to [professors] not only in terms of the lessons I learned in the classroom but also asking their advice for any opportunities outside the classroom - like internships - and also the planning process for the whole curriculum. I think that is something very happening here – that we have the close relationships. So the professor can share their own experience, and their advice. So I think that is something very unique that is something I can see here at Carter (Natalie, Interview Two).

Peers are supportive and caring. Participants indicated that supportive and caring peers were an important aspect of the lived women's college classroom experience. In the classroom, students showed support by encouraging each other and attempting to help students who were visibly struggling. Julianna described the peer support she received in a science lab:

I feel like it's something different, when even if you are not close to someone, especially like in a female setting. I feel like if it was co-ed it would be different. You know that they have your back. So, like in my physics lab, I am not close to everyone in my physics lab, but when I got like, when I was feeling really sick, or when something

happened, or just anything in general you could see the support. They were like, yeah we are not that close, but I am here for you. What do you need? I'd be like "Oh, I skipped lunch" and then someone would be like "I have food!" (Julianna, Interview Two).

Allison described how a classroom peer actively encouraged her when she was nervous about giving a classroom presentation in an architecture course:

Last semester I had the [architecture course], and I was telling my friend that I was worried in that class, and this girl that I didn't really know, she was like, "It's okay. It's fine. Just go up there." And she was like, "We don't care." So that like made me feel a lot better. And stuff like that happens. And that makes me a whole lot calmer (Allison, Interview Three).

Natalie described how supportive classroom peers are resources who support her learning in the classroom environment:

I think I would say... I don't know how to use the right words but maybe it would be something that... like learning from each other... and very supportive. In a way that we are not competing for anything but that we are supporting each other to try to learn together, and trying to improve to be better together. And it doesn't matter that we need to be close friends or not, it is just like whenever you are in the classroom any peer can help you if you don't understand some certain topic. Like we can also ask other students in the classroom, not only the professor, if we don't understand something (Natalie, Interview Two).

Nurturing and nourishing environment. Both Iris and Cameron described the women's college classroom environment as nurturing and nourishing. Iris stated:

I think, like academically, that it has met my expectations because it's a very nurturing environment. It's definitely full of professors that I think genuinely care about all of their students. Even the ones who are not, maybe not the most personable professors, I think they genuinely care about their students, which I don't think you find at every kind of university (Iris, Interview Two).

When Cameron described how Carter's professors supported students in the classroom, especially those students with relatively weaker academic preparation, she contrasted this with her previously lived high school experience, in which she did not receive the same level of support:

Even though these [Carter students] weren't ready to be majors and were having difficulty in the class, the professors were very supportive and they did not talk down on them. They would in [hometown]. [Hometown high school teachers] would be like, "You aren't ready for this class. Take some preparatory classes first." I like the nourishing environment. I really felt like you could grow more (Cameron, Interview Two).

Students receive individual reaffirmation and intellectual validation. All participants described how professors knew them as individual beings and attended to their unique needs. The majority of participants described how classroom professors and peers provided them with a sense of intellectual reaffirmation and validation in the classroom setting. Participants noted how important it was to them when professors gave them individual attention, particularly related to their scholarly interests. It was particularly meaningful for participants when they perceived that professors validated their personal histories and life experiences, embraced their scholarly and creative works, and reaffirmed their intellectual abilities.

Professors know me as an individual and attend to my unique needs. In her reflection essay, Iris shared how meaningful it was to her that an English and Creative Writing professor gave students individual feedback in the classroom setting:

We used the last day to wrap things up and get final ideas for our portfolios, due the next week. People taking the class for senior credit had to present journals they would like to submit their work to, and possibly agents who would accept their work. In the moment [the professor] gave feedback to the presenters, with how the process of submitting and getting an agent works, and the different ins and outs of submitting to magazines. She also made sure to let other students in class know when a magazine sounded like something they could submit to. She did this for me a few times during this class. It's really amazing how [the professor] took the time to know each of us and our voices, and it showed in these small ways. She also gave us personal feedback this day on writing, and how we can edit for our portfolio. Again, this was more personal, and was another way that she shows us she cares about our individual work and goals (Iris, Reflection Essay).

Professors and peers reaffirm and validate my thoughts, abilities, and experiences. Study participants described how their lived classroom experiences led to feelings of reaffirmation and validation. As Kinsley stated in her second interview, "There was a lot of validation that I got here, a lot of validation from my peers and a lot of validation from my professors." Kinsley described how professors reaffirmed students' intellectual abilities, noting:

No one ever told me I was smart until I got here. No one ever told me that I had really good ideas. No one ever looked at me and said, "Gosh, you really get this. You are good at this and you have good ideas." (Kinsley, Interview Two).

Sophie indicated in her final interview that professors frequently reaffirm and validate students' contributions to classroom discussions. She stated, "Yeah, I mean frequently Carter College teachers like to reaffirm, so they always go, 'Oh, so and so made a great point bringing this up' you know?" (Sophie, Interview Three). Sophie also reflected on how an opportunity to exchange views with an art professor helped reaffirm her intellect. In describing the significance of these conversations for her, Sophie said:

It's reaffirmation that I am not asking the wrong questions. That it's okay to be new to art, and it's okay to say things as I am thinking them and not have someone judge me, or think that, oh you shouldn't be asking that question, what a dumb question to ask, why is this in a gallery? You know? It's reaffirmation that my thoughts are worthy, and that they are powerful, and that they deserve a response (Sophie, Interview Three).

Another participant, Mariah, described the feeling of validation she felt after sharing her work with her classmates:

During the last few classes of the semester, all of the students were required to present their projects. I remember that when I read a few of the poems from my collection, the professor and my classmates were genuinely and actively enjoying what I had created. They even asked me to read them the rest of the poems, rather than stopping after just two or three. That was a moment in which I felt very validated, both as a writer and as a consumer of the course material. Being praised for my writing (my greatest passion, and what I consider to be my greatest talent) is always an incredibly uplifting and encouraging experience; such a compliment is one of the highest that a person can give me (Mariah, Reflection Essay).

Negative cases related to students receiving reaffirmation and validation. Three participants (Cameron, Mariah, and Riley) presented negative cases related to the theme of Students Receive Individual Reaffirmation and Intellectual Validation. Cameron and Riley both shared a story about how a Carter professor was not reaffirming. Cameron described how, when she was struggling in a course required for her major, the professor questioned her ability to succeed in the course – aloud, in the classroom environment. Because this professor shared this recommendation with Cameron aloud, in front of her classmates, Cameron felt “attacked.” In explaining how this was an isolated incident and not representative of her time at Carter, Cameron stated:

I mean, you are going to have one or two professors that are going to be an outlier. You are not going to have everyone that is just amazing... Even though I say this is a very supportive environment where I feel like I can be myself, there have been times where it has not been like that too. Like, not everything is perfect (Cameron, Interview Two).

Another participant, Mariah, shared a story about how a professor did not attempt to get to know her as an individual, and how this made for a negative course experience. Mariah was nervous about her ability to perform well in a course that required a great deal of memorization. After the first class meeting, Mariah asked the course professor for permission to take the class on a pass/fail basis. She described their exchange this way:

I was like “Well, my concern is that a lot of this is memorization and I really, like I really don’t have a good memory.” And she was like “Well, saying that you don’t have a good memory is not something that you should just be willing to accept; you should be willing to work on your memory.” And I was like “Well, I have known myself for 19 years and you have known me for like, an hour and half, so I think I am going to go with

my gut here and say that I have a bad memory, and that I would like to take the class pass/fail.” (Mariah, Interview Two).

Mariah went on to explain how she “hated the class” and “stopped caring.” Mariah stated that the class felt like a “waste of an hour out of my life, three days a week.”

How Students Made Meaning from the Classroom Experience (Research Question 3)

Achieving a better understanding of how students made meaning from their classroom experiences was perhaps the most challenging aspect of my analysis. Although it was initially quite clear that reflection was an essential component of the meaning-making process, the nuances of how participants made meaning from their classroom experiences were somewhat more difficult to identify. After thorough analysis, I arrived at two themes related to the third research question in this study: how women’s college students make meaning from their classroom experiences. The first theme was Reflection on How Lived Classroom Experiences Led to Self-Transformation, and the second theme was Comparison of Lived Experiences to Imagined Other Experiences and Preconceptions. Table 4 illustrates how these two themes emerged during data analysis.

Table 4

Research Question 3 (How Students Made Meaning from Experience) Themes

RQ 3 Theme	Horizons of Meaning	Participants Included
A. Reflection on How Lived Classroom Experiences Led to Self-Transformation	1. Reflection on How Classroom Experiences Fostered Personal Growth	Allison, Cameron, Iris, Julianna, Kinsley, Mariah, Natalie, Parker, Riley, Sophie
	2. Reflection on How Professor and Peer Critique Led to Self-Improvement and Enhanced Understanding	Cameron, Iris, Julianna, Kinsley, Mariah, Natalie, Parker, Sophie
B. Comparison of Lived Experiences to Imagined	1. Comparison of Lived Experiences to Conceptions	Allison, Cameron, Iris, Kinsley, Mariah, Natalie

Other Experiences and
Preconceptions

and Imaginations of a
Different, Coeducational
Experience

2. Comparison of Lived
Experiences to
Preconceptions of the
Experience before Enrolling

Allison, Cameron, Iris,
Julianna, Natalie

Reflection on how lived classroom experiences led to self-transformation. All of the participants in my study viewed classroom experiences as particularly meaningful when they led to a positive self-transformation of some kind. Often, receiving thoughtful critique from both classroom professors and peers played a role in students' enhanced growth, understanding, and self-transformation.

Reflection on how classroom experiences fostered personal growth. All participants shared at least one story about how their classroom experiences fostered their individual growth. Julianna talked about how a particular leadership class "focused a lot on personal development" and how the course focused on "who we were as students, what we liked within ourselves and what we could possibly change." Julianna noted her experience in the course "taught me to compromise not just in meetings and the classroom but also in relationships and with family and friends."

Two students, Riley and Sophie, indicated their classroom experiences helped them realize their own capacity to initiate social change. Riley wrote in her reflection essay about how speaking up in a sociology class led her to become more socially active and helped to realize that being a "passive member of society" was not her "calling." Sophie described how her classroom experiences in an interdisciplinary social science class changed her world-view, inspired her, and led her to see herself as "change maker."

Reflection on how professor and peer critique led to self-improvement and enhanced understanding. Participants shared many stories of how receiving critical feedback from classroom professors helped them to learn and grow. Iris, in her reflection essay, described how an English and Creative Writing professor's feedback helped her to significantly improve the quality of her work. Iris recalled, "Her responses to my poetry made me push to change things and make them work better." Natalie commented that although some professors provided more detailed feedback than others, all forms of feedback helped her understand where she could improve. As Natalie described it:

I think like, every professor has a different style of grading – of giving comments and feedback. Like some professors have a template and they just follow a template. That like, they just follow the template. And then like they would show you which part you need to improve and stuff. But some professors, they just go through your whole assignment and show you where you need to improve and stuff. And I think like both ways work for me. Like, the more comments and feedback I have the more I can improve and learn (Natalie, Interview Two).

In addition to valuing professors' critique as a vehicle for self-improvement, Natalie also valued the way in which peer critique helped her to learn and grow. Natalie explained how over time, she had increasingly begun to view her women's college classroom peers as resources rather than competitors. Describing a specific classroom experience in which she received peer feedback following a presentation, Natalie recalled:

But at the end of the presentation everybody gave me very specific comments on where I can improve, or what was helpful in my presentation, and where I should improve for my next presentation. I never received those kind[s] of comments before. And most of the

time before, if I had a presentation - in front of anybody or in front of a class - it was just getting done or get[ting] a grade or something. Or if people commented on it, it was just not going towards me or like not going directly to me. So that was the first time I could kind of see the learning experience can... It is totally different in that kind of positive way, and can improve so much (Natalie, Interview Three).

Julianna reflected on how the constructive criticism she received from her peers in a leadership class was helpful to her, and allowed her to examine a difficult personal situation in a new light:

Like, we had to do journal entries each week. And within the journal entries, we had to share them, if people were comfortable with sharing it with the classroom. But if not, then they would just share with the instructor. But, um, yeah, we would share those journal entries. So I remember one of mine, like I was having relationship problems then. So I wrote a journal entry about that. And basically my peers were giving me constructive criticism based on like my relationship because it was like, "Yeah, you see this that he is doing, but you don't see this that you are doing." And I was like, "Oh you're right," and I wouldn't even... I wouldn't blame myself because of course he is the problem. So it was like really good getting advice that's just like okay, yeah, there's issues there with him but also there's issues there with you in this case. So that was really helpful for me, and that's how it was the entire semester. Not just with like journal entries but probably with like, how we speak in class. Some people would be like, I notice that you have self-esteem issues... So it's just like giving criticism to everyone, which was good (Juliana, Interview Three).

Mariah also felt that her experience of receiving peer and faculty critique in a leadership class fostered her individual development. She explained how the course helped her improve her ability to compromise and increased her self-confidence. She described:

It's basically about holding yourself accountable. And so in every two or more person conflict, everyone who is involved is contributing in some way. And so, a question that [professor] will ask is "What is your piece of the mess?" Like, what are you doing to contribute to this? And I really try to, um, I try to keep myself on the hook when I am in a conflict with someone rather than saying, rather than feeling like the victim like how am I... What am I doing wrong here? What can I do differently? That is definitely something I have carried with me. And I think the way that we have learned about negotiations and navigating professional situations helped me. Really we were taught to be confident, to have a strong handshake, to be very direct about what you want, and to ask for it up front. And like invest in your own worth (Mariah, Interview Two).

Peer critique received as part of classroom-based workshopping. The participants in this study indicated that all creative writing classes at Carter emphasized the practice of workshopping student work, a highly interactive teaching technique designed to facilitate constructive peer-to-peer and professor-to-student feedback. Participants perceived that as a general rule, faculty members teaching in Carter's English and Creative Writing program embraced the concept of workshopping as a pedagogical technique, although some minor differences existed among professors with respect to preferred workshop structure. As participants described it, workshop experiences generally involved sharing one's creative work with the class, listening to critical evaluations of others, providing feedback directed at the work and not the individual, and offering concrete suggestions for improvement. For the women's

college students in this study who enrolled in Creative Writing courses, participating in classroom-based workshopping sessions was clearly a meaningful learning experience.

Allison, Iris, Julianna, and Parker all talked about their experiences with workshopping in English and Creative Writing courses. Allison, Iris, and Parker had no previous experience with the workshop process prior to enrolling at Carter; all described the workshop process as initially intimidating. Julianna had gained extensive experience in workshopping her creative work through a literary arts program at her high school.

Iris and Parker, both English and Creative Writing majors, discussed how the process of receiving verbal and written feedback from professors and peers in the workshop setting was initially awkward and intimidating, but improved over time. Iris and Parker both perceived that students' ability to help feedback to peers was enhanced as they gained more experience with the workshop process. Iris explained how "sharing your work on the internet" was significantly different from "looking at people's faces" and "having to really discuss." Elaborating on why she felt the process of workshopping was beneficial to her, Iris stated:

Well, at least in a workshop setting, once you give it to someone else, you don't have to make the changes that they want, but there are people who have ideas now about your own words, so it's not just yours. And I think that if you embrace it, it can work out really well. Because a lot of people in class have really good ideas (Iris, Interview Three).

Comparison of lived experiences to imagined other experiences and preconceptions.

Six participants contrasted their lived women's college classroom experiences to what they imagined a different college experience would be like at a larger, coeducational institution.

These participants felt that a classroom experience at a larger, coeducational institution would

differ from their women's college classroom experience in important ways. Five participants made meaning from their lived classroom experiences by comparing their actual experiences to their preconceptions of what the experience would be like, before enrolling.

Comparison of lived experiences to conceptions and imaginations of a different, coeducational experience. It is important to note that in my study, all participants had only attended women's colleges. No participants had acquired experience as a residential student at a college other than Carter. Some participants made meaning from their lived experience by actively comparing their own experiences to their conceptions and imaginations of what a different college experience (typically at a larger, coeducational institution) would be like. Participants suggested that their relationships with classroom professors and peers would be very different if they were students at a larger, coeducational college.

An excerpt from Kinsley's second interview illustrates how she made meaning from her lived classroom experience (a small classroom in which she received support and care from her classroom professors) by comparing it to her imaginations of what a different experience might have been like for her at a larger, coeducational institution. She explained how she did not feel she would have receive the same degree of individual attention and support if she were attending a larger school, noting:

In the four-person class we had a lot of discussion. It was four people and we got to know each other really well and [the professor] got to know us well too, because sitting and waiting for class to start 10-15 minutes lets you talk. So, [the professor] might say "Oh hey Kinsley, are you feeling better?" or "Hey Kinsley, did you go home this weekend?" or "How was your weekend at home?" It is different than being at a big

school where you would walk in and a professor would be like “Who are you?” (Kinsley, Interview Two).

Julianna expressed her perception that if she were attending a coeducational college, the dynamic among classroom peers would differ in important ways from her lived women’s college experience. She stated:

It’s just those little things that make me feel like, wow, if I was in a coed, I would not be able to get this. They would probably be like so focused on like this guy or I don’t know something else that’s just like... I like the bond. And even though it’s like difficult sometimes, it’s... I definitely see a sisterhood that is formed in the classroom setting and just like the general community at Carter (Julianna, Interview Two).

Cameron suggested that if she had attended a coeducational institution instead of a women’s college, she imagined the dynamic among peers would be different, and less supportive. She said:

Yeah, we were all so supportive of each other. So, that is one thing that I love about an all-women’s college. Because if you were to throw a couple of boys in that class it would have been very different. (Cameron, Interview Three)

Comparison of lived experiences to preconceptions of the experience before enrolling.

For Natalie, her lived women’s college experience was similar to her preconceptions in some ways, and different in others. In her second interview, Natalie shared that her Carter experience had met her expectations in “the way that we can share ideas, or the way that it requires more independent or critical thinking.” However, Natalie had not anticipated the classroom environment to be so “open” and non-judgmental, and “so diverse in terms of the ideas of all the students.”

Allison noted that her classroom experience had met her expectations overall. She had anticipated the small classes and felt, true to her preconceptions, small classes (and particularly small lab courses) made it easier for students to ask for help. Like Natalie, Allison had not expected the classroom experience at Carter to be so diverse.

Iris suggested in her second interview that her Carter experience met her expectations academically, but not socially. As Iris anticipated, her classroom professors were supportive and caring. However, she was not prepared for the social difficulties she would experience outside of the classroom. As Iris described:

I think, like academically, that it has met my expectations because it's a very nurturing environment. It's definitely full of professors that I think genuinely care about all of their students. Even the ones who are not, maybe not the most personable professors, I think they genuinely care about their students, which I don't think you find at every kind of university. Socially, it's not everything that I thought it would be. I think it's just such a small pool of people it's really hard to make connections if you're not, like, of a certain kind of personality (Iris, Interview Two).

Coherent Textual Description

As a final step of this study, I synthesized and integrated composite textural and composite structural descriptions of the nature of the lived women's college classroom experience. It is important to note that in hermeneutic phenomenology, the synthesis is never final and the essences are never complete. Rather, the articulated essences are related to a particular time and place as well as the researcher's view following reflective study of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The women's college classroom is an intimate space where students interact with supportive professors and peers who show genuine concern for their well-being. Professors expect students to actively engage in classroom discussion and intentionally encourage quiet students to participate. In the classroom setting, students are encouraged to share their views and receive individualized feedback from professors and students.

Women's college students receive individual reaffirmation and intellectual validation from professors and peers. Through their experience in a women's college classroom, students come to understand that their thoughts, opinions, and creative works are valued by others. During their undergraduate experience, women's college students become more likely to take risks with their thinking, speaking aloud even when unsure of possessing the correct answer to a question raised by a professor.

Women's college students make meaning from their classroom experience by reflecting on the extent to which those experience led to self-transformation. These students especially value professor and peer critique as they feel this helps them to hone their skills and abilities, and grow as individuals. Women's college students actively compare their lived experience to their preconceptions of the experience, and imagine how different their college experience would have been if they had chosen to attend a coeducational college.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter, I first discuss study findings and my interpretations of those findings. I then review how the findings of this study are situated in the context of previous research. As a next step, I suggest how study findings may inform future policy, practice, and research. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this study and offer concluding remarks.

Discussion of Study Findings

This study illuminated the nature of the lived classroom experience at Carter College, a women's college located in the southern region of the United States. This study also helped to generate new understandings of the meaning that women's college students at Carter made from their classroom experiences as well as how these students made meaning from classroom experiences. Through a series of interviews with 10 participants, all full-time residential students at Carter College, I obtained an enhanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The process of interviewing allows us to better understand “the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher's goal is to “understand what we see, and understand, in contexts - physical, emotional, geographical, political, personal, social, cultural, and historical” (Freeman, 2014, p. 832). Therefore, in this discussion I first summarize the findings related to each theme included in the description of the essence of the phenomenon. Then, I provide my interpretations of these themes as they relate to the participants included in this study.

Research Question 1 (RQ1) Findings: Nature of the Lived Classroom Experience

The first research question focused on obtaining a description of the nature of the lived women's college classroom experience. The Carter College students who participated in my study indicated that Carter professors actively fostered dialogue among students in the classroom setting, took special care to encourage normally quiet and reserved students to participate in classroom discussions, and often used silence as a technique designed to spark student dialogue. I also found that the women's college students who participated in this study expected themselves to engage in classroom-based dialogue. Finally, I found that study participants felt they were able to share their scholarly and creative work as well as voice ideas, opinions, experiences, and questions in an accepting and non-judgmental classroom environment.

Interpretations of RQ 1 findings. Over time, it appeared the women's college students included in this study voiced their ideas and opinions with increased confidence. For participants who tended to be reserved in the classroom, a professor's gentle encouragement to offer an opinion or idea appeared to be especially impactful. For the women's college students in this study who indicated they were normally quiet in the classroom setting, it is possible that speaking aloud in class was one way in which they built confidence in themselves and their ideas.

Most of the women's college students participating in this study also indicated that they expected themselves to converse with classroom professors and peers. Thus, they generally came to class prepared to engage in thoughtful discussion. It seemed that over time, study participants gradually became increasingly able to engage in discussion and debate even if they were uncertain about their views or hesitant about sharing thoughts and opinions with others.

Research Question 2 Findings: Meaning Made from Classroom Experience

The second research question focused on the meaning women's college students made from their everyday lived classroom experiences. The women's college students who participated in this study perceived classroom professors and peers genuinely cared about their well-being, took the time to get to know them as individuals, and served as important sources of individual reaffirmation and intellectual validation. Participants also perceived the individualized feedback and constructive critique they received from both professors and peers helped them to grow and develop in important ways.

Interpretations of RQ2 findings. The women's college students in this study appeared to feel increasingly confident to take risks in the classroom setting by asking questions or guessing aloud. It is possible that this increased confidence was related to a perception of the classroom environment as a safe, accepting environment where professors and peers genuinely cared for students' well-being, learning, and growth. The women's college students in this study seemed to thrive in a nurturing environment. It is possible that for study participants, feeling supported in the classroom helped them feel less anxious and focus more deeply on their own learning and understanding.

It is possible that for study participants, receiving reaffirmation and validation from professors and peers played an important role in the development of their academic self-concept and intellectual self-esteem. It appeared that over time, the women's college students in this study became more confident in sharing their scholarly and creative work. The gains that study participants appeared to experience in the areas of academic self-concept and intellectual self-esteem may be important to their future success in graduate school environments and professional settings.

Research Question 3 Findings: How Students Made Meaning from Classroom Experience

The third research question asked how women's college students made meaning from their lived classroom experiences. I found that the women's college students in this study made meaning from their classroom experiences by reflecting on how classroom experiences led to personal growth and fostered self-transformation. Study participants clearly valued professor and peer critique as a path to self-improvement. Participants made meaning from their experiences by comparing their lived classroom experiences to their preconceptions (or, beliefs they held about the women's college classroom experience prior to enrolling) and to their conceptions and imaginations of a different, coeducational college experience.

Interpretations of RQ3 findings. It is possible that the women's college students in this study evaluated classroom experiences with a "value-added" framework and prioritized courses associated with the acquisition of enhanced skills relevant to personal or professional interests, a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of a topic or issue, or a greater understanding of oneself. Additionally, the participants in this study appeared to receive unique benefits from giving and receiving peer critique. Through engaging in the peer critique process, study participants seemed to increasingly view peers as resources who could reaffirm, enhance, and validate their knowledge and skills. Finally, for the women's college students in this study, imagining how they might have behaved differently in a coeducational college classroom setting and comparing presently lived experience to preconceptions of that experience seemed to be important components of their meaning-making processes.

Relationship of Study Findings to Previous Research

Nearly 30 years ago, Rice and Hemmings asserted that a true picture of what a student gains from attending a women's college would "only emerge from research that disentangles the

components of the ‘experience’ of attending a particular kind of women’s college (1988, p. 557). The findings of this study help to illuminate the nature of attending a contemporary women’s college in the southern region of the United States. In the following pages, I offer a description of how the findings of this study are situated in the context of previous research on women’s college students and women learners.

Supporting student learners. All participants in this study described the women’s college classroom experience as a supportive environment. This finding is consistent with previous research by Kinzie et al. in which women’s college students reported “higher levels of feelings of support” than women students attending coeducational institutions (2007, p. 145). Additionally, all participants in this study perceived women’s college faculty members as a whole genuinely cared about student learning and growth. This finding is consistent with previous research by Smith, Wolf, and Morrison who found that women’s college students, when compared to women students at private coeducational institutions, were more likely to “perceive their institution as caring about student learning” (1995, p. 256).

Fostering social activism. The findings from this study suggest that some women’s college students may be inspired to become more socially active as a result of participating in classroom experiences. This finding is consistent with previous research by Kim (2001) who determined that women’s colleges contribute positively to students’ desire to influence social conditions. Kim suggested that the “socially active and altruistically oriented campus student climate of women-only colleges” was largely responsible for increases in levels of social activism among women’s college students (2001, p. 311). This finding is also related to earlier research by Smith, Wolf, and Morrison (1995) who found that women’s college students, when

compared to women students at private coeducational institutions, were more likely to perceive that their institution cared about civic involvement.

Supporting, reaffirming, and validating women learners. I found that the women's college students in this study received reaffirmation and validation of their intellectual ability from classroom professors. This finding is related to previous research by Kim (2002), who determined that women's colleges positively affect students' intellectual self-confidence. This finding is also related to earlier research by Sax (2008), which focused on collegiate women learners rather than women's college students. My discovery that the women's college students in this study valued the individual reaffirmation and genuine support they received from professors in the classroom setting is consistent with Sax's assertion that faculty members hold significant power to influence women students' sense of confidence and well-being in the classroom.

Sax (2008) also found that for women in college, feeling dismissed by faculty members in the classroom setting could have long-term negative consequences on students' academic goals and intellectual self-esteem. Although I did not see evidence of this exact phenomenon, I did observe something similar to feelings of dismissal. Four of the 10 participants in this study described at least one classroom experience that was negative because of a professor who either spoke to students in a condescending way or did not take the time to get to know students as individuals.

College women's meaning-making processes. The women students in my study demonstrated an evolving awareness of their own voice, values, and sense of identity as they made meaning from their experiences. Participants generally seemed to incorporate the perspectives of others, while still listening to their own voice, as they arrived at new

understandings of themselves and others. This finding is consistent with previous research by several scholars who have emphasized the development of a woman's voice in relation to making meaning from life experiences (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996; Sax, 2008).

The women's college students in this study made meaning from their classroom experiences by actively reflecting on the nature of the experiences with particular attention to how these experiences fostered personal growth. These findings are consistent with previous scholarship by Baxter Magolda and King (2008, 2012) which emphasized the value of epistemological reflection for college students. As Baxter Magolda and King stated, "Without developing the capacity to understand and learn from one's experiences, students are at a loss to know how to make intentional choices about what to believe and how to act" (2012, p. 2).

Implications for Future Practice, Policy, and Research

Next, I offer specific recommendations for policy and practice at Carter College, the institution examined in this study. I also offer recommendations for policy and practice at other women's colleges, cautioning readers that my findings are not directly transferrable to other contexts given the nature of qualitative inquiry. Finally, I suggest how the findings of this study may inform future research.

Implications for practice and policy at Carter College. It is important for Carter College professors to support individual student's well-being and academic success either verbally or in writing. The Carter students who participated in this study seemed to be positively impacted by supportive emails and words of encouragement they received from Carter professors. Conversely, when participants felt unsupported in the classroom, this appeared to lead to an overall negative perception of the course.

It is also important for Carter professors to engage students in classroom dialogue. Carter students who consistently converse with faculty members and peers in a classroom setting are perhaps building a solid foundation for later success in a graduate school setting. Additionally, Carter professors should encourage quiet and reserved students to participate in classroom conversations while recognizing that even the most engaged and talkative Carter college students at times prefer to take a back seat to classroom discussions and let others take the lead.

Implications for practice and policy at women's colleges. Women's college faculty, staff, and administrators may wish to consider how much participants in this study valued receiving individual reaffirmation and intellectual validation in the classroom setting. For study participants, feeling known as an individual, receiving public academic praise in the classroom setting, and peer critique were tremendously meaningful. Therefore, women's college academic administrators may wish to examine the extent to which peer critique is embedded in the curriculum and emphasized in major programs of study.

Additionally, women's college faculty, staff, and administrators might examine the extent to which the current institutional curriculum actively fosters students' personal growth. It may also be especially important for women's college students to engage in meaningful reflection of how their classroom experiences impacted their personal attitudes and aptitudes. Women's college academic administrators and teaching faculty should consider how they might help their students make more nuanced meanings from their experiences and generate new insights into their own behaviors in a purposeful manner.

Finally, faculty, staff, and administrators at women's colleges might consider the benefits of intentionally eliciting students' preconceptions of their college classroom experience prior to matriculation. Students' preconceptions may be based on individually held beliefs, abstract

ideas, experiences of visiting a college class as a prospective student, previously lived educational experiences, current or former students' descriptive accounts, or on narratives shared by family, friends, and trusted others. When students' preconceptions about their classroom experience differ in distinct and important ways from their actual lived experience, this can be a jarring experience for students and may have negative implications for student retention. Therefore, women's college administrators may consider providing enhanced opportunities for enrolled students to reflect on how lived college experiences are similar or different to their preconceptions of what college life would be like, and attempt to better understand the meaning current students are making from their lived college experiences.

Implications for future research. The findings from this study generated new understandings of the nature of the lived classroom experience at one women's college in the southern region of the United States. Future studies could gather data from a larger sample of participants (located at one institution or a variety of institutions), examine the women's college classroom experience at an institution outside of the southern region, or focus intentionally on historically underrepresented students in women's colleges (e.g., students of color, transgender students, first generation college students, or students with disabilities). Future research might also employ a dual focus on the classroom and co-curricular women's college experience, or solely focus on the co-curricular (outside of classroom) experience at women's colleges.

Key study findings that provide direction for future research. Future research could build on the findings of this study by further investigating what leads women's college students to engage in classroom discussions. Future studies might also examine students' perceived short-term and long-term benefits gained from participating in classroom discussions, such as enhanced understanding of course material or self-confidence in graduate school and

professional settings. Other studies might investigate the relationship between the encouragement and inspiration women's college students receive from classroom professors and students' increased activity related to social change and civic involvement. Based on the findings of this study, I also suggest three specific areas for future research: the importance for students of being known as an individual, the potential conflict that may exist between a student's desire for both affirmation and authentic feedback, and the impact and importance of classroom-based workshopping.

Suggested future research on the importance of being known as an individual. The women's college students who participated in this study seemed to emphasize the importance of being known as an individual by their classroom professors. Additionally, some study participants seemed to especially value classroom experiences in which professors offered students individualized critical feedback on their work. Thus, future research might explore the relative importance for women's college students to feel known as an individual in the classroom setting. Future studies might also explore the relationship between feeling known as an individual by one's professor and the ability to accept a professor's critical feedback.

Suggested future research on desire for both affirmation and authentic feedback. The participants in this study suggested that an important part of their women's college experience was the ability to receive individual reaffirmation and intellectual validation in the classroom setting. Study participants also seemed to value the authentic, individualized, and critical feedback they received from their classroom professors and peers. Future studies may explore possible potential conflict women's college students may experience if they desire both critical feedback on their work and reaffirmation of their skills, abilities, and knowledge.

Suggested future research on classroom-based workshopping. For the women's college students in this study who enrolled in English and Creative Writing courses, participating in classroom-based workshopping sessions was clearly a meaningful learning experience. Future studies might explore how college students, both at coeducational institutions and at women-only institutions, experience the phenomenon of workshopping material in the classroom context, and make meaning from engaging in classroom-based workshopping sessions. Future research might also investigate the relationship between participating in workshopping sessions and student learning and development.

Additional study findings that provide direction for future research. Two additional findings that emerged from data analysis that did not contribute to the research questions in this study, but seem to hold important implications for future research. First, many of the participants included in this study described how they developed relationships with professors through outside-of-classroom interactions (e.g. academic research, field experiences, and individual meetings). Thus, future studies may wish to explore the importance of women's college students' outside-of-classroom interactions with faculty members. A second striking finding not relevant to the research questions in this study was that conversations which began in the classroom at times continued on various social media platforms. This is an area that has not been explored very much in the literature, but may be an important part of college students' experiences (both for students at coeducational institutions and for students attending women's colleges). Future research may examine the nature and impact of students' experiences engaging in classroom-initiated conversations that continue on social media.

Limitations

No research project is without limitations. The results of this study, a qualitative research endeavor in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, are not generalizable to a larger population. Therefore, one cannot assume the results of this study would transfer directly to a different population at a different women's college.

There are also limitations inherent in interviewing. It is possible that there were important aspects of the women's college classroom experience at the research site that I did not ask directly about, or participants did not disclose. As Seidman reminded us, there are "limits on our understanding of others" (2006, p. 9).

Finally, another researcher might have collected or analyzed the data differently. Similarly, another researcher may have arrived at different findings. It is possible that my own biases and life experiences may have influenced how I collected data or performed data analysis.

Conclusions

The findings from this study illuminate the lived women's college classroom experience and the meaning women's college students made from classroom experiences. It is clear that women's college students develop intellectual self-confidence through their daily classroom life experiences. The women's college students included in this study described how they increasingly felt free to take risks with their thinking, aloud, in the classroom environment. Being in a women's college classroom made it easier for participants to ask questions, voice opinions, share personal work, and answer professors' questions - even if they were uncertain about possessing the correct answer.

The findings of this study add to the limited research on women's college students and provide valuable insight into the daily life experiences of women's college students. I am not

aware of any previous studies that have attempted to better understand the nature of the lived women's college classroom experience and the meaning students made from this lived experience, through hermeneutic phenomenology. My hope is that this study inspires further research on women's colleges and the students who attend them.

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APPENDIX A

Turning Toward the Phenomenon

In hermeneutic phenomenology, it is critical to examine one's own experience and engagement with the phenomenon of interest. In this narrative, I reflect on my lived experience at a women's college, with emphasis on classroom experiences, and on my current role as a women's college administrator. I emphasize my lived classroom experiences as a women's college student, the phenomenon of interest in this study. Finally, I describe my pre-understandings of the phenomenon under investigation and my stance as a researcher using the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition as a method of inquiry.

My interest in the lived classroom experience at a contemporary women's college arose from my own experience as both a student and an employee of a women's college. Eventually, I moved from a topic that interested me to research questions that I could explore through hermeneutic phenomenology. I realized that by engaging students directly – through gathering their stories and learning from their collective experiences – I could more fully come to understand the lived classroom experience at this unique type of institution.

Reflection on Lived Women's College Experience

In the section below, I describe what I remember from my classroom experiences, including my interactions with teachers and classmates, and the meaning I made from those experiences. I reflect on my role as a student and a learner, and highlight an important transformation I experienced during my senior year in college. I also include a brief section on individuals who served as role models to me during my experience as a women's college student.

What I remember most about the women's college classroom experience was my ability to focus more on course content than I did in my public coeducational high school, where I often was distracted by males. I loved, for the first time, not being distracted by males in the

classroom. In the women's college classroom, I was not as concerned as I had been in high school with my appearance or how my classmates might perceive me.

I also remember most of my classes being small – so small that there was no room to hide. In most of my classes, participation was expected and encouraged. Although I did enroll in a few larger lecture-style classes, most of my classes consisted of about 10 or 15 students and used a participatory group discussion format. I enjoyed the small class environment. As I progressed through college, I began to form strong and positive relationships with my classmates, especially those in my major program of study.

Role as student and learner. During secondary school and the majority of my undergraduate college experience, I was what Ken Bain (2012) has described as a strategic learner. I equated academic success with receiving the highest possible grades on my assignments and exams. I approached my academic work seriously yet hesitated to approach professors individually after a class or during their office hours. Although I asked questions and occasionally voiced opinions during my classes, I usually did so because classroom participation was a graded element of the course.

I rarely challenged a classmate's view and was reluctant to publicly disagree with a professor. In general, I felt it was my job to complete the assigned reading, come to class prepared, study, and perform well on tests. I did not perceive my role to be one of knowledge-creator, and I valued recognition over deep understanding.

Although I received A's and B's in most of my courses, and felt successful when I received one of the highest scores on a test in class, I rarely thought about how new information supported or challenged my existing beliefs. In short, I was preoccupied with what was necessary for me to receive an "A" in the course. Often this involved memorizing information

for a test and then promptly forgetting it after the end of the course. As I drafted required papers for my courses, my focus was generally on what would make a good impression on a teacher.

Transformative classroom experiences. In my senior year, my experience in two classes, a course on constitutional law and a research methods course within my major, deeply influenced my academic self-perception. In the law course, we closely examined case descriptions and struggled with constitutional questions. In this small class of eight students, I found myself beginning to speak with confidence in the classroom. In the research methods course, we dissected journal articles and were ultimately tasked with executing our own research project. Although the process of learning the SPSS statistical software was overwhelming to many of us in the course, my classmates and I banded together in the computer lab to learn it together. It was a “leave no woman behind” mentality. For the first time, I began to visit my professors during their office hours to discuss projects and course material. These two courses helped me to see myself as an individual with the capacity to create new knowledge and to critically analyze the work of others. I have no recollections, however, of faculty members situating learning in my experience or presenting learning as mutually constructing meaning.

Role models. Although I did not create close working relationships with faculty members as an undergraduate student at a women-only undergraduate institution, I did find important role models in other places. I participated in varsity sports throughout college and found mentors in my coaches and older teammates as well as our college athletic director. As I became more involved in student organizations and assumed a variety of leadership roles including class president and student government vice president, I found additional role models and received mentorship from upper class students and student affairs administrators.

Current Role as a Women’s College Administrator

As an administrator at a contemporary women's college, I engage in frequent conversations with faculty and staff members about the nature of teaching and learning. We collectively question what it means to have a learner-centered classroom, desired student behavioral and learning outcomes, and how the college curriculum aligns with those outcomes. We discuss ways to help students to become critical thinkers and effective communicators. With faculty members, I discuss the myriad of possible ways to make the classroom challenging enough to keep students engaged, but not so challenging that it leads to student withdrawal.

For the past two years, I have engaged in intense conversations with faculty members and administrators regarding learning: the learning outcomes we desire for students, how learning can best be encouraged, how we might directly and indirectly observe learning as it naturally occurs (the learning process), and the methods by which we can assess students' critical capacities to reason, think, and know. These discussions have touched on disciplinary learning as well as learning in a liberal arts setting.

On several occasions, faculty members have remarked to me that one of their highest priorities is to help students find their own voice. One suggested, "There is no cookie-cutter student here. We want them to figure out who they are, what they believe, and learn how to communicate their views effectively to others." How, I wondered, does this happen in the classroom?

In a recent meeting with a program director, we discussed ways to give constructive feedback to students, being careful to offer plentiful support while also offering ways that they might improve. "Self-esteem is very critical here; it's always in the forefront of our minds, wanting to make sure that we are building up, rather than tearing down, a student's image of

herself,” the director remarked. How, I wondered, do students perceive and make meaning from faculty member feedback in the classroom context?

In my role as an administrator and not a teaching faculty member, I constantly question the lived experiences of our students. I am curious about how students see themselves in the classroom context and how they perceive their teachers and classmates. I question the essence of the everyday lived experiences of students at the institution, and how students make meaning from those experiences. It is this constant questioning that calls me to learn more about the phenomenon. My desire to undertake this study stems from genuine concern about and interest in what women’s college students experience in the classroom, and how they make meaning from those experiences.

Examination of Assumptions and Pre-Understandings

Each of us has fundamental beliefs that serve as the foundation of understanding our worlds. When undertaking any phenomenological inquiry, it is important to surface our “understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories” prior to undertaking research (van Manen, 1984, p. 46). In the context of this study, I view surfacing beliefs and assumptions as an ongoing endeavor.

Researcher Stance

I believe that into what we inquire alters the self. The things that we make have a role, in turn, in making us. With respect to higher education, I believe that our ways of making meaning influence how we experience the learning environment. Our meaning making structures influence how we see ourselves, how we see others, and how we view the nature of truth. Decisions that we may think we are making casually are in reality rooted in our epistemological values, morals, philosophy, and ontology.

I believe gender *is* an important issue in education. I believe that the classroom experience at a women's college affects and influences students in ways that are not fully known to educational researchers. By giving voice to women's college students' experiences, I believe we can better understand their meaning-making structures and the essences of their lived experiences.

I believe in the multiple nature of reality, and that all inquiry is value-laden. I view hermeneutic phenomenology as a method and as a philosophy. As Creswell (2013) observed, in the practice of phenomenological research, an a priori decision is made to examine the meaning individuals make from lived experiences. As a phenomenological researcher, my goal is to get at essential meanings and attempt to gain a glimpse of participants' perspectives on their own worlds (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

I believe students' preexisting knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes affect how they experience the college classroom and the meaning they make from those experiences. I believe that students' prior experiences influence how they live in and be a part of the classroom, how they organize their thoughts about their classroom experience, and how they interpret these thoughts. As the process of making sense of the world begins at a very young age, identifying and examining these processes is important for students of all ages.

I believe that in the context of higher education research, particularly with respect to research that involves student participants, we must create a space where students' values and lives are respected. I view hermeneutic phenomenology as a descriptive and interpretive process by which we can make the invisible visible (Kvale, 1994). Through sharing power with study participants, I aim to make visible the multiple voices and realities of participants. Throughout this research, I hope to validate the personal experiences of study participants.

Hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on human experience as it is lived, paying particular attention to the meaning of lived experiences for individuals (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen 1990). The hermeneutic phenomenological tradition demands that a researcher explore the structures of consciousness in the human experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). As Lavery noted, “Meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experiences” (2003, p. 8). Critical to the process of understanding is the process of interpreting. An interpretivist framework of inquiry supports the notion of not just one reality, but multiple realities. In the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, reality is not something “out there to be discovered” but rather something that is locally, and individually, constructed.

APPENDIX B

Participant Recruitment Flyer

Would you like to talk about your college classroom experiences?

I am interviewing students who have completed at least 60 credits at a women's college as part of a research project about how women's college students experience the classroom environment. You will be asked to participate in three interviews that, each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes, that will take place in person on campus or via Skype.

You will receive a \$10 gift card to Amazon.com at the conclusion of each interview. You will receive a maximum of three \$10 gift cards for participating in this study.

Criteria:

- Are between 18 and 25 years of age.
- Have completed at least 60 credit hours of study at a women's college.
- Are currently enrolled as a full time, residential student.

If you are interested contact:

Katie Read at kread@vt.edu

APPENDIX C

Participant Recruitment Screening Telephone Verbal Script

[This script is designed to be used as an initial screening via telephone between the investigator and the potential participant.]

Hello. My name is Katherine Read and I am a staff member at [Location of Employment] and a doctoral student at Virginia Tech. I'm calling to talk to you about participating in my research study. This is a study about the classroom experience at a women's college. In order to be eligible for participation in this study, participants must have completed at least 60 credit hours of study at a women's college and be currently enrolled as a full-time, residential student. Have you completed at least 60 credits hours at a women's college? Are you currently enrolled as a full-time, residential student at a women's college? [*confirm that participant has completed at least 60 credit hours of study at the institution and is currently enrolled as a full-time, residential student*]

If you decide to participate in this study, you be asked to participate in a series of three interviews, spaced between one and two weeks apart. Each interview will have a different purpose. The purpose of the first interview is to learn more about your experiences prior to enrolling in college. The second interview is designed to learn more about your college classroom experiences. The purpose of the third interview is to explore the meaning that your classroom experiences have for you. With your permission, I would audio-record our interviews.

As a way to compensate participants for their time, I will offer each participant a \$10 gift card to Amazon.com at the end of each interview. Study participants will receive a maximum of three \$10 gift cards to Amazon.com.

I want to emphasize that this is a completely voluntary study. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate, we can schedule a time for me to meet with you and provide you with more information.

If you need more time to decide if you would like to participate, you may also call or email me with your decision. What questions do you have for me at this time?

If you have any more questions about this process or if you need to contact me about participation, you can reach me via phone at [Phone Number Redacted] or via email at kread@vt.edu.

Thank you.

APPENDIX D

Institutional Review Board Approval

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959
email irb@vt.edu
website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 9, 2016
TO: Claire Kathleen Robbins, Katherine Cox Read
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires January 29, 2021)
PROTOCOL TITLE: Students' Lived Experiences in Women's College Classrooms: A Phenomenological Study
IRB NUMBER: 16-353

Effective May 5, 2016, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7
Protocol Approval Date: May 5, 2016
Protocol Expiration Date: May 4, 2017
Continuing Review Due Date*: April 20, 2017

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required. Visit the following link to request an amendment to approved IRB application materials, and to report unanticipated problems: <https://secure.research.vt.edu/irb/>

The IRB wishes you success with your research.

IRB office

APPENDIX E

Research Site Review Board Approval

May 18, 2016

Ms. Katherine C. Read

Dr. Claire K. Robbins

Dear Ms. Read & Dr. Robbins,

Members of the [research site review board] have reviewed your application for the study entitled “Classroom Experiences of Women’s College Students.” We have found the proposal to meet the applicable ethical and legal standards for the protection of the rights and welfare of the human subjects involved, and have accordingly approved your protocols.

This approval is valid for two years from the above memo date. It is now your responsibility to renew your approval should your study extend beyond this time period and to keep the review board informed of any substantive change in your procedures or of any problems of a human subjects’ nature.

Please contact me at [phone number] with any questions.

Regards,

[name withheld]

APPENDIX F

Informed Consent Form

Project Title: Classroom Experiences of Women's College Students

Researcher: Katherine C. Read

Faculty Advisors: Steven M. Janosik, Claire K. Robbins

Please read this document carefully. Your signature is required for participation. You must be at least 18 years of age to give your consent to participate in this research. You will be provided with a copy of this form.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the nature of the women's college classroom experience and the meaning women's college students make from their classroom experiences. Individuals who are currently enrolled as full-time, residential students at a women's college and who have completed at least 60 credit hours of study at a women's college will be interviewed.

Description of the Study:

This study will be conducted by the researcher, Katherine Read, a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech. You will be asked to participate in three interviews, spaced between one and two weeks apart. Each interview is expected to last between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews will be undertaken at times and locations mutually suitable for you and the researcher. Interviews may be conducted via Skype. You will be asked to review a summary of each interview to ensure accuracy. You will also be asked to write a brief essay between the second and third interview.

Possible Risks:

There are minimal risks involved with participating in this study. One identified possible risk of participating in this study is a potential for emotional distress, perhaps caused by remembering unpleasant experiences. I can provide you with information regarding health and/or counseling services available. Any expenses accrued for seeking or receiving health services and/or counseling services will be the responsibility of the participant and not that of the researcher or Virginia Tech.

Possible Benefits:

One identified possible benefit of participating in this study is increased self-awareness. By participating in this study, participants will have the opportunity to share their experiences with an empathetic and interested listener. This research will hopefully contribute to an enhanced understanding of the women's college classroom experience.

Compensation for your Time:

This study consists of participation in three interviews. As a way to compensate you for your time, I will offer you a \$10 gift card to Amazon.com at the end of each interview. Study participants will receive a maximum of three \$10 gift cards to Amazon.com.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

Under no circumstances will you be identified by name in the course of this research study, or in any publication thereof. Identifiable information will be stored separately, and securely, from coded data. Only I and my faculty advisers will have access to the data. Information shared by participants will be used and stored in a confidential manner. All forms, printed transcripts and digital voice files will be locked in a file cabinet in my home. It is possible that the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Tech may view the data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research. The data will be destroyed three years after the study is completed.

Consent to Audio Recordings of Interviews:

This study will involve audio recording of interviews. Consent to audio recording of interviews is required for participation in this study. Only the researcher and a designated transcriber will have access to audio recordings. The designated transcriber must sign a confidentiality agreement. Audio recordings will be erased/destroyed three years after completion of the study.

Freedom to Withdraw:

Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time, for whatever reason. There is no penalty for withdrawing from this study. If you choose to withdraw from this study, all information you provide (including audio recordings) will be destroyed and omitted from the final paper.

Questions or Concerns:

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact the researcher, Katherine Read, at kread@vt.edu or [Phone Number Redacted]. Should you have any questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research participant, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David M. Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.

Participant's Responsibilities:

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

- To participate in three 60-90 minute interviews
- To review summaries of interviews to ensure accuracy
- To complete one brief reflection essay (suggested maximum length 250 words)

Participant's Consent:

I have read the Informed Consent/Participant Agreement Form. I have had all my questions answered. I voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

_____ Date _____

Participant signature

Participant printed legal name

Participant printed preferred name

APPENDIX G

Interview One (Focused Life History) Protocol

Goal: Learn about participants' previous experiences and how they came to attend a contemporary women's college, to place the participants' experiences with the phenomenon in context.

Summary: In the first interview, I ask participants to tell me as much as possible about their selves and past lives in light of the study topic up until present time.

Estimated Length: 60-90 minutes

Beginning Script: Thank you for meeting with me today. As I explained on the phone, the purpose of this study is to better understand the lived classroom experience at a women's college. This research is part of the requirements for my doctorate.

Participating in this study will involve three interviews, each with a different theme. The theme of the first interview is exploring your experiences prior to you enrolling at this institution, with particular attention to your classroom experiences. I estimate that this interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes. I sent you the informed consent by email and have a printed copy for you here today. I will answer any questions you have. Once you sign the form we will begin the interview. [Review informed consent and obtain signature.]

Are you ready to get started? [If participant indicates readiness, the interview begins.]

Main Questions:

1. Please tell me about yourself before coming to this institution.
2. What was everyday life like for you in your high school classes?

Follow-Up Questions:

- a. Tell me more about what kinds of things typically happened in your high school classroom.

- b. Tell me more about what you were like as a high school student in the classroom.
- c. What were your high school teachers like? How did you typically interact with them?
- d. What were your high school classmates like? How did you typically interact with them?
- e. Tell me more about how you came to be a student at this institution.
- f. Before you enrolled, what did you expect the classroom experience would be like here?

Probes:

Could you please tell me more about...

I'm not certain what you mean by... Could you give me some examples?

Could you tell me more about your thinking on that?

So what I hear you saying is..."

What are some of your reasons for liking ...?

You mentioned....Could you tell me more about that? What stands out in your mind about that?

Ending Script:

Thank you for participating in this interview today. As a next step, I will send you a summary of what we discussed in the next two to three days. I will ask that you review this summary for accuracy and reply back to me via email with any comments or corrections you have. Once you receive the summary via email, I will ask that you reply to me in seven days with any comments or corrections. As a way to compensate you for your time today, I'd like to offer you a \$10 gift card to Amazon.com. [Offer gift card to participant.] Let's talk about when it might be convenient for you schedule our next interview. [Attempt to schedule the second interview.]

[If participants express feelings of discomfort, stress, or anxiety during the interview, I will share contact information for campus counseling staff.]

Thank you for your time. I look forward to meeting with you again soon.

APPENDIX H

Interview Two (Details of Experience) Protocol

Goal: Gather the concrete details of participants' lived classroom experiences at a contemporary women's college.

Summary: In the second interview, I ask participants to describe the details of their classroom experiences, including the nature of the classroom environment as well as the actors and activities present.

Beginning Script: It's good to see you again. First, I want to thank you for reviewing the summary of your first interview and responding to me with any corrections or edits. Do you have any further questions or concerns about the summary of your first interview? [Wait for participant to respond.] As I mentioned during our last meeting, participating in this study will involve three interviews, each with a different theme. In this interview, we'll explore your classroom experiences at this institution. I estimate that this interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes. I want to remind you that your anonymity will be protected throughout this study. Are you ready to begin? [If participant indicates readiness, the interview begins.]

Main Questions:

1. Please walk me through a typical day of classroom life for you here.
2. Tell me more about your classroom experiences and interactions at this institution.

Follow-Up Questions:

- a. In the classroom setting, how do you typically interact with your teachers?
- b. Tell me about a time when you felt challenged by a teacher in the classroom.
- c. Tell me about a time when you felt supported by a teacher in the classroom.

- d. In the classroom setting, how do you typically interact with other students?
- e. What has been your best classroom experience so far at this institution?
- f. What has been your worst classroom experience so far at this institution?
- g. How would you describe the classroom culture here, based on your experiences?

Probes:

Could you please tell me more about...

I'm not certain what you mean by... Could you give me some examples?

Tell me more about your thinking on

So what I hear you saying is..."

What are some of your reasons for liking ...?

You mentioned....Could you tell me more about that? What stands out in your mind about that?

Ending Script:

Thank you for participating in this interview today. As a next step, I will send you a summary of what we discussed and ask that you review it for accuracy and reply back to me via email in seven days with any comments or corrections you have. In my email, I will also ask you to complete a brief essay reflecting on one of your college classroom experiences that stands out for you as particularly meaningful. The suggested maximum length of this essay is 250 words. I will ask that you submit this to me via email or email attachment before our next scheduled interview. Do you have any questions or concerns about this? [Wait for response.]

As a way to compensate you for your time today, I'd like to offer you a \$10 gift card to Amazon.com. [Offer gift card to participant.] Let's talk about when it might be convenient for you schedule our third and final interview. [Attempt to schedule the third interview.]

[If participants express feelings of discomfort, stress, or anxiety during the interview, I will share

contact information for campus counseling staff.]

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX I

Interview Three (Reflection on Meaning) Protocol

Goal: Invite participants to reflect on the meaning of their lived classroom experiences at a contemporary women's college.

Summary: I asked participants to reflect on the meaning of their lived classroom experiences at a contemporary women's college, paying particular attention to the experiences participants shared in the second interview.

Beginning Script:

It's good to see you again. First, I want to thank you for reviewing the summary of your second interview and responding to me with any corrections or edits. Do you have any further questions or concerns about the summary of your second interview? [Wait for participant to respond.]

I also want to thank you for sending me your essay in which you reflect on one of your college classroom experiences that stands out for you as particularly meaningful. I appreciate you taking the time to craft this and share it with me.

The theme of this third and final interview is exploring the meaning you have made from your classroom experiences at this institution. I estimate that this interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes. I want to remind you that your anonymity will be protected throughout this study.

Are you ready to begin? [If participant indicates readiness, the interview begins.]

Main Questions:

1. Given what you have said about your experiences prior to becoming a student here and given what you have said about your classroom experiences here, what meaning do you make from your classroom experiences at this institution?
2. How have your classroom experiences here affected you, both negatively and positively?

Follow-Up Questions:

- a. Thinking about your classroom experiences at this institution, what else stands out as particularly meaningful for you?
- b. How would you describe your classroom experience here to a prospective student considering attending this institution?
- c. What life lessons have you learned from your classroom experiences here?
- d. How does the classroom experience so far at this institution compare to what you thought it would be like?
- e. What would you consider to be your biggest challenges in the classroom here?
- f. If you were talking about your classroom experience here to students at your former high school, what would you share with them?
- g. If you were describing the classroom experience here to a group of new students, what would you share?

Probes:

Please tell me more about...

I'm not certain what you mean by... Could you give me some examples?

Tell me more about your thinking on

So what I hear you saying is..."

What are some of your reasons for liking ...?

You mentioned....Could you tell me more about that? What stands out in your mind about that?

Ending Script:

Thank you for participating in this third and final interview today. As a next step, I will send you a summary of what we discussed and ask that you review it for accuracy and reply back to

me with any comments or corrections you have to the summary. Once you receive the summary via email, I will ask that you reply to me in seven days with any comments or corrections.

As a way to compensate you for your time today, I'd like to offer you a \$10 gift card to Amazon.com. [Offer gift card to participant.]

[Describe how this concludes the participants experience in the study.]

[If participants express feelings of discomfort, stress, or anxiety during the interview, I will share contact information for campus counseling staff.]

Thank you for all that you have shared with me. I appreciate you being a part of this study.

APPENDIX J

Participant Check Email #1

[Address Redacted]

[Address Redacted]

[date]

Dear _____,

Thank you for your recent participation in the interview related to your high school classroom experiences. Attached for your review is a summary of your interview. Please check to be sure that the summary accurately reflects your thoughts on the topic. If you have any additions, deletions, or clarifications, please make those on the attached document and send it back to me via email within the next 7 days. If I do not hear from you by then, I will assume that you have no changes to make and that the attached summary accurately represents your comments. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you for participating in my study.

Sincerely,

Katherine Read

kread@vt.edu

[Phone Number Redacted]

APPENDIX K

Participant Check Email #2

[Address Redacted]

[Address Redacted]

[date]

Dear _____,

Thank you for your recent participation in the interview related to your college classroom experiences. Attached for your review is a summary of your interview. Please check to be sure that the summary accurately reflects your thoughts on the topic. If you have any additions, deletions, or clarifications, please make those on the attached document and send it back to me via email within the next 7 days. If I do not hear from you by then, I will assume that you have no changes to make and that the attached summary accurately represents your comments. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

As I mentioned in our last interview, I will now ask that you complete a brief reflection essay (suggested maximum length of 250 words) on one of your college classroom experiences that stands out to you as particularly meaningful. Please submit your reflection essay to me via email or email attachment before our next scheduled interview. If you have any questions or concerns about the reflection essay, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Thank you for participating in my study.

Sincerely,

Katherine Read

kread@vt.edu

[Phone Number Redacted]

APPENDIX L

Participant Check Email #3

[Address Redacted]

[Address Redacted]

[date]

Dear _____,

Thank you for your recent participation in the interview related to the meaning you make from your college classroom experiences. Attached for your review is a summary of your interview. Please check to be sure that the summary accurately reflects your thoughts on the topic. If you have any additions, deletions, or clarifications, please make those on the attached document and send it back to me via email within the next 7 days. If I do not hear from you by then, I will assume that you have no changes to make and that the attached summary accurately represents your comments. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you again for participating in my study.

Sincerely,

Katherine Read

kread@vt.edu

[Phone Number Redacted]

APPENDIX M

Transcriber Release Form

Principal Investigator: Katherine Read
Department: Leadership, Counseling, and Research
Program: Higher Education
Institution: Virginia Tech
Project Title: Classroom Experiences of Women's College Students

I understand that as a translator/transcriber working for Katherine Read, I am required to maintain and protect the confidentiality of the information divulged by participants in recorded research-related interviews. I agree not to disclose the information gathered during interviews to anyone other than the principal investigator. I agree also not to disclose the identities and information about the identities of individuals who participate in the interviews.

My signature confirms that I will abide to this agreement, and that I will preserve the confidentiality of all proceedings, information gathered and transcribed, as well as the identities of participants in the interviews.

Signature of Transcriber: _____

Date: _____