

PIONEER WOMEN: MEANING MAKING AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF WOMEN IN  
AN INAUGURAL MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION COHORT

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Master of Arts in Education

By

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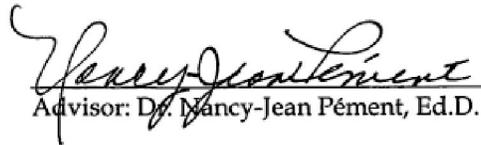
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## **Abstract**

Among the trends in American higher education over the past decade is the overall growth of students in graduate programs. This study focuses on the experiences of Latina women in an inaugural cohort in a Master of Arts in Education program with an emphasis in higher education leadership at an institution in the United States. The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of these participants as they shared their meaning making and career aspirations upon completing their graduate program. The women in this study were career professionals in the field of higher education, including academic and student services. The experiences shared formed four themes, including academic motivation, cohort experiences, family and support systems, and career aspirations. Constructivist research in the areas of self-authorship and meaning making guided this study of college students and women.

The methodological structure was also informed by the Listening Guide Method advanced by Gilligan (1982, 2015). It was valuable to capture feedback from these participants because of their shared experience of being the first to journey through their academic program together. This qualitative study is based on a narrative research design, and the data was collected during semi-structured interviews with the participants. This study was made with participants from a public university, a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI), located in California.

By exploring the cohort and graduate school experiences through the narratives of the participants, the reader will gain both an understanding of how the women interacted with each other as a cohort throughout their educational journey and insight into how the graduate program affected the participants as they explored the implications of the program for their career aspirations. Recommendations for academic programs, support, and further research are highlighted at the conclusion of this study.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my mother, Roni Miranda; my late grandmother, Margaret Miranda;  
and my brothers.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Among the trends in American higher education is the overall growth of enrollment of students in post-baccalaureate programs over the last decade. Statistics show that eighty-six percent (86%) of graduates are in master's degree programs (National Center for Statistics, 2017). Of these students, sixty percent (60%) were women in the fall of 2015 (National Center for Statistics, 2017). Since 2000, the enrollment of female students has grown at a faster rate than that of males, with a forty-two percent (42%) increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This enrollment increase of women in graduate education has resulted in fifty-eight percent (58%) of all master's degrees being awarded to women in the United States in 2014. Around the same time, the enrollment of Latinx graduate students also reached about eleven percent (10.7%) in 2014 (Allum, Feaster, & Okahana, 2016). Given the over-representation of women in post-baccalaureate education, it is vital for researchers to explore the experiences of these women and their career aspirations (Allum et al., 2016).

Universities in the United States will need to meet the growing market demand for graduate education that is driven, in part, by specific careers becoming increasingly professionalized through requirement of advanced education. Indeed, graduate education is growing across career fields, most notably in the fields of education, medicine, and business (Okahana, & Zhou, 2017). In the area of education broadly, seventy-six percent (76%) of all students pursuing master's degrees were women (Allum et al., 2016). More specifically in higher education, advanced education is quickly becoming a necessary part of one's career trajectory (Schoper, 2011).

This study focuses on the experiences of Latina women in an inaugural cohort in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership program in the United States. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of the participants as they shared their meaning making while pursuing their degrees. With this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do female graduate students who are in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership degree program at a public, Hispanic-serving University make meaning of their experiences?
- 2) How do female graduate students who are in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership degree program at a public, Hispanic-serving University construct their career aspirations?

It is anticipated that this study will advance the existing and emergent research on graduate school experiences and career aspirations of women in the aforementioned graduate program at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). I hope that this study will serve to inform future studies and practitioners as they work to advance the experiences of women in graduate studies.

The women in this study are employed in institutions of public higher education. The institution where this study was conducted recognized the need for a graduate program in higher education leadership to meet the demands for professionalization in the field. The students in this study are members of the first graduate cohort to go through that degree program. The narratives shared were collected through semi-structured, individual interviews with six women. During the interviews, they shared with me their graduate school experiences and their journeys as the first students in their academic program. All the participants in the study identify as women with the majority identifying as Latinas.

A constructivist theoretical perspective informed the framing of the research questions as well as the methodological tools used in this study. Constructivism informed the development of the research questions in this study since “[it] allowed for a focus on how individuals use their personal experiences, beliefs, and assumptions to make meaning of their graduate program experience” (Schoper, 2011, pp.7-8). The alignment of the elements of the study—namely, the theoretical framework, the research questions, and the methodology—are fitting for the nature of this investigation since participants were invited to share their stories regarding their educational journeys. Thus, a narrative inquiry methodology was chosen because it is uniquely suited to inquiring into the lived experiences of the participants.

Among the literature that informed the theoretical framework for this study concentrates on women’s meaning making and career aspirations. This literature includes theoretical work by Piaget (1950, 1954, 1965), Perry (1970, 1981), Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), Kegan (1982, 1994), and Baxter Magolda (1992, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2008). Additionally, the study is informed by research regarding the career trajectory of women and the impact that graduate school has on that trajectory (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005). Although there is research in these areas, there is a gap in the current literature covering career aspirations and meaning making of women in graduate school programs pursuing a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education with similar demographic characteristics of the participants in this study.

This study is critical because it explores the meaning making of women who were members of the same inaugural graduate cohort. By exploring the cohort and graduate school experiences through the narratives of the participants, the reader may gain an understanding of how the women interacted with each other as a cohort throughout their educational journey. The

study also provides insight into how the graduate program affected the participants as they explored the implications of the program for their career aspirations. All studies have their limitations, and this study is no exception. The experiences shared in this study represent but a snapshot of how participants expressed their meaning making at the time the interviews took place. While the size of the population studied does not devalue the lived experiences of the participants, it is vital to expand future studies with additional voices of women in graduate school.

The following chapter presents a review of the literature that informed this study, including works on meaning making, self-authorship, and career aspirations, to support the exploration of the central research questions in this study. While most of the literature on these topics is focused on the meaning making of undergraduate college students, the chapter also examines the studies that explored the experiences of graduate students writ large.

Chapter Three presents the methodological framework and the research design used in this study to collect and analyze data. The chapter also describes the selection of the participants and setting, data-collection procedures, data analysis, topics of trustworthiness, positionality of the researcher, and limitations of the study. Following the interviews, I used a modified version of the Listening Guide Method (LGM) to analyze and interpret the interview data to identify emergent themes. The LGM is a qualitative, relational, voice-centered, feminist methodology used to assist in the analysis of interview transcripts (Belenky et al., 1986; Woodcock, 2016). The LGM was specifically developed to be used with women and thus aligns itself beautifully with the population in this study (Gilligan, 2015).

Chapter Four explores the findings of this study to advance further insight into the meaning making and career aspirations of the participants. These findings are organized

thematically with participants' narratives placed in conversation with each other to illuminate the emergent themes.

Lastly, Chapter Five offers a discussion and analysis of the findings of this study and their implications for policies, program enhancements, and further research.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of Literature**

In Chapter One, I outlined the purpose of this study and identified two research questions to guide this study. These questions are the following:

- 1) How do female graduate students who are in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership degree program at a public, Hispanic-serving University make meaning of their experiences?
- 2) How do female graduate students who are in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership degree program at a public, Hispanic-serving University construct their career aspirations?

In this second chapter, I undertake a review of the literature related to meaning making and career aspirations of students in higher education. While most of the literature on these subjects is focused on the meaning making of undergraduate college students, this study will also explore literature that addresses the experiences of adults in graduate school.

This chapter begins with a discussion of constructivist theories related to this study with an emphasis on meaning making. This section provides an examination of the foundational work of Piaget (1950, 1954, 1965) and Perry (1970, 1981), followed by a review of the work of Belenky et al. (1986). and Kegan (1982, 1994). Baxter Magolda's seminal work in self-authorship (1992, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2008) will also be explored. Finally, this chapter also explores the research regarding marginalized students.

The constructivist developmental tradition, broadly, and meaning making research, specifically, have focused on how individuals come to know the world and the cognitive structures that inform one's assumptions through experience (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Creamer & Laughlin,

2005; Kegan, 1982; Marx, 2012). Cognitive meaning making structures act to filter how individuals understand and make meaning of their experiences to construct their reality (Bornstein & Lamb, 2005; Marx, 2012). This section addresses the work of Piaget and Perry and related research.

**Cognitive-structural theories.** One of the core foundations on which the constructivist developmental tradition is formed originates in the seminal work of Jean Piaget (1950, 1954, 1965) and his Piagetian cognitive-structural theory. Among his discoveries, Piaget explored the use of schemas constructed by individuals to assimilate new experiences and knowledge. According to Piaget, individuals harness information derived from previous experiences to incorporate new information into their existing schema. This new information is, in turn, incorporated into managing transitional periods (Piaget, 1954, 1965). Piaget's finding of the impact that dissonance has on the development of meaning making structures and its implications for adapting to new experiences informed research for decades that followed (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Kegan, 1982; King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1970).

Building upon the Piagetian cognitive-structural model, William Perry (1970) conducted a longitudinal study of male undergraduate students over a 15-year period with the goal of understanding the ethical and intellectual growth of students on a continuous spectrum. The theory that Perry articulated was the first of its kind, proposing an evolution of adult epistemological structures based on the study of undergraduate male students (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Perry articulated the seven positions of cognitive and ethical development as dualism, basic duality, complete dualism, initial multiplicity, relativism, contextual relativism, and commitment (Perry, 1970). These nine positions may be condensed into three broader concepts:

dualism, multiplicity, and relativism (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Perry, 1970). At the dualist position, young adults perceive knowledge claims through a narrow lens of wrong and right while looking to authorities to assist in the search for truth (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Individuals at the multiplicity position view knowledge claims with uncertainty while relativism results when a knowledge claim can be made by judging the relevant evidence (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Perry's contribution to constructivist research has assisted research across fields, including Baxter Magolda's (1992) and Kegan's (1994) work on understanding college student development, as well as more recent studies on self-authorship of American college students. However, Perry's work has been criticized for lack of diversity among the participants. Consistently, Perry's studies lacked gender, ethnic, racial, and age diversity, which would more accurately reflect the current dynamic student population in American higher education (Schoper, 2011).

### **Gender and Cognitive-Structural Theories**

Belenky et al. (1986), writing in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, offered a framework of adult epistemological structures originating from their study of college and adult women. The authors framed meaning making into "ways of knowing" rather than stages. These ways of knowing are contained within five perspectives: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge.

The structures displayed a shift in women's ways of knowing, moving from taking in knowledge from others to building the ability to construct knowledge by oneself (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Early in the ways of knowing is a period of silent construction where women receive knowledge from authorities without questioning such information. This knowledge and

resulting assumptions are then challenged by the women's lived experiences, leading women to turn to their inner voice. Belenky et al. (1986) linked identity and ways of knowing in women's development, whereby constructed knowing integrates experiences and external information to form the basis for commitments to oneself, others, and community (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

The work of Belenky et al. (1986) is known for its strength of diversity among the women participants in the study and for highlighting the cognitive strategies women use as they make sense of their experiences. The link between women's identity and meaning making emerged alongside the work that expanded the understanding of women's experiences, including those as American college students (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Gilligan, 1982). However, the Ways of Knowing model has been criticized for lack of clarity in some areas, including whether these perspectives were hierarchical in nature in contrast to a circular understanding of perspectives (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

### **Constructivist Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan**

Kegan's books *The Evolving Self* (1982) and *In Over Our Heads* (1994) built upon the research of Piaget (1954, 1965), Erikson (1950), Kohlberg (1975), and Perry (1970) through the formation and articulation of a constructive-developmental model. This work explored the phenomenon of meaning making using a subject-object structure consisting of the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal interconnected dimensions, each of which built upon each other (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Schoper, 2011). Kegan viewed meaning making as a process rather than stages, where the importance of understanding context and cultural factors were paramount.

Kegan (1994) articulated an integrated theory of consciousness held within five orders of consciousness. In the first order, individuals move from believing the people around them to

understanding themselves and the world. In this first order, perspectives and impulses are subjects and movements are objects (Schoper, 2011). The second order of consciousness refers to individuals experiencing the world through the *self*, where people and objects become permanent in their meaning making structures (Kegan, 1994). For example, individuals become focused on their places in the meaning making. During the third order of consciousness, what had been subjects during the second order become objects as individuals become socialized and their ideas and values become subjects (Schoper, 2011). For example, during this order, individuals reflect on their friendships and begin to understand how they influence others while exploring the views of others (Love & Guthrie, 1999). During the fourth order of consciousness, individuals achieve self-authorship by viewing themselves and others as part of a complex system of interrelationships (Kegan, 1994). In this fourth order, self-authorship “incorporates the ideas of self-regulation, identity, autonomy, and individuation” (Love & Guthrie, 1999). Kegan holds that at the fifth order of consciousness, which is rarely achieved, individuals may self-transform their belief systems with those of others while exploring contradictions in their own belief systems (Kegan, 1994; Love & Guthrie, 2011).

It is through the orders articulated by Kegan that Baxter Magolda labels the theory of self-authorship as dimensions. These dimensions of self-authorship include understanding the use of the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions in meaning making as individuals take responsibility for their actions and form diverse relationships (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Winters, 2016).

Like Perry’s research, Kegan’s work has been critiqued for its lack of diversity among the participants in the study. In light of this criticism, research has expanded on the application of Kegan’s work by adding lenses that explore race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and social class in

the meaning making process (Abes & Jones, 2004; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres, 2009; Torres & Hernandez, 2007).

### **Baxter Magolda: Self-Authorship**

Building upon the constructivist-developmental traditions articulated by Perry (1970) and Kegan (1982, 1994), Baxter Magolda sought in her 1986 longitudinal study of college students at Miami University to explore the possibility of gender-related patterns regarding how individuals develop their epistemological structures (Baxter Magolda, 2001). In the context of Baxter Magolda's early studies, the tradition of constructivist-developmental frameworks holds that individuals interpret their experiences using meaning making structures that they form over time and explores the way people interpret and analyze their surroundings to construct meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005).

Kegan's work (1982, 1994) is viewed by Baxter Magolda as some of the most significant contributions to expanding the understanding of self-authorship through the integration of Piagetian research into the constructive-developmental tradition (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Baxter Magolda (2008) summarizes Kegan's contribution as representing the interconnectivity between individual views of the world, the way in which individuals view themselves, and how individuals view social relations. Kegan describes social relations as epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal.

In the Epistemological Reflection Model that arose from Baxter Magolda's initial study, college students moved through a gender-inclusive model of epistemological development, from absolute knowing, through transitional knowing, and into independent/contextual knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1992). In absolute knowing, individuals are at the foundational level of

epistemological development, where knowledge is certain, inflexible, and dualistic and originating from authority figures (Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2004, 2008). In transitional learning, individuals view knowledge as partly absolute while still uncertain and challenge authority figures, including professors (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Baxter Magolda (2001) noted that at the transitional knowing level, women tend to use an interpersonal approach, whereas men tend to use an impersonal approach. The interpersonal pattern shows students learning through collective ideas, interaction with the views of peers, and valued evaluations of individual differences. In contrast, the impersonal pattern shows students learning through forced interactions with instructors in conjunction with debates with peers (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Contextual knowing is the final stage of knowing, where knowledge is non-absolute and where individuals seek to examine their own biases given multiple perspectives (Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2008). This final stage of knowing emerged in the post-college interviews conducted with the students that indicated that they had developed to the point of cognitive self-authorship, whereby peers and authority figures are understood to possess knowledge that may support the students' own stances (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Another concept advanced throughout Baxter Magolda's work is that of self-authorship, expanded through her focus on the development of meaning making among college students (1992, 1998, 2001). In her framework, Baxter Magolda describes self-authorship as a developmental process that begins in young adulthood and leads to the capacity to internally define one's identity, beliefs, and relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2008; Marx, 2012). Further, self-authorship is the ability to evaluate and construct knowledge along with the capacity to recognize a distinct identity apart from external factors (Abes, Jones & McEwen,

2007; Ashton, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 1999; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005). Additionally, a self-authored person has the ability to interpret his or her experiences in tandem with the perspectives of others while engaging their epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005).

To articulate the process of self-authorship, Baxter Magolda developed what she references as the “Phases of Self-Authorship,” containing the phases of external formulas, crossroads, self-authorship, and internal foundation (Ashton, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009).

During the external formulas phase, individuals look to authorities to formulate what to think and how to work while being unclear of their influences in their decision-making processes (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2003). Learning in this phase represents understanding the importance of comprehension versus the acquisition of knowledge (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

During the second phase, individuals find themselves at a crossroads when conflicts arise between their internal voices and those of authority figures. To respond to these conflicts and to answer essential life questions, individuals search for meaning across their meaning making structures, including the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Schoper, 2011). Also during this phase, individuals find that the plans constructed for their lives and careers by others may not meet their own goals, which may result in reevaluation of their academic and career goals (Evans et al., 2010). In the reassessment of their career and academic expectations, individuals will need to form new goals. For example, a lawyer who has been practicing for a few years wants to become a teacher, which results in challenges from her colleagues, family, and friends to her change of vocation (Schoper, 2011).

In the third phase, individuals arrive at self-authorship, where they develop the ability to defend their perspectives while facing competing views (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Evans et al., 2010). It is also during this phase that individuals engage in self-reflection as they deepen their understandings of their self-concepts while evaluating and adjusting their belief systems to meet their changing environments (Evans et al., 2010). Their belief systems also develop from the individuals' stronger senses of independence while engaging in the ongoing process of shaping their belief systems (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Carpenter, 2013).

For the fourth phase, Baxter Magolda differs with Kegan's (1982, 1994) framework by bifurcating self-authorship into the self-authorship and internal foundation phases. Individuals at this level have developed self-determination in their belief systems that is open to change but trusted by the individuals so that they may live their lives with confidence (Evans et al., 2010). It is at this phase that individuals use their developed self-authorship to navigate the interconnectedness of their meaning making to answer questions regarding what they believe, who to be, and how to relate to others while handling changes to their personal relationships and career aspirations (Baxter Magolda, 2003, 2004; Evans et al., 2010; Schoper, 2011). Also at this phase, individuals understand that they do not have control of the external world but do have the ability to make meaning of their experiences while becoming more confident in their internal voices when navigating their relationships, work, and personal philosophies (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2008, 2009; Schoper, 2011).

Building upon Baxter Magolda's 1992 study, this study included 16 participants to examine the intellectual development of graduate school students. Baxter Magolda's 2009 study expanded research into the self-authorship of graduate students. Baxter Magolda (1998, 1999, 2001, 2004) found that the participants' epistemological development was intertwined with the

development of their senses of self and their relationships with others. In 2008, Baxter Magolda explored the experiences of the participants from the 1992 study in their undergraduate years and into their thirties. After their undergraduate education, the 1992 participants faced an unfamiliar world with concerns centering on their careers, the formation of meaningful relations, establishing families, and achieving satisfaction (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

While Baxter Magolda's longitudinal study (1992) has become a seminal work in the field of constructivist meaning making, particularly in college student development research, her study has been critiqued for several limitations. Most notably, participants in the study consisted of traditionally aged students, lacking ethnic and racial diversity, with a limited amount of income diversity (Schoper, 2011). Because of the limitations in Baxter Magolda's research, other researchers have built upon her contributions.

To expand upon Baxter Magolda's work, Pizzolato (2005) explored the narrative survey responses from 613 high-risk undergraduate students to gain insight into their journeys toward self-authorship. Pizzolato's research into self-authorship found that undergraduate students who were at high risk of withdrawal could, through dissonance and experiences, form their identities and set educational and career goals (2003). Pizzolato also discovered that high-risk undergraduate students were more likely to achieve self-authorship before their collegiate experience because of the adversity they faced, which led them to be self-reliant in college (2003). While these students had achieved self-authorship, Pizzolato also found that some students continued to reconsider their foundation as they strived to meet external expectations and as they faced challenges in integrating with their peers (Pizzolato as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

Torres (2003) and Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) studied 28 Latino undergraduate college students through a longitudinal study to expand understanding of the links between cognitive development, self-authorship, and ethnic identity. Additional research has found that one's journey toward self-authorship is impacted by one's racial and ethnic identity, as well as one's experiences with discrimination (Baxter Magolda & Torres, 2004; Torres, 2009; Torres & Hernandez, 2007).

Abes and Jones (2004) conducted a longitudinal study to explore the experiences of undergraduate college students who identified as lesbians to add a new lens to the study of self-authorship. Specifically, the researchers examined how discrimination based on sexual orientation shaped the journeys of participants to self-authored identities. Abes and Jones found that self-authorship developed as a result of a mismatch the participants felt between their inner voices and that of external influences, which, when met with discrimination, necessitated their development toward self-authorship.

Laughlin and Creamer (2005) conducted a study to explore women's career decision-making processes and self-authorship. The study consisted of phone interviews with 40 women responding to structured interview questions connected to the epistemological, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions of self-authorship. Participants indicated that they relied on external formulas of parents, peers, and partners to inform their career planning decisions.

This chapter began with a discussion of constructivist theories related to this study with an emphasis on meaning making. Moreover, in this chapter I undertook an examination of the foundational work of Piaget (1950, 1954, 1965) and Perry (1970, 1981), followed by a review of the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), as well as Kegan (1982, 1994)

and, finally, Baxter Magolda's (1992, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2008) seminal work in self-authorship among others.

In the next chapter, I will share the methodological tools and practices I used to recruit participants. I also discuss the strategies I used to conduct interviews, as well as my analysis of the narrative collected. I conclude Chapter Three with a discussion of my efforts at triangulation to advance the trustworthiness of the study.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

In the first chapter, I articulated that the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the meaning making of women in a Master of Education program and how this meaning making informs their career aspirations. To this end, I offered the following questions to guide this study:

- 1) How do female graduate students who are in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership degree program at a public, Hispanic-serving University make meaning of their experiences?
- 2) How do female graduate students who are in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership degree program at a public, Hispanic-serving University construct their career aspirations?

Chapter Three outlines the research design, participants, setting, data-collection procedures, data analysis, topics of trustworthiness, positionality of the researcher, and limitations of the study. Shared in this chapter are the resources that I drew upon to construct the methodological framework used in this study as well as the “roadmap” of the methodology that I developed to allow for replication.

#### **Research Design**

This qualitative narrative study focused on exploring the lived experience and meaning making of women who were members of the initial cohort of a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership program at a predominantly undergraduate, public Hispanic-serving university. In addition, I sought to understand the implications that the meaning making by these women of their graduate experiences had on their career aspirations. Literature indicates that one of the most useful methods for understanding meaning making is a qualitative

narrative inquiry (Baxter Magolda, 2007). The interview questions developed for this study were closely aligned with the research questions that allow for the collection of the data that is workable and fits the purpose of the study (Maxwell, 2005).

This study is informed by a constructivist and meaning making conceptual framework shaped by early Piagetian (1950, 1954, 1965) research and the later work by Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda (1992, 1998, 1999, 2004). This study is further advanced by the methodological tools advanced by Gilligan (2015) and Woodcock (2016). Building upon the constructivist-developmental framework, the narrative design of this study provided participants with the opportunity to share their experiences related to their graduate school journey and the paths of their career aspirations following graduate studies. Given the participants and focus of this study, I chose to use the Listening Guide Method by Gilligan (1982, 2015) to frame the coding and interpretation of the data collected through semi-structured interviews with each participant. Also, I collected data using a demographic questionnaire that was completed by each of the participants to gather data such as socioeconomic status, familial information, and academic achievement (Appendix A). Maxwell (2005) recommends that for a study to be successful, the methodological structure should support the research questions, as well as inform the interview questions and structure, assist in data analysis, and advance the overall purpose of the study. I recognize that there is no precise cookbook recipe for qualitative research (Maxwell, 2005). Thus, it is essential that the methodological selections used in this study align with its broader goals and with the understanding that the researcher's eyes and ears serve as the instruments in the study (Creswell, 2012; Gilligan, 2015; Maxwell, 2005; Pément, 2013).

## **Data Collection and Procedures**

**Participants and Setting.** Participants at the core of this study shared their experiences of belonging to the same cohort, and as such, there may have been similarities in certain aspects of their graduate school adventure. The participants in this study were recruited through intentional homogeneous snowballing as informed by Creswell (2012, 2013) and Noy (2008), and by calling upon an insider to gain access to the participants. As stated by Maxwell (2005, p. 88), the quantitative language of “‘sampling’ is problematic for qualitative research because it implies the purpose of ‘representing’ the population sampled.” The employment of intentional, homogeneous snowballing allowed for the women in the study to share their graduate school experience as a cohort (Maxwell, 2005).

**Setting.** The cohort in this study was based at a liberal arts-centered, historically undergraduate, public university with a medium-sized nonresidential student body and carries the federal recognition of being a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI). Most of the undergraduate students and the small number of graduate students are drawn from the surrounding community. In the fall of 2012, the university added a higher education concentration within its existing P12-focused Master of Arts in education program. The participants in this study hailed from the initial cohort in that newly established concentration. The pool of potential participants in the initial cohort was approximately 14 members, of which seven ( $n = 7$ ) chose to share their lived experiences for this study. The program offers a five-semester, lock-step cohort-model master’s graduate program with cohorts of between 10-20 members. To maintain the anonymity of the participants in this study, as well as that of the institution, the identity of both have been withheld. Participants were also invited to assign themselves pseudonyms.

The process of conducting qualitative research required that I chose not only a population to explore, but also the events, settings, and processes that surround the population (Maxwell, 2005). Further, Maxwell (2005) indicates the importance of describing why I decided to study this particular site. Since its founding at the turn of the 21st century, the public university from which participants are drawn is unique among those on the West Coast in that it has a rapidly growing undergraduate enrollment, while at the same time expanding its graduate-program offerings. Second, the university has a history of serving historically non-traditional undergraduates and post-graduates within a Hispanic majority, liberal arts-oriented university. Third, the unique characteristics of the cohort allowed for exploring the experiences of women in a newly established graduate program in a discipline in which women are increasingly over-represented.

The purposeful selection process was constructed with the goal of strategically selecting the setting and participants to achieve heterogeneity within the participant population. Heterogeneity contributes to ensuring that conclusions adequately represent the full range of views among participants in the first cohort (Creswell, 2012).

The methods were also selected by considering the “feasibility of access [to participants] and data collection” while recognizing the limitations of a study of this type (Maxwell, 2005, p. 90). Creswell (2012) describes homogeneous sampling as selecting people based on shared traits and/or characteristics, including having membership in a subgroup. In this study, the subgroup was the cohort. Although recruitment for this study began with the hope of reaching all cohort members, a full 50% of cohort members, notably a significant response rate, indicated an interest in participating. Furthermore, all self-selecting participants were female cohort members.

Before any data was collected in this study, its details were shared with the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which also reviewed the theoretical framework, methodology, research questions, participant consent form (Appendix B), interview protocol (Appendix C), participant invitation email (Appendix D), and the National Institute of Health certificates of both my thesis advisor and myself (Appendices E and F, respectively). The IRB approved this study with minimal modifications. The IRB procedure allowed for feedback, credibility, and the protection of participants (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2005; Woodcock, 2016). Further, as supported by Creswell (2012), steps were taken throughout the study to ensure confidentiality of all identifying names, titles, and direct characteristics that, when necessary, were omitted or substituted for fictitious ones.

**Cohort Access.** In this study, a peer insider was invited to assist in the recruitment of participants and to mitigate against any power differentials that may exist between the researcher and the interviewees, thus promoting the trust of the student (Spall, 1998). As previously mentioned, the insider was a member of the cohort under inquiry, a peer, and a woman. To gain access to the participants, I contacted a member of the cohort and asked if she would be interested in assisting me as an insider by contacting her peers through email and in person. This method of recruitment allowed for recruitment through the natural social network and for peer-to-peer recruitment, where power relations are somewhat mitigated (Noy, 2008).

**Insider.** Once the insider agreed to assist me, she distributed the recruitment email (Appendix D) to her peer cohort-mates. In the recruitment email, she invited her peers who were interested in taking part in the study to contact me directly. For those who chose to participate in the study, I shared the participant consent form (Appendix B) and the preliminary demographic

questionnaire (Appendix A), both of which were to be submitted before, but which could be filled out in person before our time together.

**Snowball sampling.** The use of snowball sampling in this study was informed by the work of Noy (2008) who explored the use of snowball sampling as a primary recruitment strategy in qualitative research. Snowball recruitment served as my primary vehicle to access the participants in the study. I employed this methodological approach in its own right and not merely as a “default option” as other literature may suggest (Noy, 2008, p. 331). Noy also stated that snowball sampling could lead to “dynamic moments, where the unique social knowledge . . . can be fruitfully generated” (Noy, 2008, p. 328). Snowball sampling also served to allow the exploration of the social networks within the cohort. In addition, this form of recruitment allowed for my “image as a researcher” to be shared from peer to peer as my call for participants spread through the social network of the cohort (Noy, 2008, p. 339).

**Semi-structured interviews.** Interviews were conducted in person at a convenient time and location except with one participant who chose to be interviewed over the telephone. In scheduling interviews, I offered a high level of scheduling flexibility to accommodate participants. As recommended by Creswell (2012), the interview was held in locations free from distractions and which lent themselves to audio voice recording. This was also true of the one interview in which the participant chose to share her experiences over the phone with the audio being recorded using a digital voice-recording device. Collectively, the interviews each lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour, depending on the participants’ availability and wishes.

At the beginning of the interviews, I presented myself as a fellow graduate student eager to understand the participants’ experiences in an effort to open a broader conversation and to build a rapport. I did so as I set up the audio voice recorder and collected the consent and

preliminary demographic questionnaire forms. I restated the purpose of the study, the motivation behind it, and its potential benefits, and I shared the various resources available to, as well as the rights of, the participant. At this stage, I also reviewed an interview checklist adapted from Creswell (2012) that allowed for consistency across the interviews in addition to ensuring that practical elements were addressed, including those of technical and procedural natures. During this time, I also set up the digital recording devices, which included a digital voice recorder and a password-protected iPhone, to make sure that a clear recording was obtained and to provide a digital backup for the primary recording device. These audio recordings were later transcribed verbatim, including “pauses, inflections, false starts, unfinished sentences, and overlapping speech” by a third-party audio transcription vendor (Gilligan et al., 2003, p.160; Woodcock, 2016).

**Interview Protocol.** The interview protocol (Appendix C) used in this study was informed by and adapted from a variety of literature, including Creswell (2012), Gilligan (2015, 2017), Gilligan et al. (2003), Maxwell (2005), and Pément (2013). The goal of using the protocol was to frame the discussion and the time spent with the participants. The protocol was shared with a few of my peers in graduate programs to ensure clarity in addition to the review conducted by the Institutional Review Board. Clarity was also sought in an effort to distinguish between the interview questions and the research questions, while providing for the generation of data that would assist in the understanding of the social and psychological contexts of events and activities (Maxwell, 2005).

Beginning with information regarding the rights and resources available to the participants, the protocol shifted the conversation to the core questions and was supplemented by sub-questions. Creswell (2012) recommends that no more than four or five questions be used in a

qualitative study while aided by probing questions. I began the interviews with warm-up questions, which allowed for open-ended questions to establish a rapport with the participants. The core questions in the interview provided insight to aid the central research questions while providing for open-ended responses. Following the core questions and informed by Luker (2008) and Maxwell (2005), I asked a series of “cool-down” and future-oriented questions that allowed the participants to share other aspects of their experiences that may not have been captured by the previous questions. I closed the interviews with a concluding statement that included additional contact information. I thanked the participants and asked whether I might reach out to them again if I had further questions or required clarification. While I took observational notes in the first two interviews, I stopped this practice after a participant shared that she felt the use of note-taking was pejoratively “clinical.”

**Demographic data questionnaire.** The purpose of the questionnaire was to provide additional contextual descriptive information that could inform the analysis of the primary interview data collected. The questionnaire allowed me to explore various aspects of the participants’ lives, including their past and present experiences. In the questionnaire (Appendix A), I asked questions about the participants’ socioeconomic status history, gender, age, race and ethnicity, relationship status, housing, economic overview, familial education attainment, nationality, and academic backgrounds. Participants were given the option to leave blank any of the questions. As supported by Creswell (2012), Maxwell (2005), and Pément (2013), the use of a demographic questionnaire is a valuable addition to qualitative research by allowing descriptive data to be collected, which added contextualization to the narratives shared. Furthermore, the demographic questionnaire was structured to enable participants to choose their pseudonyms that were used in this study. Once received, and with the goal of not influencing my

initial time with the participants, I did not review the contents of the demographic questionnaires until the analysis phase of the study.

### **Data Analysis: The Listening Guide Method**

The interview data collected in this study were analyzed and interpreted using a modified method, the Listening Guide Method (LGM). The LGM is a qualitative, relational, voice-centered, feminist methodology used to assist in the analysis of interview transcripts (Gilligan et al., 2003; Woodcock, 2016). The LGM was developed considering Gilligan's research on the identity and moral development of women (Gilligan, 1982). The method is built on the premise that human development occurs in relationship with others as the researcher navigates multiple voices and in the act of meaning making (Pément, 2013; Woodcock, 2016). Further, the method "honors the role of the research-researched relationship" (Woodcock, 2016). The method was specifically developed to be used with women and thus aligns itself beautifully with the population in this study (Gilligan, 2015).

The LGM entails sequential *listenings* structured to bring the researcher closer to the distinct voice of the participants and to understand their experiences (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 159). To reflect this close relationship, the LGM describes each of the steps as listenings rather than readings to articulate the goal of exploring the voices of the participants within each interview. As the listenings were conducted, the listener (and novice researcher) used colored markers to help organize indicators within the transcripts, to track notes on the interview transcripts, and to create summaries to assist in the later interpretations (Woodcock, 2016). Below is a description of each step in the LGM:

**Step one: Listening for the plot and reflexivity.** The first two listenings are prescribed and shaped by the questions I brought to the interviews. As recommended by Maxwell (2005),

because I did not transcribe the interview audio myself, and supported by Woodcock (2016), I chose to integrate an audio listening into the first listening. The first listening is structured to integrate a variety of qualitative methods, including thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and grounded-theory approaches while allowing the researcher to stay close to the descriptive content of the interviews (Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan & Eddy, 2017).

In this first listening, I listened for the plot while exploring questions, including “What is happening? What stories are being told? When, where, with whom, and why?” I sought to understand the “landscape, context, metaphors and images, notable absences, dominant themes, and larger social context” (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 160; Woodcock, 2016). Second, during this listening, I recorded my responses to the interview data through actions of self-reflexivity, including voice notes, quick writes of initial impressions, and reflections (Gilligan et al., 2003; Gilligan, 2015). The goal of this listening was to record my thoughts and feelings that emerged from my listening with the purpose of identifying different connections, resonances, and interpretations that emerged from the listenings themselves (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 161).

**Step two: Voice Poems.** At this step, I created what are called “I poems” or “voice poems” from data collected from the interview transcriptions (Woodcock, 2016, p. 1). In this process, I listened to the use of the first person by the participants by looking for distinctive candidness and rhythms in their responses. The construction of voice poems allowed for a systematic method to listen to the participant’s first-person voice while seeking to pay attention to how the participant speaks of herself in relation to herself and others (Woodcock, 2016). Through these poems, I capture the “stream of consciousness” in the responses from the participants as they shared their narratives (Gilligan, 2015; Woodcock, 2016, p. 4). Also, during this step, I ask, “How does this person speak about herself?” Gilligan also shares that this action

is critical in the relational method by focusing on how participants talk about themselves. I started by reading the transcript of each interview, highlighting any use of the first person by the participants along with the verbs in the order in which they appear in the transcript. I then pulled these *I statements* into a separate Word document, where these statements appeared similar to stanzas with the goal of exploring each stream of consciousness that crosses through each interview.

**Steps three and four: Listening for contrapuntal voices.** As articulated by Woodcock (2015), the first and second listenings provided substance to the themes that demonstrate the participant's way of meaning making while the third and fourth listens provided the opportunity to hear the participant's voice in relation to the research questions. In the fourth step, I returned to the research questions when listening for contrapuntal voices. I sought to understand the different layers of each of the participant's expressions. With its origin in the performing arts, this step called for listening for the counterpoint to identify different strands within the interview that inform the research question and for applying conceptual elements from the theoretical framework. Having built upon the previous steps, I had a trail of highlights, notes, and quick writes to process through. I then pulled together all I had learned from the analysis and put it into a relationship with the research questions while synthesizing the evidence collected.

**Coding.** Following the LGM analysis, there was already a trail of material to gather and synthesize the final number of main themes. During the first listening, I took notes, wrote reflections, and reviewed my interview notes while creating a trail of evidence supporting the emerging themes using a color-coding system. Throughout the first listening, I used highlighters to mark passages that emerged from each question asked during the interviews. I color-coded

keywords, phrases, contradictions, and periods of silence (Woodstock, 2016). I then kept note of passages from the interviews that informed the identification of emergent themes.

During the second listening, I created the voice poems that emerged from each of the interviews and placed the poems in relationship with each other. Throughout the LGM process, I identified preliminary themes as I coded the transcript data, and then I clustered the preliminary codes into broader categories. During coding, I identified preliminary categories, which were then condensed into themes. I maintained the color-coding system and notes on transcripts from each interview to stay close to each narrative, which informed my data analysis in Chapter Four, and the discussion contained in Chapter Five. Pulled from those transcripts are quotations from the participants that supported the emergent themes and inform the discussion in Chapter Five.

### **Trustworthiness**

A central overarching principle in qualitative research is that of trustworthiness (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2005; Woodcock, 2015). To advance trustworthiness in qualitative research, it is imperative to use procedures that achieve quality in the study. Maxwell (2005) recommends that one way to add trustworthiness to a study is through triangulation. To enhance trustworthiness or authenticity in this study, I relied on several strategies, including member checking, peer debriefing, journaling and bracketing, and intentional self-reflexivity. These procedures were enhanced by the framework provided through the Listening Guide Method that integrated many of these strategies into its process (Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). As previously mentioned, the data collected in this study represent the lived experiences of participants. These lived experiences are significant and valid expressions of participant meaning making.

**Member checking.** One of the standard tools to ensure authenticity in qualitative research is the use of respondent validation, also known as member checking. In this study, I

contacted participants if I needed any clarification of their responses and/or further descriptive data. Furthermore, I shared the verbatim interview transcripts with each participant and requested any corrections or feedback they would like to offer (Maxwell, 2005; Pément, 2013). I also invited participants to share any additional feedback they may have had after the interview was conducted. I took these steps because it is important to limit the amount of potential misinterpretation of participant information. Moreover, by engaging in continual self-examination and self-reflexivity, I sought to achieve clarity in my own perspectives and possible biases throughout the study (Maxwell, 2005, p. 111; Pément, 2013).

**Peer debriefing.** Another method I used to account for authenticity in the research was the use of a peer debriefing. As informed by Spall (1998) and Spillet (2003), I engaged in peer debriefing to share my thoughts and reflections with a fellow graduate student who was enrolled in a Master of Education in higher education program at another public university. My peer would share her experiences as a woman in graduate school while assisting me as I reflected on the research. The use of a debriefer assisted me with processing the stress of collecting data, exploring personal perspectives, and processing their implications in my interaction and interpretation with the data collected (Spall, 1998).

**Reflective journaling, note-taking, and bracketing.** Building from a position that all research is biased, I engaged in reflexivity through journaling, note-taking, and bracketing consistent with the Listening Guide Method. While qualitative research is not primarily concerned with eliminating variance, the field is interested in recognizing and displaying how the researcher's perspective informed their study (Maxwell, 2005). Throughout the data-analysis process, I recorded my reflections in quick writes and voice notes as I recorded my emerging

thoughts and questions. Collecting these reflections allowed me to offer a brief self-narrative in the positionality of researcher section of this paper.

Furthermore, at the core of both the Listening Guide Method and this area of qualitative research is the view that self-reflexivity enhances research by identifying one's own views while navigating those of others (Gilligan, 2015; Pément, 2013; Woodcock, 2015).

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

Akin to trustworthiness, setting the positionality of the researcher and self-disclosure is another central element in qualitative research. Positioning the researcher offers a means of acknowledging one's place in the research process (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Pément, 2013). Self-reflectivity activities are also critically integrated when using the Listening Guide Method that, in turn, are informed by a feminist perspective (Woodcock, 2016). As noted by Pément (2013, p. 83), reflexivity in qualitative research "acknowledges the end product is situated in a larger cultural, political and economic climate." Further, self-positionality allows me to "explore how personal values and social constructs play a role in one's practice and interpretations" (Woodcock, 2016, p. 4).

As previously stated, the motivations for this study were my observations in graduate school of the broad and differing paths my peers were navigating in their professional, academic, and personal lives. These observations were informed by my worldview that holds that history and people matter, that the stories we tell ourselves matter, and that the personal is political. Additionally, my observations and conceptualization of this study were informed by my understanding that the "past is never dead. It's not even past" (Faulkner, 1951). I found this to be

true, especially as I sought to understand the expectations and meaning making of those who shared their stories for this study.

Further, I hold that to explore the graduate school experiences and career aspirations of the women in this study, the context of time and place should be established. The importance of time and place is also true of my positionality as the researcher. I share, alongside many of the participants in this study, membership in the millennial generation, roughly those born between 1980-1997, with the elements of history that influence that generation. In my case, the impact of such historical events included the death of Princess Diana, the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001, historic elections and candidates, the global financial crisis, failed education reform, and the persisting march of the internet revolution. This is an era in which American higher education is struggling to meet the demands of the millennials while bracing for the arrival of the post-millennials, those born after 2000, students who are immersed in the “internet of things,” a generation larger than the baby boomers, and who have only lived in a country at war (McBride & Nief, 2016).

As the beneficiary of the perspectives of scholars, reformers, theologians, and policy makers (many of whom were women), and as a student who is a member of various groups that are historically underrepresented and marginalized in American higher education, I was eager to engage in a study of this kind. Further, recognizing that all studies are only snapshots in time, it was important to me to collect the experiences of these women in an era in which dark echoes of the past are pushing back across the spheres of public and personal life—particularly, echoes that are impacting and redefining the value and positionality of women in the public and personal spheres, including across the spheres of influence such as belief systems, family, media, politics, education, economy, and culture. These echoes exist in an era where, broadly, the academy,

those who support it, and the marginalized groups within it are entering a period of considerable uncertainty. Finally, as a practitioner in higher education, it is of intrinsic importance that I make decisions informed by a broad exposure to the experiences and lives of others, particularly those that been historically marginalized by the academy.

### **Limitations**

All studies have their limitations, and this study is no exception. The experiences shared in this study represents but a snapshot of how women in the study expressed their meaning making at the time the interview took place. While the size of the population studied does not devalue the lived experiences of the participants, it is important to expand future studies with additional voices of women in graduate school.

This chapter has explored the methodological tools and practices I used to recruit participants, collect interview data, analyze the narratives collected, and perform coding and data analysis while maintaining trustworthiness. This chapter contained an explanation of the processes used through the Listening Guide Method, which aligned with the theoretical framework and participants of this study. In the next chapter, the results and findings of this study will be explored to give further insight into the meaning making and career aspirations of the participants in this study.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Findings**

In the first chapter, I articulated that the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the meaning making of women in a Master of Education program, and how this meaning making informs their career aspirations. To this end, I offered the following questions to guide this study:

- 1) How do female graduate students who are in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership degree program at a public, Hispanic-serving University make meaning of their experiences?
- 2) How do female graduate students who are in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership degree program at a public, Hispanic-serving University construct their career aspirations?

Chapter Two presented a review of the pertinent literature that informed this work, including scholarship on meaning making, self-authorship, and career aspirations, and supported the exploration of the central research questions. The review of the literature revealed that people make meaning in a developmental pattern that has been explored in various contexts (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 1998, 2004; Kegan, 1982, 1994). Specifically, the literature examined the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students, with a focus on the meaning making and career aspirations of women (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 1998; Creamer, 2005).

In Chapter Three, I outlined the research design, participants and setting, data-collection procedures, data analysis, topics of trustworthiness, positionality of the researcher, and limitations of the study. Also shared in that chapter are the resources that I drew upon to construct the methodological framework that allows for dependability and confirmability of this study.

In this chapter, I begin with a presentation of demographic data relating to the participants. Then, an analysis of the interview data is presented along with the identified themes, which include academic motivation, inaugural cohort experiences, family and support systems, and career aspirations. For each of these themes, I sought to allow the participants to speak for themselves by quoting extensively from the interview transcriptions. Given the nature of the shared experiences of these women, I have also chosen to place their quotations in conversation with each other. Additionally, to aid with the readability of these quotations, I elected to correct grammar when possible while maintaining intent and context. To protect the identity of the participants and to recognize the sensitivities of the small number of participants in this study, there are areas in this chapter where specific demographic data is withheld. The following sections contain the stories of Veronica, Margaret, Dolores, Nancy, Sarah, and Janis.

### **Demographic Data**

The following section provides a succinct demographic portrait of the participants in this study. Given the small sample size, every effort has been made to ensure the anonymity of participants.

**General criteria for participation in this study.** Participants sought for this study had to meet the criteria of being members of the initial cohort in the Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership program. These participants were recruited using an insider within the cohort who invited her peers to participate in this study. Before each interview, participants were given the option to complete a preliminary demographic questionnaire (Appendix A). All participants in this study chose to complete the questionnaire and responded

to every question. The demographic data presented below represents the information collected through these questionnaires.

**Age, ethnicity, and marital status of participants.** The average age of the participants in this study was 32 years old, ranging from their mid-twenties to mid-forties. All the participants in the study identified as women. Five of the six participants identified their ethnicities as variations of Latina (Chicana, Hispanic, Latina, and Mexican) with one participant identifying as Caucasian. Half of the women were not in a romantic relationship, two of the participants identified that they were married, and one participant was in a domestic partnership.

**Socioeconomic and upbringing.** All the participants in the study shared that they were raised in Southern California in households ranging in socioeconomic status from lower economic to lower-middle economic class. At the time of the study, all participants stated that they were financially independent of their parents.

**Employment and educational attainment.** All the women shared that they were employed in administrative, non-faculty, functions in the field of higher education. Half of the participants were the first in their families to obtain a baccalaureate degree in academic fields including psychology, sociology, liberal studies, history, and communications. At the time of their interviews, three of the participants had completed their master's programs, two had completed all the degree requirements except their thesis, and one participant indicated that she needed additional coursework.

The mothers of the participants represented a broad range of educational attainment including one with an elementary level, two at the high school level, and two who had obtained their baccalaureate degrees. By contrast, the educational attainment of participants' fathers was generally lower than that of the participants' mothers. The educational attainment of fathers of

participants ranged from one with no formal education, one with some formal education, one had a middle school education, two at the high school level, and one with a baccalaureate degree.

#### **Four Emergent Themes: —Theme One: Academic Motivation**

Four themes emerged from the interviews conducted with the members of the first cohort of a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership program. The themes which emerged from the open-ended interviews include the following: academic motivation, inaugural cohort experiences, family and support systems, and career aspirations.

To answer the research questions regarding the meaning making and career aspirations of women in graduate school, participants were asked about their graduate school experiences and about their career aspirations. The stories of these graduate students begin with the motivation to consider and to enroll in the Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership program.

Participants offered a range of narratives on their motivation to enroll in graduate school and what their hopes were for the outcome of their programs. Through these narratives, participants also explored what meaning they make of the status proffered by graduate degrees and the value they place on graduate education. Not surprisingly, the views expressed herein are influenced by broader social norms and values of higher education, particularly those of graduate school education.

For participants, their motivation to enroll in graduate school included viewing the master's degrees as personal goals, acknowledging the influences of employee cost incentives, the convenience of the degree program, and the opportunities to advance their careers. Veronica framed graduate school this way: "Continuing education is good for anybody." Dolores, like

other women in the study, suggested that graduate education is a life goal on a perceived timeline of one's life. More specifically, she stated, "In my personal life, I like to say the years were blending. So, I had benchmarks in my own personal timeline. I wanted a new goal. I wanted to achieve something." Similarly, Dolores shared that her timeline was influenced by her parents: "My parents expected me to attend college." Because of this, "after ten years [from undergraduate education], my next step, naturally, would have been graduate school."

Among the primary influences on the decisions by the participants to enroll in graduate school were employer tuition support and the convenience of the graduate program. Under the tuition structure of the program at the time, the costs of the program were waived for any student who was also a full-time employee at the institution at which the graduate program was housed. Veronica framed the graduate program as having been "highly supported financially wise." In addition, it was "convenient" for employees of the university to enroll in the graduate program. The convenience of the location of the program, in particular, influenced participant choice, especially among those who have children. As Margaret shared, "Traveling was very hard on my part"; this had, in the past, influenced her decision to "withdraw from an MA program at another institution because life happens."

Viewing their graduate education as a means for career advancement and social mobility was the central consideration in the decision-making of the participants to enroll in their graduate program. Janis framed these influences in this manner:

I came into the program kind of having my [career] vision already set. I was only going for the degree, and I let them [program administrators] know, too. I'm here to get a degree, yes, of course, to broaden my education but I'm here to be able to get the next job.

Furthermore, Janis shared this:

Everyone told me there's no way you're going to go up anywhere in higher education without a master's. You, at least, need that, and so I knew I had to go get one, and I went and got one, and now I'm—now that everything's been finished and I have the degree, I am looking for that next step.

This sentiment was shared by Dolores: “There was no upward mobility whatsoever in my job. Once I got to that, and I was frustrated enough, that's when I applied to graduate school.” Sarah framed this sentiment in this way: “I had gotten to a point where I kind of got as far as I could go without another degree.” Dolores shared that the master's degree was a “jumping-off point” where she could “get to a place where I can actually do some good work” and that “[the degree] will get me to that point and then I could really start my career.” Framing the view from the perspectives of her peers, Dolores stated:

You know you hear that people want to know your title before they know your name, or they want to make sure you have those letters after your name. Otherwise, they're not going to talk to you or think you know a thing.

Finally, Dolores stated the value of the master's degree as a “booster pack” in her career and that once the participant completes her degree, she could say that “I got the star in *Super Mario*.”

## **Theme Two: Inaugural Cohort Experiences**

Among the central themes running through the meaning making of the participants was their experiences as members of the same first cohort within their Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership. Dolores suggested that “the first cohort, you

have to be a guinea pig. You know? . . . who are they going to pull from if not from the office next door?” Dolores expanded further:

Looking back on it, it makes sense, you know, that is how the cohort was built. You know, you must, you must pull from around you, and that’s, who else? but the staff, and the incentive is there because now I know how much they [the employees] had to pay for a semester as opposed to my full price, you know, tuition.

Speaking to the feelings of the cohort as “a community,” Dolores shared, “In one sentence, how was my experience? My cohort did not follow the cohort model. I know what the cohort model is supposed to be.” Many of the participants spoke to the lack of “connectivity” among the cohort members, which Sarah described as “one thing I was hoping for that didn’t really happen was the super connectivity with the cohort-mates.” Sarah elaborated by stating, “We weren’t as dependent on each other.” Elaborating on cohort connectivity, Margaret shared, “I kind of felt disconnected from my cohort.” Further, she shared that “I never really felt, like, you know, like, support. There were a few people that I would talk to and rely on . . . but I didn’t feel that closeness . . . everyone kind of forms their own little groups.”

The framing of the closeness of cohorts included broader early expectations that the participants had of what the cohort should feel and look like. For example, Sarah shared, “I don’t know like, they’re like, ‘Oh, you’re going to feel like a family,’ and it will be like, it didn’t really develop into that. That would’ve been pretty cool.” Nancy stated, “I didn’t feel like there was a culture of grad students on campus.” Dolores shared that “I have this very textbook kind of definition of what a cohort should be.” She elaborated further:

But then again, going in as the only person who didn’t work on campus, I was very different. I thought, I automatically thought, ‘Okay, here’s 20 new best friends. You

know? How am I gonna fit? How am I gonna have so many people in my wedding party. You know? . . . You think ahead, and, and you just hear stories of what a cohort should be and these you know lifelong, just blood, practically blood-related friendships . . .

Another aspect of the cohort experience that all participants spoke to the navigation and building of interpersonal relationships within their cohort. Dolores framed this challenge in this way:

The kind of interpersonal relations part of what it means to work in higher education. We're all doing good. We're all for the same purpose, which is what you are in the master's program, but sometimes, we don't have, we don't have to work together as the level of friendship. It's kind of basic, but you don't have to be friends with everyone. And I think that help, that would've helped me not take things so personally, and I understand that other people have things going on in their lives as well.

In reflecting on their cohort experiences, many of the participants shared that if they had known what the initial cohort experience was ahead of time, they would have waited to join later cohorts of the program. Veronica said, "If I knew what I was going into, I probably would've waited and not been the first cohort." Veronica continued, "I mean, going through it now, I could say, like, 'Oh, it was good, I learned a lot.' But probably going into it, I probably wouldn't have done the program." Sarah expanded on their cohort relationship: "So you get both the good and the bad of that, of being the first cohort. I wouldn't ever be the first cohort of something again." Margaret shared simply, "I probably wouldn't have done the program." Janis framed her experience as this: "There are pros and cons to always being part of the inaugural group." A sentiment that was often repeated by participants was framed by one participant as "kind of guinea pigs, is how I would describe the two years." Understanding this sentiment, Nancy shared the challenges surrounding the academic experiences of the cohort. She stated, "I knew I was

part of the first cohort, so I wasn't going to be the best program. I knew there was going to be a lot of improvements to be made. So, I was just ready for not the best program.”

Sarah, building upon the feeling of being one of the “guinea pigs” in the cohort, framed the challenges in this way: “Sometimes things worked; sometimes they didn't So, it was a kind of a learning experience for everybody, including the program.” Viewing the program as an evolving experience led Nancy to share:

The first cohort, it's a little special, because of—we were the first ones, it was like a new program. I know there were a lot of hiccups in trying to like to establish the program. I would be very curious to know what like the second, third or like the four, upcoming cohort would have to say because I'm pretty sure they going to have a different experience.

Some of the participants shared the view of the opportunities and benefits of being members of an inaugural cohort. For example, Janis shared “there were benefits to being part of an inaugural program. We go to provide that feedback to help create it.” Similarly, Sarah stated, “I had a positive experience. There were a couple of growing pains, you say, because we were the very first cohort.”

**Coworker-Cohort Relationship.** Expanding upon their cohort experiences, all participants spoke of the dynamic of having, as Nancy stated, “like 80% of the people, of my classmates, worked on campus, so they had a staff position as well.” Janis described this coworker cohort relationship in these words:

I also worked with a lot of people, so we already had a closer relationship I think that was the unique dynamic took away from the cohort experience because you couldn't be as honest because people were afraid if you critically analyze your workplace, it was going to

negatively impact you professionally as you left the classroom. A lot of my friends, friendships developed in the cohort with each other because we understood. We would walk and talk and relate to everybody.

Expanding upon the co-worker cohort relationship, many of the participants spoke about the roles that their supervisors played as faculty members in their program. Sarah framed faculty relationships as such: “I work with a lot of faculty members on a daily basis anyway. So it’s just kind of an extension of that.” Veronica felt that the program was just “filling a void, grabbing the first person they could” to teach the courses in the program. At times the staff selected to teach courses had what a participant called “conflicts of interest between students and supervisors.” Dolores, who was not employed by the university at the beginning of her graduate experience, described the contrast between her experience and an outsider from those of her cohort-mates who were employed by the university:

I feel that [my] experience was validated, or my perspective was validated because—it’s funny because the freedom that comes with not being staff is incredible. I—not that I was there to offend anyone, but I didn’t look as faculty as employers. I didn’t look at professors as office mates. I had fewer boundaries than the rest of my cohort because my actions—I didn’t see a direct connection or a direct aftereffect.

Dolores also shared that there was a certain kind of freedom from not being a staff person at the university at which the graduate program was offered. She stated:

I could just immediately get to the point of comfort, of vulnerability, and just absorbing everything and not second-guessing any of their help or support, where I knew that it was coming from a genuine place and it wasn’t something strategic because I work with them. Or, that you know, were recruiting me, or you know, there wasn’t—there was no ulterior

motive, and that just really opened things up for me. It made such a difference because . . . it didn't cloud my experience.

**Academic Experiences.** Several of the participants spoke vividly of their academic experiences while expounding upon the unique dynamics incorporated into their inaugural cohort graduate school experience. Participants shared the challenges they experienced as the academic expectations and structure of the program shifted. This reality is illustrated by Sarah who indicated that “we were given the guidebook not necessarily all of those things were required from us by the end of the program.” Margaret shared that “the program wasn't clearly defined, so we were getting things as they came, and that was very frustrating because I didn't think it was going to be this difficult.” For example, participants spoke of the surprise of having to write a thesis in their graduate program with late notice of this requirement. Sarah summed up this experience in this manner:

When you go for over a year thinking you don't have to do a thesis, is a bit of a shock. But you know I did it because it was— I had to do it. But the constant changes were sometimes difficult. I was genuinely upset and taken off guard about the whole thesis thing and, about the whole huge shift in the expectations for the fieldwork.

Margaret shared Sarah's frustration, “for instance, that we had to write a thesis. The thesis prolong my time to completion.” Margaret continued by stating that had she known about the thesis earlier, that “definitely the thesis, that would have [been] a huge factor in my decision to attend the program.” Sarah also shared that her fieldwork requirement “drastically changed my last semester” and “people that may have waited until that last semester [to complete their fieldwork] just kind of got off doing a lot less work. That was frustrating.” She summed up her experiences in the program by stating, “What I didn't like were the constant changes.” Veronica

described her overall academic experience: “It didn’t seem like a student-centered [program] at the time; there was no logic across the board.”

**Academic Growth.** Many of the participants spoke of their growth in their self-awareness and academic ability during their graduate experiences. Sarah shared:

I was surprised to find I’m a good writer. [In undergraduate work,] I thought I was a bad writer, or at least not a good one . . . my papers were not fully read. I was published off a paper, which blew my mind because, like, “Are you really sure? Me?”

Nancy spoke extensively of her personal and professional growth through the forming of connections between her coursework and practice. She shared, “I worked on my portfolio. It took me a while to finish it because I suddenly realized all these connections that I was making between my course and eventually what I want to do.” She added, “I was making those connections, tying it back to what I learned in the classroom, what I learned from readings. So that portfolio was pretty much a reflection of what I learned both inside and outside of the classroom.” Nancy continued: “I know in my undergrad, I got to learn what I’m capable of doing, like really put myself out there. And then graduate school, it was really more of strengthening those skills that I gained and that confidence that I gained.” Finally, Nancy shared:

I do not regret making the decision to go to graduate school. It was hard for me at the beginning, but I do not regret it at all. I feel a lot more confident in myself and definitely have learned new skills. I already had some skills that I didn’t know I had that.

**Academic Challenges.** All the participants spoke to the academic challenges of the program and how they related to their expectations. Janis shared this: “Realizing that the courses were not challenging to the degree that I expected, I wasn’t pursuing the degree necessary for the challenge which is ironic because I felt like ‘wait no, I want that challenge.’” Janis further shared

that “one of the common comments that were said was ‘my bachelor’s education was more challenging than my master’s education.” Janis continued, “So that [was] what I had expected going in, and it didn’t quite meet my expectations. I felt I had to challenge myself more outside the classroom than . . . inside the classroom.” Building upon this was the challenge of the coursework overall, as described by Janis:

I was not really expecting to come into a master’s program and [in class] doing a get-to-know-you bingo game or a two-page reflection paper on how something made you feel or a five-page paper on cultural experience you had [in our classes]. We didn’t really learn student development theory, which is one of the most talked-about classes in higher education master’s courses . . . [because of this] I feel unprepared, I did learn something in the two and half years [in the program]. I would hope that I learned something in that time. A lot of us [cohort members] look at our degree [and compare it] to somebody else who has a master’s degree and that [is] really concerning for a lot of us.

Nancy spoke to the challenge of diversity in the courses by stating, “We only focused on one population, and there are, of course, many types of college students out there. We only focused on millennials, and that was it. I was expecting a lot more, and so I was disappointed.”

**P-12 Mixed Cohort.** The structure of the cohort was such that two of the courses were mixed with members of a P-12 education cohort. Margaret shared about the experience of the mixed classes: “I wish I also would have known I was going to be mixed with P-12 [graduate students]. That probably would have influenced my decision as well.” In contrast, Dolores described her experience with the mixed P-12 and higher education classes in more positive terms; she stated, “I took classes with the P-12 specialization, and that has had such a great effect on me. I felt [among the P-12 cohort] finally my people. I just flourished. I mean, I wasn’t quiet

anymore. I found my voice. I opened up.” Janis shared extensively about her experience with the mixed classes:

I was most surprised at the disparity between the two cohorts. Every class we were together, it was interesting. It was the unique dynamic between the two. This separation [of] . . . [P-12 cohort]—you’re over [there] or you’re the higher-ed cohort, which was unfortunate because we’re all in education and you’re [the P-12 cohort members] ultimately preparing them to get to us [in higher education]. But when it came to socioeconomic social justice and in third grade and elementary school kids, there seemed to be this inability to have dialogue around that or when we talked about oppression for someone to be surprised. I’m concerned that some are out there teaching students who don’t understand what oppression is and how they could be perpetuating stereotypes and negatively contributing to the access in their classroom. . . . It felt like there was a lack of devotion to the program . . . it kind of takes away some of the incentives for you to be engaged in your own learning.

Based on the views of the participants, their engagement with the blended P-12 and higher education cohort classes was mixed with some of the women favoring the diversity offered through the blended cohort. In contrast, some of the participants shared the blended classes as examples of the lack of academic structure within their own higher education curriculum.

### **Theme Three: Family and Support Systems**

All the participants shared about the implications of graduate school on their personal and professional lives while navigating their academic demands with their support systems. Margaret described her experience as such:

I was working full-time, I was going to school full-time . . . it was very, very difficult, and if I had to do it again, I probably wouldn't because it was a lot to handle, it was a lot to manage. It was a lot of sacrifices, being away from my kids, being away from my family. I don't know. I don't know how I did it. It was difficult, it is very, very difficult, very challenging.

Margaret spoke about the support of her mentor: "We sat down, we mapped it out and most of my classes transferred, and for me, personally, because I am a mom and I have kids, and I'm married, time is pretty, you know, sensitive." Janis spoke about the broader impact that her graduate studies had on her life:

I was surprised at how it's school again. And, that means, there are going to be sacrifices that are made. Even just personal relationships were strained because I was available all the time. And I couldn't always come home and visit when I usually would or respond all the time to have long conversations in the evening like with family or friends and that was challenging. You don't always think about life when you apply for a master's degree.

Another view included the implications of motherhood and the impact these obligations had on their academic experiences. Margaret described her life at the intersection of motherhood and graduate study: "I was pregnant my first semester of graduate school, and then I had . . . my [baby] a week before the fall, my last fall semester. I was on maternity leave and still taking classes and doing work." Margaret continued, "My oldest daughter, she has been my mom, my mom's been amazing, taking care of the kids, helping me while I have to do homework."

Veronica simply described the role of motherhood in her graduate experience as "I had to plan academics around [the] children."

Other participants struggled to manage their roles within their family structures and their academic demands. Nancy shared her experience as follows:

I had to move back home, but yet I still had graduate school. So I did that, and then, being home and being a grad student is tough because I grew up in a Mexican household where, you know, it's not like a female role is like to, you know, cook and be ready and have dinner at a certain time, and just do all those roles that females are supposed to have, and I didn't follow those norms. . . . [Eventually] I was able to move back closer to the university and have my space, my time to focus on grad school, because I knew grad school was gonna be a tough experience, because I already had in mind that I'll be working full time, being a full grad— full-time grad student, and having somehow a life. I have my own space, make my own schedule and not have those family distractions.

Another consideration within the support systems for the women in this study was that of their partners. Seemingly, partners and husbands exerted some influence on participants from the decision to attend graduate school through to program completion. Sarah shared, “I talked with my husband about it, talked to family members about it. And, initially, the decision as well, why not?” The roles that extended family played in the experiences of the women varied greatly. While some family members provided a great amount of support, such as in Margaret's case, Sarah stated, “My mom has always been a strong support for me, she's always helped me.” Similarly, Sarah shared that she enjoyed the “support of my family, my mother, and my mother-in-law”. By contrast, Dolores indicated:

I did not tell anyone other than my parents, I did not tell any of my extended family or friends that I was in the master's program until I had finished a year and a half of it.

Because my familial expectations are that I'm going to succeed. I'm the cousin or niece

who's going to succeed . . . my family found out that I was in graduate school when they saw my pictures at graduation on Facebook. It was not shame. It is not a place of shame. It is a place of obligation and responsibility, and expectations that I didn't want to let anyone down. Not myself included.

Another form of support that the participants received was through their supervisors who supported them as mentors. This support included providing a wide range of tasks for the women to gain new skills, to which Margaret added, "I'm actually using now with my current position." Nancy stated, "[My supervisor] helped me professionally, also as a student and as a person."

#### **Theme Four: Career Aspirations**

Participants shared their post-graduation plans as well as the next steps in their lives. Some of the women, like Veronica, could envision their long-term plans, stating, "I could work until I retired that was providing me a solid income and an opportunity to somehow grow and develop." While others, like Janis, discovered new career aspirations in combination with plans for further education. Janis' comments follow:

[The courses] gave me some ideas for how I would want to teach a course, where I would challenge students, where I wouldn't put as much time, where I would focus on dialogue—which is actually one of the reasons why I even considered going for my doctorate degree because I know that I could teach a master's level course.

Margaret also shared that "in 10 years, maybe I will pursue a PhD program." Dolores shared, "Now I have examples to follow . . . I have all these [professors] . . . great examples of where I'm supposed to go and what I can achieve and what I can aspire to do."

All the participants reflected on where they have come in their careers and how they chose to pursue careers in higher education. Margaret stated, "I wanted a career in higher

education, which I had decided in the latter parts of my undergraduate experience because I had worked in a lot of areas in higher education.” She added, “My ultimate goal is to eventually move up in the ladder and move up in my career in an administrative and leadership role.” When asked about the influence of the program, she stated:

I can’t really say that the program itself shaped my aspirations. I think it definitely gave me, like, access to be able to grow. I know that now that I have my master’s, I can pursue other opportunities that perhaps I wouldn’t have if I hadn’t got a master’s.

Speaking of the influence of the graduate program on her career goals, Nancy shared, “I kind of was surprised at how little it influenced my decision for what I want to do eventually. I kind of already knew I already knew coming into this program what I wanted to do.” She added:

[The program] didn’t change my mind, which is kind of what I was, like, doubting. I’m, like, maybe the program will change my mind. Maybe it’ll make me want to stay in a four-year institution. I still want to work for a nonprofit.

She added that the program helped “reinforce my decision that I want to work for a nonprofit someday . . . I just wanted verification.” Nancy further stated:

In 10 years, I hope to be working for a nonprofit that does outreach full time . . . my biggest goal right now is to have a job where I can meet people, every day work with the community, build relationships, and make a positive change.

In contrast, other participants were unsure of their next steps and what their career trajectories were at their current institution. As one participant shared about the limited upward mobility at her institution, “Do I hunker down, stick it out? Do I apply somewhere else?” Further, some participants, like Sarah, are asking larger questions, such as, “Do I even want to continue [on] this path? So that’s still kind of up in the air for me.” Some participants considered

more drastic career changes. As Sarah indicated, “I like to think that I could just break out of it and go do something completely 180 degrees from higher education.” Others, like Dolores, portray a broader view of the future:

I see myself being a forerunner in 10 years . . . I will have my doctorate . . . I will have another car to pay for. I see myself in 10 years being a driving force behind the good that I see now and what I would like to be expanded and further developed now.

She added, “I am a part of the picture [now]; I’m just a larger part of the picture in 10 years.”

Dolores echoed this sentiment by stating that “my perspective deserves a place at the table, and my voice should be heard. I’m speaking for others, and those others wouldn’t necessarily be vocal”. Dolores shared that she knows “I’m supposed to be working in higher education. I am supposed to be helping students, especially underrepresented . . . populations, vulnerable populations.” In a summary of her next steps, Dolores shared that now that she has graduated, “I do not feel like I was starting from point A. I felt like, I was starting from of point further along. I was paying for a booster pack.”

## **Conclusions**

This chapter presented an overview of the stories shared by the women who described their meaning making and career aspirations as part of this study. In this chapter, I sought to present and to play fair witness to the experiences of the women as they shared various aspects of their graduate school experiences. Four themes emerged from the narratives collected in the open-ended interviews conducted for this study. The four themes that are identified and discussed in this chapter include the following: (1) academic motivation; (2) inaugural cohort experiences; (3) family and support systems; and (4) career aspirations. While some of these

themes draw on the narratives from all the participants, others pull on exceptional reflections that illustrated both the similarities and the differences among the experiences of the women.

The next chapter will continue the discussion and analysis of the results of this study while offering conclusions and recommendations based on the emergent themes and stories from the participants in this study. Throughout our time together, the participants shared recommendations for how the experiences of future graduate students, generally and in their program, could be enhanced through programs, policy changes, and future research. These recommendations will be set in context and explored at the conclusion of the next chapter.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

In Chapter Four, I presented the narratives shared by the women in this study by placing quotes from Veronica, Margaret, Dolores, Nancy, Sarah, and Janis into conversation with each other. Four themes emerged from the narratives collected in the open-ended interviews. These four themes include the following: (1) academic motivation; (2) inaugural cohort experiences; (3) family and support systems; and (4) career aspirations. For each of these themes, given the nature of the shared experiences of these women, I sought to allow the participants to speak for themselves by quoting extensively from the interview transcriptions throughout Chapter Four as within this chapter.

In the first chapter, I shared that the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the meaning making of women in a cohort within a Master of Arts in education program and how this meaning making informs their career aspirations. To this end, I offered the following research questions to guide this study:

- 1) How do female graduate students who are in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership degree program at a public, Hispanic-serving University make meaning of their experiences?
- 2) How do female graduate students who are in a Master of Arts in education with an emphasis in higher education leadership degree program at a public, Hispanic-serving University construct their career aspirations?

This study retells the narratives of six women who were members of the same inaugural cohort in a Master of Arts in education program at a public, Hispanic-serving, university located in Southern California. In this chapter, I present a discussion of the findings of this study and its

implications for the experiences of the participants. This chapter contains an overview of the conceptual framework, the design and methods of the study, the limitations and strengths of the study, efforts to advance trustworthiness, a discussion, and, finally, recommendations for future programs.

## **Design and Method**

In Chapter Three, I outlined the qualitative narrative method I utilized to interrogate the lived experiences of the participants. To access these participants, I gained the assistance of a member of their cohort who was willing to recruit her peers through a network snowball method. This method also mitigated against power differentials that may have existed between the researcher and the participants, thus promoting the trust of the participants in the study (Spall, 1998). Participants were invited to complete a demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) and then participated in a semi-structured, in-person interview that was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The demographic questionnaire provided a wide range of contextual descriptive information.

During the interviews, I was particularly interested in creating an environment in which the women felt comfortable to share their experiences. To assist with the flow of conversation during our time together, I developed an interview protocol (Appendix C) to frame the discussion and time spent with the participants.

**Trustworthiness.** In this study, I used several strategies to advance the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis process. As discussed in Chapter Three, these strategies included member checking, peer debriefing, journaling, bracketing, and self-reflexivity. Each of these elements was imperative to achieve quality in this study each are supported (Creswell, 2012;

Maxwell, 2005; Woodcock, 2015). These procedures relating to trustworthiness were enhanced by the framework for analysis provided through the Listening Guide Method that integrated many of these strategies into its process (Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). Furthermore, the LGM allowed me to place the experiences of the participants within the larger social-political context (Pément, 2013).

### **Limitations and Strengths of the Study**

This study has limitations in its findings as well as strengths in its methodological structure and the population surveyed. It is important to note that the experiences shared in this study represent but a snapshot of how women in the study expressed their experiences at the time their interview took place in the spring of 2017. At that time, all participants had either recently or were near completion of their academic program. Consequently, their personal experiences of graduate school were still fresh in their minds.

A limitation in the study was the homogeneity of the participants regarding their shared experiences as both co-workers and cohort-mates. Qualitative research holds that, while the relatively small size of the population studied does not devalue the lived experiences of the participants in this study, it is vital that future studies add additional voices to those already recorded of women in graduate school. Similarly, to the claim advanced by Pément (2013), it is likely that conducting additional interviews could have yielded additional perspectives to this study that my retelling of the experiences of the participants did not adequately represent.

### **Framework Discussion**

This study was informed, in part, by the work of constructivist and human development researchers, including the works of Baxter Magolda (1992), Belenky et al., (1986), and Kegan

(1982, 1994). As reported at length in Chapter Four, participants shared stories ranging from overarching elements of their life, their educational journeys, and their career plans. Baxter Magolda illuminated the range of motivations of students who attend graduate school (Baxter Magolda, 1998). Her research continues to inform research in college student development as it has for this study. For example, as a participant in this study shared, she enrolled in graduate school “only for the money,” while another student shared that the master’s degree represents a major life goal beyond just career advancement. Throughout Chapter Four, the women shared their stories representing the elements of their journeys, which has informed the rest of this chapter, including the recommendations for future programming. Dolores shared the meaning she made of her experience: “I have this idea of who I was [before the program], and then, I was validated, and that is where I am now.”

The theoretical research that informed this study aligned nicely with a qualitative narrative methodology in the way that the interviews were conducted, the data was collected, analyzed, and presented in Chapters Four and Five. The use of the LGM not only provided a methodological structure for the data analysis but also informed the theoretical foundation of the study. Working from the assumption that previous qualitative and quantitative methods often hinder women’s voices, the LGM provides steps to strengthen the opportunity for women to share their experiences. I held that the inclusion of the LGM was necessary because of the tendency among some research not only to be male-dominated but also to frame college students as merely children or young adults. Consistent with research developed recently regarding women in STEM fields, many of the women in this study shared the “sense of responsibility to others, whether that is their direct family or humankind in general . . . all had a selfless moral compass that embodied their thoughtful personalities,” as those in Ravan (2018).

This study was also informed by women's ways of knowing, as articulated by Belenky et al. (1986). Many of the women in this study expressed shifts from silent construction, in which they unquestionably received knowledge from the academic power holders, to engagements of their inner voices. This process was most evident in the decisions of participants to attend graduate school, in matriculating, and by thinking critically, by sharing constructive critiques, and challenging the imposed academic system of their graduate program. As a male researcher guided by the work of Gilligan et al. (2015) and Belenky et al. (1986), I accept the stories of participants as inherently valid as expressions of their experiences, valuable, and critical to the success and meaning making of their graduate program.

### **Discussion of Findings**

As stated above, the four themes that were identified in this study and discussed in Chapter Four included the following: (1) academic motivation; (2) inaugural cohort experiences; (3) family and support systems; and (4) career aspirations. The structure of this study allowed for the expressions of the experiences of the participants and allowed for their voices to hold the center of the narrative. The following paragraphs review the themes from the interviews, which were explored in Chapter Four.

**Academic Motivation.** First, academic motivation was discussed in all the interviews. Participants offered a range of narratives on their motivations to enroll in graduate school and what their hopes were for the outcomes of their programs on their lives. Through these narratives, participants also explored the status extended by graduate degrees and the value they place on graduate education, which was influenced by broader social norms and values of higher education, particularly those of graduate school education. Among the primary influences on the decisions by the participants to enroll in graduate school were employer tuition support and the

convenience of the graduate program at their place of employment. Under the tuition structure of the program at the time, the costs of the program were waived for employees at the institution. The influence of possible career advancement as a motivating factor to attend graduate school is in line with research in this area, including that of Shepherd and Nelson (2012). These researchers found that the participants in their study, women who completed graduate school, “were primarily centered on anticipated financial gain or career change” (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012, p. 12).

The composition of the cohort, whereby the majority of members were coworkers, revealed a differential experience from those who were not employed by the university. Dolores framed this conflict as follows:

How do I relate with other [in the cohort]? [The cohort members who were employees of the university had] an HR kind of perspective because that was the mindset that the rest of my cohort had. They all worked together. They all were here on campus, and they saw [graduate education] as an employer, where I saw [graduate education] more as social mobility, as opposed to a reflection on my paycheck.

Dolores’ view is similar to one of the participants in Baxter Magolda’s (1998, p. 9) study, whose experience was framed similarly when the participant stated, “The [graduate] program required minimal work and consequently she had learned very little.” Baxter Magolda (1998, p. 9) framed this learning challenge as “going through the motions [of the program] without being sure why she wanted this [graduate degree].”

**Inaugural Cohort.** Second, the participants explored their experiences as members of the inaugural cohort of their graduate degree program. Among the central themes identified in the exploration of the meaning making of the participants were their experiences as members of

the first cohort within their graduate program. The participants held early expectations of what their relationships within their cohort should have felt and looked like. One aspect of the cohort experience that all participants spoken to included the navigation and building of interpersonal relationships within their cohort. The participants shared sentiments similar to those found by Brown (2011, p. 153), that “in order to learn from one another professionally, the [cohort] support system must be developed first.”

**Family and Support Systems.** The third theme that emerged from the interviews was the role of family and support systems in the experiences of the participants. As illustrated in Chapter Four, the women gave voice to their personal and professional lives and their academic journeys. They spoke of how family structures impacted their experiences, their careers, and their academic pursuits. A number of the participants shared the sense of support they received from the cohort, including Nancy, who framed this support in this manner: “We were all in it together. We all kind of had the same questions, the same concerns. We were our support system.” Other participants were assisted by friends who served as “sounding boards.” Others relied heavily on a friend within the cohort who could reach the “inner sanctum of the cohort.” All the participants in this study found aspects of their cohort experience beneficial, because like Maher (2005, p. 201), “students realized that simply being together over time was beneficial because cohort members shared the same experiences and developed deeper interpersonal ties.”

**Career Aspirations.** The fourth theme that emerged from the interviews concerned the formation and actualization of the participants’ career aspirations. Many of the participants were unsure of their next steps after their graduate program and what their career trajectories would look like at their current institution. Akin to the findings of Creamer and Laughlin (2005), the participants relied on external influences of parents, partners, and peers when forming their

career aspirations. Some of the participants could envision their long-term professional plans, while others were concerned that they did not have a plan of what their next career steps would be following attaining their graduate degrees. During my discussions regarding career aspirations, the women often intermixed their career aspirations with plans for further education beyond the master's degree level. The range of ages of the participants added uniqueness to their long-term plans. For example, while for some of the participants, obtaining a doctorate was the next major goal, for others, the next goal was to prepare for retirement or a second career. Some of the participants held views parallel to those found by Baxter Magolda (1998, p. 9): “[ The student] two years in a master's program and a thesis had brought her no closer to a self-authored vision of her career goals.” This is meaningful because if meaning making and career development are to take place in graduate program, then elements need to be incorporated into the structure to provide opportunities for students to develop intentionally.

### **Recommendations for Policy, Programs, and Research**

In each of the interviews, participants shared their recommendations for policy and program improvements as well as the need for future research in the area of graduate school experiences. When considering recommendations based on the findings of this study, it was essential for me to include the suggestions made by the participants during their interviews.

**Program Planning.** The first recommendation area expressed by all participants relates to the importance of program planning before the launch of a graduate degree program, and to the ongoing process of program improvement. Participants called for better planning by academic decision makers. The participants highlighted the need for an extensive review of both program outcomes and enhancements of graduate programs throughout the first cohorts of new

academic programs. Participants called for ongoing quality improvement of graduate programs with efforts focused on enhancing the academic experiences of students. Improving the educational experiences of the students should be firmly connected to the development of the program's andragogy, which in turn should be used to create a high-quality graduate learning environment. As highlighted by Baxter Magolda (1998), this learning environment should promote complex ways of knowing including creating conditions for the emerging and expansion of independent knowing by the graduate students.

The views expressed by Veronica were shared, in part, with her other cohort-mates. She stated, "There was a lack of interest in making sure that the students [in this cohort] received the best education from the best faculty available." Almost all the participants shared some version of the need for "continuous program feedback" to enhance their educational experiences and, thus, their ability to make meaning of their experiences. If programs, such as the one in which participants in this study were members, are to lead to deep learning resulting in complex meaning making, then the participants in the cohorts must be active stakeholders in the ongoing assessment and enhancements of graduate degree programs in education. Indeed, the voices of the students in the graduate program are critical to the success of the program.

To enhance the program also requires the incorporation of national standards developed by the range of higher education personnel preparation and leadership graduate programs. Many examples of these graduate program standards exist, including those produced by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS, 2015), the American College Personnel Association, and NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, among others. The publication of standards by CAS (2015), for example, contains standards and practices for functional areas within the higher education profession. The functional areas, such as student affair and academic

services, reach across departments, offices, programs, and centers in a modern university (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014).

**Relationships.** The second recommendation area addresses the policies of the graduate program and the incorporation of relationship building into the program. Throughout Chapter Four, I shared the participants' experiences related to the programs and policies of the program. The participants emphasized the need for clarity in academic policies throughout the program and the intentional incorporation of relationship building into the academic programs. The participants shared that when developing new programs, decision makers should consider and answer questions raised by students. For example, decision makers must have a clear policy on how the program should handle instructors who are current administrators who teach members of the cohort who are current employees. Other policy questions raised by study participants included addressing conflicts of interest between instructors and students. Related to this concern is the examination of relationships between students and faculty who may also be their direct supervisors.

**Program Clarity.** Another area of enhancement that came through in discussion with the participants was the negative impact that the lack of clarity in the mission of their academic program had on their experiences and the sense of the worth of their graduate degrees. Participants offered questions for decision makers to consider when establishing new programs such as the following: "What [is] driving the program? What defines the program? [For] those [who] complete the program—how are they defined?" Dolores framed these questions in terms of her experience through this statement:

[There was not], you know, something to really ground us [as a cohort]. As compared cohorts where it is not enough to be all put in the same room and to have, you know, transcripts that look the same, to have a shared experience.

This framing serves as another example of why it is important to include students in the planning of new programs as well as asking broader questions when forming new cohorts. In developing the andragogy of the program, decision makers should incorporate elements that would advance the four dimensions of self-authorship, as advanced by Baxter Magolda (1996, as cited in Baxter Magolda, 1998). Those dimensions include trusting one's ability to make knowledge claims and establish and commit to priorities; experiencing the emergence of confidence to direct one's life; learning to balance external forces with one's own perspective and knowledge; and developing an internal identity that supports acting on one's knowledge and priorities. The intentional incorporation of elements into the graduate program that are informed by these dimensions would further the possibilities of meaning making development.

**Cohort Experiences.** The third recommendation area relates to the importance of ongoing enhancements in the overall cohort experiences. Participants recommend improvements to cohort experiences by encouraging the development of connections across the university. Participants suggested that new graduate programs at institutions should be incorporated into the broader university culture. This incorporation, in turn, should lead to an enhanced sense of belonging among cohort members in the new graduate programs. Margaret emphasized there is a need to stress the importance of “making connections across the university through interactions in the graduate program” and to “build that community” among the cohort members and with the broader academic community. The incorporation of mentorship opportunities to build leadership and career directions was highlighted by the participants as an element that would have enhanced

their experiences. This sentiment regarding the vital importance of mentorship of college personnel in graduate school is reiterated in studies by Banās (2010) and Bureau (2011), who suggested that the intentional incorporation of mentorship relationships with graduate programs leads to greater support and meaning making on behalf of the students.

**Professional and Graduate Journeys.** The fourth recommendation area focuses on building ongoing professional and career planning throughout the graduate school journey. As highlighted by Baxter Magolda (1998), powerful professional development experiences in graduate education advance self-authorship and thus the meaning making of graduate students. The participants in the study expressed the importance that the influence the fieldwork opportunities in their program had on their experiences and how the subsequent building of fieldwork portfolios influenced their graduate school journey. It is recommended that program developers incorporate fieldwork opportunities into their new programs, which would require partnerships across universities, including with career services and academic services. Nancy shared the impact of fieldwork: “Fieldwork really had a big impact on me . . . that’s where I got my hands dirty and really gained some experience.” Participants also shared the importance of early planning of their thesis and clarity in expectations for the culminating experiences as influential in their journeys. It is also important that members of graduate cohorts are encouraged to align their research topics with areas of career interests. Participants indicated that professional-conference attendance and exposure to scholarly research should be incorporated throughout new programs to improve the alignment of research topics to praxis. Sarah shared that the benefit of aligning of her research with her career path is that she will be able “publish off my thesis” and thus advance her career in higher education.

The participants in this study shared a range of career goals, including the following statements by Janis: “[My] goal is to be a director of some area [of the university and then become] dean of students.” Further, Janis shared that she views her career path as a succession of advancing work. She stated, “You’ve assisted [frontline staff], you’ve coordinated [a program]; now you’re directing [a program].” Other participants, however, were uncertain of their next steps, especially Margaret, who shared, “What my actual title would [in ten years], I don’t know.” Some participants shared their concerns that their careers were uncertain, and that advancement would require a change in employment. As Sarah said, “I might have to leave [my current institution] at some point, which is terrifying me.”

To advance career experiences, participants recommended that program designers draw upon the range of literature on career development for graduate students and those related to career paths in higher education to incorporate career advancement into the outcomes of new graduate programs. This incorporation should include assisting cohort members in identifying future skills development as professionals beyond the curricula in their program. The integration of intentional goal setting can provide the opportunity for graduate students to self-author their career goals (Baxter Magolda, 1998). The identification of skills development for higher education personnel is connected to viewing professional development as the future of innovation and, ultimately, the survival of institutions of higher education (Christensen, 2011).

I share the views of the participants who held that additional research is needed on the meaning making of graduate students, particularly those related to higher education-focused master’s programs. More research on the meaning making of graduate students in the form of longitudinal studies is needed to understand how one’s meaning making of one’s graduate school experience changes over time. Additional research is also necessary to inquire into the

experiences of mid-career women college personnel pursuing graduate education meaning making. Moreover, research is needed addressing the needs and interests of nontraditional students and male students in education master's programs, which would expand the understanding of the meaning making of these student populations while in graduate studies. Finally, research is needed to understand why staff members chose to enroll in employer-supported graduate programs and how these programs influence the meaning making of their graduate education.

## **Conclusion**

The motivation for this study were my observations in graduate school of the broad and differing paths my peers were navigating in their professional, academic, and personal lives. This study benefited greatly from the willingness of the participants to share their stories to the benefit of the field of higher education and, particularly, master's programs in higher education. From my time engaged in conversation with the participants in this study, four themes emerged reflecting the academic and meaning making experiences. These themes included academic motivation, cohort experiences, family and support systems, and career aspirations. If universities seek to develop degree programs and meet the need for future university leaders, then institutions must continue to refine their master's programs with the goal of providing potential opportunities for students to make meaning of their experiences and to advance their career aspirations.

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## Appendix A

### Preliminary Questionnaire

(Adapted from Schoper, 2011)

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study to help me understand your experiences. Below is a list of questions that I will use to better understanding our conversation and to inform the study. Please complete the questions as thoroughly as possible. If there are questions that you would like clarified or that you may want to leave blank, please do so. You are under no obligation to complete this questionnaire or to answer all of the questions. Please feel free to ask me any questions regarding this questionnaire or to contact the thesis advisor for this study, Dr. Nancy-Jean Pément, at 805-298-2645 or email at [Nancy-jean.Pément@csuci.edu](mailto:Nancy-jean.Pément@csuci.edu) for further information.

CSU CI Student Investigator: Steven T. Auclair, California State University Channel Islands (CI), under the supervision of the thesis advisor of this study, Dr. Nancy-Jean Pément.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? Other \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_

How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

How would you identify your ethnicity & race? \_\_\_\_\_

How would you describe your marital/ relationship status? \_\_\_\_\_

Who did you live with while in graduate school? \_\_\_\_\_

Where did you spend most of your time growing up? (city, state, country)

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you consider yourself to be financially independent of your parents or guardian(s)?

Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

What is your annual household income? (check one)

\_\_\_ Less than \$24,999 \_\_\_ \$25,000–\$49,999 \_\_\_ \$50,000–\$74,999 \_\_\_ \$75,000–\$99,999  
\_\_\_ \$100,000–\$149,999 \_\_\_ \$150,000–\$199,999 \_\_\_ \$200,000 or more

To the best of your knowledge, what how would you identify the social class of your family of origin (parents or guardians) during your undergraduate years? (check one)

lower lower/middle middle middle/upper class upper class

What is your current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

Were you the first in your family to complete a bachelor's degree program? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a first-generation American? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the highest level of education your parents/guardians obtained?

Mother \_\_\_\_\_ Father \_\_\_\_\_

Guardian(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Highest degree completed by a member of your family \_\_\_\_\_

When did you start your studies in this graduate program? \_\_\_\_\_

What stage are you in the program?

Still need to take classes \_\_\_\_\_

Withdrawn and not finished \_\_\_\_\_

All but thesis completed \_\_\_\_\_

Completed the program \_\_\_\_\_

What was your major at the undergraduate level? \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you, and I look forward to our conversation!

## Appendix B

### Participant Consent Form

Title of Study: Meaning Making and Career Aspirations of Graduate Students in Higher Education Programs

CSU Channel Islands Investigator: Steven T. Auclair, California State University Channel Islands. The Thesis Advisor of this study is Dr. Nancy-Jean Pément.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the meaning making of graduate students in a Master of Education program and how this meaning making informs their career aspirations. This study seeks to recruit participants from the first cohort in the higher education concentration within the Master of Education program at California State University Channel Islands (CI).

#### Participation:

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour to complete. While this study may inconvenience you with the time commitment, the risk involved is no more than one would experience in normal daily activities. It is possible that some people may react negatively to the survey or interview questions. If you experience any discomfort, you can terminate the process at any time, and you have access to me and my thesis advisor, Dr. Nancy-Jean Pément, should any issues arise. If you do not wish to answer a question, you may skip it and go to the next question without any negative consequences.

#### Confidentiality:

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that may identify you will remain *confidential* and will be disclosed only with your permission. Neither California State University Channel Islands nor participants will be identified by name within the thesis text itself. Data will be kept in password-protected files and in a locked cabinet and will be destroyed after seven years.

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will *not* prejudice your future relations with CSU Channel Islands. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without ramifications.

It is anticipated that this study will advance understanding of graduate student experiences and professional aspirations within a master of education program at a Hispanic-serving institution. Furthermore, this study will advance scholarship in higher education studies including student affairs and student development.

The results of this study will be completed in the form of a thesis. This study may be included in appropriate journals and presented at appropriate professional conferences. The results will be shared with the staff, faculty, and administration of California State University Channel Islands. The thesis, in its final form, will be stored in perpetuity in the library at CSU CI.

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact me at 805-717-8821 or by email at [steven.auclair371@myci.csuci.edu](mailto:steven.auclair371@myci.csuci.edu). Additionally, you may contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Nancy-Jean Pément, at 805-298-2645 or email at [Nancy-jean.Pement@csuci.edu](mailto:Nancy-jean.Pement@csuci.edu).

I have read the information provided above. I understand that by agreeing to be interviewed, I agree to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this form to keep.

By selecting this box, I agree for the interview to be audio recorded.

By selecting this box, I do not agree for the interview to be audio recorded.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

For related problems or questions regarding your rights as a subject, the Research and Sponsored Programs office at CSU Channel Islands can be contacted at (805) 437-8496 or via email at [irb@csuci.edu](mailto:irb@csuci.edu). For other questions about the study, you should contact the CSU CI student investigator or his advisor.

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol for Semi-Structured Interviews

Date:

Time of Interview:

Place:

Participant:

Interviewer: Steven T. Auclair

Before we start, I would like to thank you for taking the time to take part in this study. The purpose of this study which is understanding the career path, graduate school experience, and the impact these have had on your career aspirations.

If there is anything I ask that you would rather not talk about, please let me know and we will move on to another subject. You are welcome to take a break at any time. Just let me know. If during our interview, you have questions feel free to interrupt and ask your questions.

If you experience any discomfort, you have the option to end the process at any time. If you have any questions regarding this study you can ask me, or you may contact the thesis advisor for this study Dr. Nancy-Jean Pément. Dr. Pément's information is located on the consent document.

Does this sound good?

The questions asked during this interview seek to engage your graduate school experience, your surprises, your joys and disappointments, and the journey of your career aspirations. Our time together should be about 45 minutes to one hour. Again, you can stop at any time.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me the story of your graduate school experience.

1.1 What did you most enjoy/least enjoy about your experience?

1.2 Did anything surprise you?

1.3 What was absent?

1.4 What do you wish you knew in advance?

2. How has your graduate experience shaped your career aspirations?

2.1 Before you started your graduate program what was your career aspirations?

2.3 Where did you see yourself in ten years?

3. Is there anything that hasn't come up in our conversation that you would like to talk about or you feel is important to understanding your experiences?

4. Why did you choose to participate in this study?

(Thank the individual for participating in the interview. Assure participants of the confidentiality of the interview.)

## Appendix D

### Participant Invitation Email

(Adapted in part from Thomas, 2015)

From: Steven T. Auclair

Subject: Research Request

Dear [name of participant],

My name is Steven T. Auclair; I am a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Education (Higher Education concentration) at California State University Channel Islands (CSU CI). Thank you for agreeing to meet with me to discuss your graduate school experience and career aspirations.

The interview is confidential and will be guided by a series of open-ended questions. The interview should take approximately one hour. In advance of our meeting interview to take place, please take a moment to read, approve, and sign the attached consent form. We will review the consent form together when we meet for the interview, but please feel free to contact me in advance should you have any questions.

Rest assured that your confidentiality will be maintained throughout this study. Two digital voice recorders will be used to audio record the interview. After the interview is completed, the audio recording will be moved to a password-protected computer and saved in a password-protected file. Thereafter, the audio will be digitally transcribed by a third-party vendor and saved on my computer in a password-protected file.

You will have the opportunity to review and provide comments on the transcript of the interview. The recordings and transcriptions will be stored under lock and key for a period of seven years following the completion of the study. References or quotations from the transcripts may be used as content in the final paper for this project, but these, too, will contain no identifying information.

Your participation in this study is essential to this project. Thank you for sharing your experiences with me. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at the coordinates provided below, or you may contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Nancy-Jean Pément, at 805-298-2645 or by email at [Nancy-jean.pement@csuci.edu](mailto:Nancy-jean.pement@csuci.edu).

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Steven T. Auclair

Candidate for Master of Art in Education

## Appendix E

### NIH Certificate of Completion Researcher



## Appendix F

### NIH Certificate of Completion Supervisors

