THE SENIOR YEAR EXPERIENCE AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY:

GRADUATING SENIORS MAKE MEANING

OF THEIR UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

A Dissertation

by

VANESSA DIAZ DE RODRIGUEZ

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2007

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

The Senior Year Experience at Texas A&M University:

Graduating Seniors Make Meaning of Their Undergraduate Education. (December 2007)

Vanessa Díaz de Rodríguez, B.S., University of Florida;

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Christine A. Stanley

The purpose of this study was to identify if and how graduating seniors make meaning of their undergraduate education by exploring graduating seniors' understanding of their undergraduate education, as well as what Texas A&M University was providing undergraduates during their senior year to help them synthesize and bring closure to their experiences. The researcher developed a research protocol that relied upon qualitative research data collection through interviews with a purposive sample of graduating seniors. Quantitative data was collected using the graduating student exit survey to provide a baseline of the population of graduating seniors from which the interview participants were selected.

The descriptive baseline data were calculated from nearly 3,000 student records, and a total of 20 students were interviewed from this pool. This group included at least one student from each of the nine Texas A&M University academic colleges. The overall gender representation of 60% female and 40% male was nearly par with the graduating senior population, 15% were Black and 15% were Hispanic, 30% were 1st generation, and there was one member of the Corps of Cadets.

The baseline data from the graduating senior exit survey were instrumental as a point of reference when examining the participants' interview responses, particularly given that the interview participants' survey response averages mirrored the baseline population almost identically. The interviews with these students provided a depth and a dimension of information that was not possible through the survey responses. As they reflected upon their experiences as college students, they described the experience as very positive and exciting. In essence, they loved being "Aggies." However, the details of their academic experiences were not described as positively, and many were facing the realization that there were more questions at the end than when they began their journeys as undergraduate students.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents, Olga Maldonado Díaz and Luis Vicente Díaz, whose example made life-long learning appealing to me and whose sacrifices made college possible for me many years ago.

As I reflect, I also pause a moment in memory of my cousin Jorge Luis Díaz Maldonado (September 14, 1962 - January 15, 2007) and my aunt Norys María Díaz de Guerra (August 18, 1928 - May 18, 2007).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I come to the conclusion of this long and eventful journey that was my doctoral trail, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to those who accompanied me along the way at various stages and for different lengths of time, always believing in my ability to achieve this goal. Those individuals include, Christine Stanley, the chair of my doctoral committee, a wise and calming voice who never wavered in her support nor in providing guidance; Mark Weichold, who, both as a colleague and as a member of my doctoral committee, allowed me to muse and to process out loud several versions of my research "idea," sharing in my enthusiasm over enhancing the undergraduate experience; Yvonna Lincoln and Vincent Lechuga, the newer members of my committee, for their suggestions, encouragement, and sincere interest in my research topic; Stan Carpenter, committee member for my preliminary examination, who debated convincingly with me the value of my embarking on such a journey; Bill Kibler, committee member for my preliminary examination, to whom I looked for an example of professional and personal life; Mark Troy, my colleague in Measurement and Research Services, whose insight was invaluable as I developed my idea over the course of a couple of years and whose assistance was integral to my data collection; my friends and colleagues who believed in me and who did not tire of asking me about my research. In particular, I thank Sandi Osters and Joel McGee, who coached me from their own 'doctoral student' experiences, and Rodney McClendon, whose friendship supported me through the highs and lows of life during it all; my aunts, Haydeé, Esther, and Alicia Maldonado, for their love and

care; Luis and Olga Díaz, my parents, whose constant presence, both from afar and in person, has always anchored and motivated me; Mauricio and Cristina, without whose unconditional support and love, as well as their cheering, this accomplishment would have been impossible.

I would also like to acknowledge the 20 graduating seniors who so graciously volunteered of their time to meet with me during their busy, final semester. Not only were they disposed to meet with me, but they shared their experiences and feelings willingly and candidly. Each one was a delight to meet, and I was glad to have had the opportunity to get to know about them and their own life journeys.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of undergraduate higher education? This question may be answered on one level by describing the contractual nature of a college education. As described in the report by The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (1998), there is a bill of academic rights that stipulates both an institution's obligations to an admitted student and vice versa. By seeking admittance into an institution of higher education, the student is submitting to its expectations of conduct and of performance in order to complete a degree. By admitting a student, the institution is also committing itself to providing the student with opportunities to develop beyond the education in the intended course of study, which is another level in the purpose for higher education. These opportunities should minimally include: 1) learning through inquiry rather than the simple transmission of knowledge; 2) oral and written communication skills "at a level that will serve the student both within the university and in postgraduate professional and personal life;" 3) an appreciation of the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences; and 4) "careful and comprehensive preparation for whatever may lie beyond graduation, whether it be graduate school, professional school, or first professional position" (Boyer Commission, pp. 12-13).

This dissertation follows the style of the *Journal of Educational Research*.

What is being described in the Boyer Commission Report are features of the general education component of undergraduate education, which have historically been the core of undergraduate education in the United States. In the state of Texas, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) outlined in 1997 its general education expectations for the state's colleges and universities through the core curriculum requirements. These requirements have some practical value such as providing a common course numbering system, the facilitation of course credit transfer between institutions within the state, and some commonality across the undergraduate education experience. However, its greater purpose is to ensure that students are being exposed to educational opportunities beyond their disciplines. The aim is to graduate a well-rounded person who is more than an architect or an engineer. This is evidenced in the THECB's guidelines.

The THECB core curriculum guidelines begin by naming basic intellectual competencies – reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking, and computer literacy. However, it goes on by listing another imperative of a core curriculum: "that it contain courses that help students attain the following: 1) Establish broad and multiple perspectives on the individual in relationship to the larger society and world in which he or she lives, and to understand the responsibilities of living in a culturally and ethnically diversified world; 2) Stimulate a capacity to discuss and reflect upon individual, political, economic, and social aspects of life in order to understand ways in which to be a responsible member of society; 3) Recognize the importance of maintaining health and wellness; 4) Develop a capacity to use knowledge of how technology and science affect

their lives; 5) Develop personal values for ethical behavior; 6) Develop the ability to make aesthetic judgments; 7) Use logical reasoning in problem solving; and 8) Integrate knowledge and understand the interrelationships of the scholarly disciplines" (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1999).

It is important to note that the THECB does not intend for these guidelines to restrict the professors' teaching style nor is the primary aim to regulate the course system. "A core curriculum experience will prepare them to learn effectively through the rest of their college years so that they carry these aptitudes for learning into their life careers … [therefore] a core curriculum should be described and assessed by faculty and institutions in terms of basic intellectual competencies and perspectives, and of specified student outcomes, rather than simply in terms of specific courses and course content" (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1999). To that end, the THECB not only requires that institutions have a core curriculum that is developed based upon its defining characteristics, but it also requires that each institution periodically assess its core curriculum and report the results to the Board.

The fact that undergraduate education is the subject of assessment by various entities and for varying reasons is nothing new. Higher education has been under scrutiny for 10 years. In its report *The Status of General Education in the Year 2000*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) summarizes the results of a national study on the subject. General Education is typically the largest academic program offered by colleges and universities because of its centrality to undergraduate education. According to this survey, two-thirds of the CAO (Chief Academic Officers)

respondents reported that general education has increased in priority in the past ten years (*The Status of General Education in the Year 2000,* p. 7).

In his book *Undergraduate Education: Goals and Means*, author Rudolph H. Weingartner (1993) examined all of the component parts of the undergraduate education. He begins his examination with "if the aim is to improve baccalaureate education, one must try to keep the entire mission in front of oneself and make particular decisions with an awareness of the larger context (p. 1)." Weingartner aims to retain clarity about what undergraduate education seeks to accomplish. Its focus is the student: what is undergraduate education attempting to do for him and her? In what way should those four years (more or less) transform the person who devotes that much time, effort, and money into the venture (Weingartner, 1993)?

In 1994, the Association of American Colleges published a report outlining twelve principles for effective general education programs. "It is the task of general education to introduce students to the breadth of knowledge and also to the lifelong project of making sense and creating coherence out of the variety" (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 12). According to this description, general education begins with a variety, but its objective is to ultimately provide coherence by connecting the various parts. "All too often students experience the curriculum as fragmented separate courses and academic disciplines typically stress particular content and approaches rather than searching for commonalities or making connections between fields. Students are often left adrift in their search for meaning or enlightening connections" (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 13). This report further

asserts that a defining goal of a strong general education program is to seek the "connectedness" of its content (p.13).

One obvious method for achieving coherence includes manipulating the content of the curriculum. Content may be manipulated by offering the same core courses to all students or at least a modified core. The logistics of such an enterprise, particularly at larger institutions, make implementation of this method practically impossible. Interdisciplinary courses may also offer the opportunity to connect the various parts of the content of general education. "Senior capstone seminars or projects are another means for achieving integration through content of general education" (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 14).

Coherence in a general education program may also be achieved by focusing on the development of particular competencies. Consequently, most general education programs seek to develop skills, such as all levels of communication and problem-solving (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p.14). In the end what is important is to achieve the desired outcomes. "We need to understand how and in what way the curriculum and the approaches to the curriculum change students; perceptions of themselves and their world. And we need to know if the changes observed are the ones desired" (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 26). Therefore, it is essential that the student experience be closely examined periodically in order to develop a general education curriculum that closely aligns that experience with faculty objectives.

Of course, as noted in the THECB core curriculum guidelines earlier, the general education curriculum is not intended to restrict faculty teaching style nor is the primary

aim to regulate the course system. "In colleges and universities organized by departments built around academic disciplines a tension between loyalties to the specialty and general education is built in. Sometimes the disciplinary major and general education are seen to be in opposition. But as Ernest Boyer observes, 'Rather than divide the undergraduate experience into separate camps – general versus socialized education – the curriculum of a college of quality will bring the two together.'" (As cited in Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 39).

In its report the Boyer Commission (1998) describes the ecology of the university, which depends upon all members of the community having a shared mission. "Everyone at a university should be a discoverer, a learner. That shared mission binds together all that happens on a campus. The teaching responsibility of the university is to make all its students participants in the mission. Those students must undergird their engagement in research with the strong 'general' education that creates a unity with their peers, their professors, and the rest of society" (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 9).

As the purpose of higher education continues to be closely examined, this increased focus, combined with the alleged shortcomings of higher education, has led to demands, both internal and external, for transforming undergraduate education. The concept of student outcomes has been applied to more than coursework, and the assessment movement has reached all aspects of higher education. All of these address the need for higher education institutions to be accountable to their constituencies.

Colleges and universities are being asked to demonstrate that they are fulfilling their obligations. This presumes that institutions can articulate clearly, not only their

overall purpose and mission, but their expected outcomes for undergraduate students, in order to assess if and how these outcomes are being met. Given that many of the outcomes of undergraduate education are not discipline-specific but developmental in nature, the question then arises regarding the tangible impact of college on its students and how this is ascertained.

In their second volume of *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) address the subject of change during college. Following the format of their original work published in 1991, they reviewed the results of related research from 1989 to 2002. Without any claims of having been exhaustive in this effort, Pascarella & Terenzini have synthesized the extensive data into an invaluable compendium. While they describe many and varied examples of the changes documented during the undergraduate years, the authors are also careful to qualify these data. "As emphasized throughout this book, freshman-to-senior change during college does not necessarily represent the impact of college. Nearly all the studies of change discussed in our synthesis lacked a control group of students who did not attend college….In addition, just as the fact of change does not necessarily represent the impact of college, the absence of measured change does not necessarily indicate the absence of college impact (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 578).

The Senior Year Experience

What does 'learning' mean? "*Learning Reconsidered* defines learning as a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development, processes that have often been considered separate, and even independent of each other" (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & the American College Personnel Association, p. 2, 2004). Currently, academic education is most often organized into general education requirements, major requirements and electives…..General education, while based on the philosophy of "the full and creative development of the whole person" has not consistently adopted pedagogical approaches by which its holistic purposes could be accomplished (as cited in National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & the American College Personnel Association, 2004, p. 8).

A result of this examination and self-examination has been the attention focused on the senior year experience. In 1990, the University of South Carolina coordinated the first of several conferences focused on the senior year experience. The purpose of these conferences was to raise awareness of the critical nature of the senior year in connecting all of an undergraduate student's experiences and preparing that student for career or graduate study. Not unlike the freshman year, the senior year is a stressful one of transition, but unlike with the former, the problems and needs associated with the transition out of the college setting have received little attention from college and university personnel, let alone researchers (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, p. 5).

The Boyer Commission Report (1998) also recommends a senior year capstone experience. The importance of the senior year experience is related to several factors. Undergraduate students tend to have lofty expectations by the time that they reach their senior year. As they plan to receive the degree, they also have high hopes of success. While this is a time of excitement and celebration, it is also a time of anxiety and self-examination. Several authors suggest that the senior year is particularly critical to student development because of the need for all students to reflect on and make meaning of the undergraduate experience (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, pp. 24, 27-28). The senior year raises issues of transition similar to those of the freshman year. Students are preparing for a change in surroundings and expectations whether they are moving into a job or continuing their studies in graduate school. Whatever path the senior is taking, it is a given that graduates are expected to be proficient in various skills beyond their academic course of study.

Enhancing the Undergraduate Experience at Texas A&M

Since 1997, when it unveiled its strategic plan in the form of *Vision 2020: Creating a Culture of Excellence*, Texas A&M University has had a stated initiative of enhancing the undergraduate experience. In the Fall of 2004, President Robert M. Gates appointed the university's Task Force for Enhancing the Undergraduate Experience and charged it with: 1) reviewing Texas A&M data from earlier studies on facets of the undergraduate experience and contrasting them to national research findings; 2)

critically assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the current undergraduate experience and related policies; 3) identifying and evaluating the best practices in undergraduate teaching and learning; and 4) recommending those practices that best "fit with and complement the unique Aggie experience" (Texas A&M University, 2005, p. 1).

In its aim to enhance the undergraduate experience, Texas A&M University purports to be a scholarly community that emphasizes academic rigor and inquiry, encourages involvement in the life of the institution beyond the classroom, instills an appreciation of the arts and sciences, integrates learning and leadership, fosters an environment of caring and concern, promotes success and leadership development for all students, and encourages engagement in life-long learning. To that end Texas A&M has identified what the University wants every undergraduate to be able to know and do when they graduate from Texas A&M University. Broad institutional indicators of undergraduate excellence have been identified to assess undergraduate success (see Appendix A).

Statement of the Problem

Relative to how the undergraduate excellence is defined at Texas A&M University, it is unclear if the senior year experience at Texas A&M University synthesizes for graduating students undergraduate education for the desired character traits and competencies identified by the 2005 Task Force on Undergraduate Excellence. Additionally, the broad institutional indicators of undergraduate excellence at Texas

A&M identified by the 2005 Task Force on Undergraduate Excellence do not measure the identified desired character traits and competencies. Finally, it is unclear what efforts are made to convey to undergraduate students the expectations that Texas A&M University has of them as graduates. Given all of this incertitude, it is important to establish clearly what should undergraduate students experience as seniors in order to provide them the appropriate closure, and how can this be assured?

Purpose of the Study

Texas A&M University does not have an intentional strategy to guide students in integrating their degree plan requirements into the desired character competencies of undergraduate students, which are, in essence, the core of an undergraduate education. The purpose of this study was to identify if and how graduating seniors make meaning of their undergraduate education. Exploring graduating seniors' understanding of their undergraduate education, as well as what Texas A&M University provides undergraduates during their senior year to help them to make meaning, will be valuable when the University proceeds with its goals of enhancing the undergraduate experience.

Research Questions

This research study addressed the following questions:

1. How do graduating seniors at Texas A&M University define the purpose of undergraduate education?

2. How do Texas A&M graduating seniors make meaning of their undergraduate education?

3. What opportunities do Texas A&M graduating seniors have to integrate all of their undergraduate experiences in order to get closure?

Operational Definitions

1. Graduating seniors: undergraduates in their last semester of enrollment.

2. Senior year experience: a set of initiatives to provide opportunities for reflection on personal growth and development, integration and closure to the undergraduate experience, and efforts to facilitate and support holistically the graduating students' transition to post-college life, while supporting, enhancing, and promoting the academic objectives of the institution (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, p. 12).

3. Learning outcomes: what a student is expected to learn, skills that s/he will develop, and a perspective that s/he may gain as the result of completing a curriculum or program. Learning outcomes should be measurable, and they should include a verb in order to clearly describe what the student should demonstrate.

4. Capstone experience: may be a course, a comprehensive examination, or a senior project. "The capstone can be used to mark the final year of college as either a transition or conclusion. The aim is to give students an experience or exercise which is

retrospective – tying the four or more years of college together – or prospective, preparing the student for the next phase of life after undergraduate education" (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, p. 52).

5. Senior Seminar: academic course designed to provide graduating senior students with the framework to adjust to the expectations, standards, rigors, and social community after attending Texas A&M University while providing the integration and closure to the undergraduate experience.

6. Intellectual Competencies: those cognitive skills which are indispensable to learning in any discipline.

7. Character Traits: characteristics widely considered desirable qualities of college graduates; may be moral or intellectual (Weingartner, 1993, p. 83)

8. Core Curriculum (Texas): The core curriculum guidelines described by the THECB "are predicated on the judgment that a series of basic intellectual competencies – reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking, and computer literacy – are essential to the learning process in any discipline and thus should inform any core curriculum." (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1998).

Assumptions

Previous research at other institutions on the senior year experience and on general education can be extrapolated to Texas A&M University through thoughtful

adaptation to the core curriculum and to the set of academic values that have been defined for this institution.

Limitations

The results of this study will be directly applicable only to Texas A&M University, although with judicious adaptation, they could be extrapolated to illustrate the senior year experience at peer institutions. Additionally, some limitations exist that are specific to qualitative research. According to Borg & Gall, qualitative research does not differentiate between all of the contributing factors in a given situation making it "impossible to distinguish causes from effects." Therefore, the results can be used only to describe the subjects' perceptions of their experiences, but they cannot be used to explain what caused the experiences. Another limitation is that "the researcher and the research subject interact to influence one another and are inseparably interconnected" (Borg & Gall, 1989, p. 384). While this interaction is valued by the qualitative researcher, critics point to the possible effects of this communication on the data collected due to interviewer bias.

Population

In theory, seniors who graduated during the spring of 2007 should have been largely members of the 'Class of 2007.' If so, these students entered Texas A&M

University in the fall of 2003. Gathered from fall 2003 reports posted on-line by the Office of Institutional Studies and Planning (OISP), the entering freshman class included 6,726 FTIC (first-time in college) students, of whom 26% were first generation in college. Considered "traditional" in age, the entering class members were practically all under the age of 21, and the number of female students was slightly higher than males at 52% of the entering class (Office of Institutional Studies and Planning, 2003).

Overall first year retention for this group was quite strong at 90%, though it dropped in the second year to 85%. Retention data for the subsequent two years is not currently available for this class. However, given that the profile and year-to-year progress for this class is quite similar to other contiguous classes, we may estimate a progressive decline in the junior year retention of this group to be down to 80%, a figure that will be sustained by a combination of retention and graduation numbers through the sixth year (Office of Institutional Studies and Planning, 2005).

According to these projections, it is likely that only 37% of the 'Class of 2007' actually graduated May of 2007. This means that the graduating seniors included students who began their undergraduate careers during the course of several different years. Regardless of this likelihood, OISP data on freshman class composition at Texas A&M University for the last several years supports the assumption that those who were graduating seniors during the spring of 2007 will generally have been members of an entering class of freshman very similar in composition to that of the 'Class of 2007.'

Methodology

Using quantitative data and employing a qualitative research design, this is an exploratory study based upon a constructivist perspective. The research strategy derives from phenomenological methods where the aim is to speak about the senior year experience from the perspective of the research subjects. Based upon this approach, the research subject's point of view, interpretation, and subjectivity are what is of value in gaining insight into their experience and how they make meaning of it.

The research subjects, selected from the pool of graduating seniors, were interviewed in an effort to present new insights into if and how college seniors at Texas A&M University make meaning of their undergraduate education as they prepare to graduate. By using a phenomenological strategy, this method of data collection provided a rich account of what occurred during the senior year, thereby increasing the awareness of this experience for those in higher education who work with college seniors. Upon approval of the study from the Institutional Review Board, a sample of graduating seniors from each of the academic colleges was selected randomly from the list of seniors who apply for graduation in May 2007. One student name was selected for approximately every 500 graduating seniors in each college. Every effort was made to select an equal number of males and females and ample minority student representation in the sample.

Based upon these random selections, students were sent a letter of invitation to volunteer as participants in the interview for the study. The letter of invitation included

a description of the study. Arrangements for an interview time during spring 2007 semester were made via e-mail and/or telephone with the students who volunteered to participate. Initially, more than the needed number of students was identified from the college lists of graduating seniors. Whenever a student declined the invitation to participate, the next selected name from that college was invited to participate until the necessary number of research participants per college was confirmed.

Data were collected through an individual interview with each research subject. Interviews will be open and unstructured to allow the interview to evolve naturally. While the course of the interview was unstructured, each interview began with the same introduction, and the researcher used a set of questions from which to prompt the discussion with each subject. The set of interview questions was checked for the clarity of the language prior to the first interview by receiving feedback from seniors who did not participate in the study. The purpose of the interview was to ascertain if and how these students were making meaning of their undergraduate education. Did they see the various parts of their degree plan requirements purposefully connected? If so, in what ways did they see that they are connected? What did they think was the purpose of their undergraduate education?

Most of the interviews were held in a small meeting room of the MSC to provide a neutral yet familiar environment. They were scheduled during weekday hours and around the students' class and work schedules. The interviews were recorded through the researcher's field notes for later analysis. The field notes aided the researcher in

capturing all that is said, while being less intimidating for subjects than having the interview audio recorded (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 241).

There were several advantages to using this research design as outlined by Hancock (2002, p. 13). "Data collection methods are time consuming and consequently data is collected from smaller numbers of people than would usually be the case in quantitative approaches such as the questionnaire survey. The benefits of using these approaches include richness of data and deeper insight into the phenomena under study." Borg & Gall (1989, p. 446) further include the unique interaction between the researcher and the subjects as one of the advantages of the interview research technique. For example, there is the opportunity for immediate feedback and follow up during an interview, while the responses on a survey are flat and static.

Analyses of the data began after the first interview was concluded. "Data analysis must begin with the very first data collection, in order to facilitate the emergent design, grounding of theory, and the emergent structure of later data collection phases" (Lincoln & Guba 1989, p. 242). Students' descriptions of their undergraduate experience as they reflect upon it while they prepare to graduate were grouped into categories as themes become apparent. Categorizing the data in this manner revealed patterns within the experience of these students. The data were analyzed by using the constant comparative method. This method will be applied as described by Lincoln & Guba (1985). "Since our interest is not particularly in theory development at this point, we shall truncate these steps by limiting ourselves to their data processing aspects" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p 340). To further describe the process that was used to

examine the data, “thus the process of constant comparison stimulates thought that leads to both descriptive and explanatory categories” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p 341).

In order to provide a quantitative baseline data of the population from which the interview participants was drawn, data from the graduating seniors exit survey that was administered by the Department of Measurement and Research Services was used. This survey was administered during January 2007 to all of the population of graduating seniors from which the sample for this study was drawn, and it included five statements that were explored as questions during the individual interviews of this research study.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study are germane to the on-going efforts to enhance the undergraduate experience at Texas A&M University. Given that Texas A&M University has defined what is meant by undergraduate student success, but is still developing the initiatives to achieve it, the results of this study will help us to identify what, if any, element is needed in order to develop an appropriate senior year experience at Texas A&M University.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides, through a review of the literature, a foundation for this exploratory study. Using a combined quantitative and qualitative research design, the study relied upon the research subject's point of view and interpretation of her/his undergraduate experience, in addition to if and how each made meaning of this experience. While the context within which students experience their undergraduate education provides the framework and parameters for their descriptions, the researcher's positioning impacts the interaction between the researcher and participants, as well as the researcher's analysis of the data. The terms higher education and undergraduate higher education are used interchangeably throughout, as are the core curriculum of Texas and general education, which is the part of an undergraduate education that is common to all students at an institution.

The Purpose of Undergraduate Education

What is the purpose of undergraduate higher education? This question is complex in that there is not one answer, or it may be better stated that the answer is multilayered. The issue could be examined historically. There was a time when the purpose of higher education aimed specifically at preparing citizens for the purpose of preserving the American way of life, which is discussed by Harry Lewis, former Dean of

the College of Harvard, in his book *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (2006). "The Red Book defines general education as 'that part of a student's whole education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen'" (Lewis, 2006, p. 56).

For those who work in higher education, the question of how education is defined is a pivotal one that should be asked and answered, or at least deliberated, periodically. Lewis contends that to determine what an institution values one needs to look at its curriculum. "The college curriculum – the academic program students follow to earn their degrees – is more than a rule book of requirements and regulations. It is an expression of what a college believes education means. As such, a decision to change the curriculum can precipitate a war of ideas about the purpose of college" (Lewis, 2006, p. 22). To conduct this debate is important, not only to ensure that higher education progresses through the years, but more so in order to provide the framework within which the undergraduate curriculum is developed. In addition to the networking and professional development opportunities, higher education professional associations have provided leadership by facilitating these discussions, studying the issues, and offering recommendations through their reports.

The question of what is the purpose of undergraduate higher education may be answered on one level by describing the contractual nature of a college education. As described in the report by the Boyer Commission on "Educating Undergraduates in the Research University" (1998), there is a bill of academic rights that stipulates both an institution's obligations to an admitted student and vice versa. By seeking admittance

into an institution of higher education, the student is submitting to the expectations of conduct and of performance in order to complete a degree. By admitting a student, the institution is also committing itself to providing the student with opportunities to develop beyond the education in the intended course of study, which is another level in the purpose for higher education. Similar to the hallmarks of a college education as listed by the "Student Learning Imperative" (ACPA, 1996), these opportunities should minimally include: 1) learning through inquiry rather than the simple transmission of knowledge; 2) oral and written communication skills "at a level that will serve the student both within the university and in postgraduate professional and personal life;" 3) an appreciation of the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences; and 4) "careful and comprehensive preparation for whatever may lie beyond graduation, whether it be graduate school, professional school, or first professional position" (Boyer Commission, pp. 12-13).

What is being described in the Boyer Commission Report are features of the general education component of undergraduate education, which have historically been the core of undergraduate education in the United States. In the state of Texas, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) outlined in 1997 its general education expectations for the state's colleges and universities through the core curriculum requirements. These requirements have some practical value such as providing a common course numbering system, the facilitation of course credit transfer between institutions within the state, and some commonality across the undergraduate education experience. However, its greater purpose is to ensure that students are being

exposed to educational development beyond their disciplines. Marcia Baxter Magolda and Patricia King (2004) articulated it well in their book, *Learning Partnerships: Theory and Models of Practice to Educate for Self-Authorship.* The authors provide a theoretical framework for the self-authorship of college students. A shift from a reliance on authority to a confidence in oneself, self-authorship, is facilitated by the Learning Partnerships Model. Based upon Baxter Magolda's 17-year longitudinal research with young adults, "learning partnerships support self-authorship via three principle: validating learners' capacity as knowledge constructors, situating learning in learner's experience, and defining learning as mutually constructing meaning" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, p. xix). By the time that the graduate from college, young adults are expected to be self-reliant and contributing members of society. As such, "A common goal in American higher education is to improve student learning for the purpose of preparing young adults for the professional, civic, and personal challenges of adult life. Numerous reports address educational needs at the dawn of the 21st century, most emphasizing the complexity of life in contemporary society as a key dynamic" (Baxter Magolda and King, 2004, p. 2).

Therefore, a primary objective for undergraduate education today is to prepare students for life, as well as for careers. The overarching aim of the curriculum is to graduate a well-rounded person who is more than an architect or an engineer. This purpose is clearly affirmed by researchers in the field of education and through professional associations, such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). ACPA partnered with the National Association of Personnel Administrator (NASPA) to

produce the report "Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience." "*Learning Reconsidered* is an argument for the integrated use of all of higher education's resources in the education and preparation of the whole student" (NASPA & ACPA, 2004). This aim is also evidenced in the THECB's guidelines.

The THECB core curriculum guidelines begin by naming basic intellectual competencies – reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking, and computer literacy. However, it goes on by listing another imperative of a core curriculum: "that it contain courses that help students attain the following: 1) Establish broad and multiple perspectives on the individual in relationship to the larger society and world in which he or she lives, and to understand the responsibilities of living in a culturally and ethnically diversified world; 2) Stimulate a capacity to discuss and reflect upon individual, political, economic, and social aspects of life in order to understand ways in which to be a responsible member of society; 3) Recognize the importance of maintaining health and wellness; 4) Develop a capacity to use knowledge of how technology and science affect their lives; 5) Develop personal values for ethical behavior; 6) Develop the ability to make aesthetic judgments; 7) Use logical reasoning in problem solving; and 8) Integrate knowledge and understand the interrelationships of the scholarly disciplines" (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1999). Core Curriculum requirements at Texas A&M can be fulfilled by taking courses in the categories outlined in Appendix B.

It is important to note that the THECB does not intend for these guidelines to restrict the professors' teaching style nor is the primary aim to regulate the course system. "A core curriculum experience will prepare them to learn effectively through

the rest of their college years so that they carry these aptitudes for learning into their life careers … [therefore] a core curriculum should be described and assessed by faculty and institutions in terms of basic intellectual competencies and perspectives, and of specified student outcomes, rather than simply in terms of specific courses and course content" (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1999). To that end, the THECB not only requires that institutions have a core curriculum that is developed based upon its defining characteristics, but it also requires that each institution periodically assess its core curriculum and report the results to the Board. Assessment of the curriculum that is designed, then, is a key aspect of the continuum of education. The established curriculum must have a purpose that is articulated in outcomes that can be measured.

Referring back to the "Higher Education's New Playbook: Learning Reconsidered" article in *About Campus*, Jane Fried (2007) concurs that it is not sufficient to develop the curriculum, but that the development of the curriculum must be closely tied to assessment of the identified outcomes. "*Learning Reconsidered* offers recommendations for assessing the outcome of this learning and contrasts transformative learning with the more traditional informative learning that focuses on the transmission of information from teacher to student" (Fried, 2007, p. 3). While Fried was not focusing her observations on general education or the core curriculum, she was making a case for assessment of the preparation of the whole student through "transformative" undergraduate education. "When learning is transformative, students know, can explain, and can demonstrate what they have learned" (Fried, 2007, p. 3). To that end, outcomes should not only be measurable, but they should be attainable.

According to the current literature, student learning will be more likely to occur through transformative learning. In 1999, Gaff discussed the importance of looking beyond the content of the curriculum in AAC&U's report, "General Education: The Changing Agenda." Of the ten points brought forth for consideration, Gaff emphasized the need to examine learning and not simply content when assessing general education. "It would be irresponsible for a campus committee to concentrate on *what* is being learned to the exclusion of *how* it is being learned" (Gaff, 1999, p. 4). The movement then in higher education is to transform education by taking a holistic approach to learning. The focus, rather than on the content being imparted to the student, is the student her/himself. "Reports from both student affairs and academic organizations advocate this holistic approach to 21st-century education" (Baxter Magolda and King, 2004, p.3). Such a holistic approach is best implemented by creating the environment that promotes experiences that contribute to learning and development.

Enhancing Undergraduate Education

In 1993 the American College Personnel Administrators (ACPA), published the document "The Student Learning Imperative." In its preamble, the document provided the context for its stated purpose of stimulating discussion on how to enhance student learning. "Higher education is in the throes of a major transformation. Forcing the transformation are economic conditions, eroding public confidence, accountability demands, and demographic shifts resulting in increased numbers of people from

historically underrepresented groups going to college…Because of these and other factors, legislators, parents, governing boards, and students want colleges and universities to reemphasize student learning and personal development as the primary goals of undergraduate education. In short, people want to know that higher education is preparing students to lead productive lives after college including the ability to deal effectively with such major societal challenges as poverty, illiteracy, crime, and environmental exploitation" (ACPA, 1996). While its implications were primarily aimed at Student Affairs professionals, the "Student Learning Imperative" observations regarding higher education are generally pertinent throughout the academy. According to the sixth Student Learning Imperative (1993), "Student affairs professionals, faculty, and other administrators have the responsibility to create the conditions where intentional learning takes place."

The Fall 2004 issue of the quarterly "Peer Review" from AAC&U focused entirely on general education and its assessment. The first article by of the issue, written by Gaff, explored the attributes of a generally educated person. To answer that question, one typically considers first what general education is and what gains are expected to be made by students as a result of this education. Consequently, the author of this article notes, "It is important to periodically review the curriculum because reasoning for decisions tends to fade with time, which erodes the expectations for student learning…Another reason for periodic discussion and review is because many [professors] are new faculty who did not participate in the conversation and who inherited the curriculum" (Gaff, 2004, p. 4). Such a review of the curriculum will not

necessarily yield a consensus for improvement as illustrated here by Harry R. Lewis, former Dean of Harvard College in his book *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (2006). "Just as Dean Kirby kicked off the [curriculum] review by advocating a 'shared foundation' without suggesting what it might be, the reports that emerged from the review presented no particular knowledge that should be universally or even broadly shared [by students]" (Lewis, 2004, p. 60), to which then President Lawrence H. Summers responded that the curriculum should be about something.

Even so, Gaff has found that, when asked, most faculty across institutions, regardless of discipline, point to the liberal education, and the associated skills, as key in undergraduate learning. In this case, liberal education refers to "a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a stronger sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement ... characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, and more a way of studying than a specific course or field of study" (AAC&U Statement on Liberal Education, 1998). He goes on to highlight the fact that the leaders of professional accreditation bodies also place high value on liberal education. "They and their colleagues in regional accrediting and in several educational associations have agreed that students should acquire the following attributes: breadth of knowledge and capacity for lifelong learning; abilities to analyze, communicate and integrate ideas; effectiveness in dealing with values, relating to diverse individuals and developing as individuals" (Gaff, 2004, p. 4).

This brings attention to some key of interrelated issues in the purpose of undergraduate education: that there are stakeholders beyond the students themselves and that the purpose of this general education must also include a reflection of its practical application. Gaff explains that "educated people today need to be able to understand the similarities and differences among people and to develop the capacities to bring different people together to solve problems, whether in the work place, one's community or internationally" (Gaff, 2004, p. 5). While it may be true that there are some foundational lessons in general education that have remained relevant through the years despite the passage of time, on the whole, the knowledge, skills, and experiences that undergraduates need in order to be well-prepared as graduates has changed with the modernization of today's world society. In citing Carnevale and Strohl, Gaff points out that "The United States has moved from an agrarian economy, through an industrial economy, to a knowledge-based economy. Labor economists have determined that, for a knowledge-based economy where many people work on solving unscripted problems, a liberal education is excellent preparation for the best careers" (Gaff, 2004, p. 5).

Likewise, in the 2002 report "Greater Expectations," AAC&U discusses the reasons why individuals attend institutions of higher learning. The report addresses this within the context of the rapid and continuous changes in all aspects of life today. "The education all students need prepares them for personal success and fosters a just, democratic society. The panel believes that the elements of such an education can bring together many expectations various group hold for college study" (AAC&U Greater Expectations, 2002, Ch. 3).

The challenge then is how to proceed in assessing and developing the curriculum in order to ensure alignment between the purpose of undergraduate education and the needs of the generally educated person of today, particularly given all of the stakeholders both on and off campus. On college campuses, particular care should be given to avoid having the conversation about curriculum sidetracked by territoriality. Gaff (2004) suggests that the conversation should be driven by learning goals for students and the educational principles that are shared among faculty. He also cautions against rushing in too quickly into the design of a new curriculum. "It is important to take enough time to discover what is common among the faculty and to secure basic agreement about what they think students should learn and about what qualities should characterize a high-quality, coherent college education" (Gaff, 2004, p.5).

The assessment and outcomes movements in higher education are gaining strength because it is essential that the curriculum of an undergraduate education be evaluated periodically for relevance and outcomes assessed routinely for attainment. "While there are good tests for measuring effectiveness in business, law, and other professions, the outcomes of general education remain elusive and relatively unstudied" (Gaff, 2004, p.7). With the emphasis on accountability from the various stakeholders, there is the expectation, even if there is not yet the common practice, that student learning outcomes are being assessed routinely. Assessment then necessitates a clearly articulated set of measurable outcomes.

The fact that undergraduate education is the subject of assessment by various entities and for varying reasons is nothing new. Higher education has been under

scrutiny for a number of years. In its report *The Status of General Education in the Year 2000*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) summarizes the results of a national study on the subject. General Education is typically the largest academic program offered by colleges and universities because of its centrality to undergraduate education. According to this survey, two-thirds of the Chief Academic Officers (CAO) respondents reported that general education has increased in priority in the past ten years (*The Status of General Education in the Year 2000,* p. 7).

In their article that promoted sharing with students the responsibility for their general education, from the Fall 2004 issue of AAC&U's Peer Review, White and Cohen explained that students may not understand the significance of general education even though it may contribute to one-third of their undergraduate education. "This lack of awareness is compounded by the belief, reinforced by our own practices, that a college degree represents no more than the accumulation of a specified number of credits" (White and Cohen, 2004, p.8).

Coherence Out of Variety

In his book *Undergraduate Education: Goals and Means*, author Rudolph H. Weingartner (1993) examined all of the component parts of the undergraduate education. He begins his examination with "if the aim is to improve baccalaureate education, one must try to keep the entire mission in front of oneself and make particular decisions with an awareness of the larger context (p. 1)." Weingartner aims to retain clarity about what

undergraduate education seeks to accomplish. Its focus is the student: what is undergraduate education attempting to do for him and her? In what way should those four years (more or less) transform the person who devotes that much time, effort, and money into the venture (Weingartner, 1993)? In a chapter of the book *The Senior Year Experience*, Barbara Leigh Smith also points to this need for achieving coherence in undergraduate education. "Creating an educational environment that cultivates a sense of coherence and personal empowerment is not simple. A growing literature suggests that effective learning environments result from the complex interplay of many factors: the academics culture and scale of an institution, the peer group, the form and content of the curriculum, and the pedagogy and value system that prevail" (Gardner and Van der Veer, 1998, 81).

In 1994, the Association of American Colleges published the report, *Strong Foundations*, outlining twelve principles for effective general education programs. According to this report, strong general education programs reflect the fundamental educational standards and responsibilities of the institution. Effective implementation is difficult if the curriculum lacks clarity, encompasses too many objectives, or if it is developed through concessions instead of consensus (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 6). The first principle for effective general education, then, calls for strong general education programs to explicitly answer the question, "What is the Point of General Education?" "General education programs are intellectual projects. They ought to be based on a coherent rationale" (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 3). Academic administrators should consider the purpose of the general education program

and the role of each course within it in its development. "If the major aims mostly to help students 'make a living' then general education is concerned with 'how to make a life' or ' how to make a self worth being'" (p.4).

The third principle for effective general education programs requires that general education programs educational always endeavor to achieve educational coherence (p. 12). "It is the task of general education to introduce students to the breadth of knowledge and also to the lifelong project of making sense and creating coherence out of variety. Thus, general education starts with diversity but aims at coherence" (pp. 12-13). According to this description, general education begins with a variety, but its objective is to ultimately provide coherence by connecting the various parts. "All too often students experience the curriculum as fragmented separate courses and academic disciplines typically stress particular content and approaches rather than searching for commonalities or making connections between fields. Students are often left adrift in their search for meaning or enlightening connections" (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 13). This report further asserts that a defining goal of a strong general education program is to seek the "connectedness" of its content (p.13).

One obvious method for achieving coherence includes manipulating the content of the curriculum. Content may be manipulated by offering the same core courses to all students or at least a modified core. The logistics of such an enterprise, particularly at larger institutions, make implementation of this method practically impossible. Interdisciplinary courses may also offer the opportunity to connect the various parts of the content of general education. "Senior capstone seminars or projects are another

means for achieving integration through content of general education" (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 14).

Another means of providing coherence to undergraduate education is to focus on the development of faculty. Curricular change and development cannot be well-sustained without the investment of time and resources into the implementation of these changes. "A survey of institutions in 1991 making various changes in their curricula revealed that those making a greater investment in faculty development reported a greater increase in the quality of education, more curricular coherence, more active learning, a stronger sense of community, a sharper institutional identity, and, above all, more faculty renewal" (Gaff, 1999, 8-9). Without this type of support, intended changes are typically subsumed by the way that things had always been done.

Coherence in a general education program may also be achieved by focusing on the development of particular competencies. Consequently, most general education programs seek to develop skills, such as all levels of communication and problem-solving (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p.14). In the end, what is important is to achieve the desired outcomes. "We need to understand how and in what way the curriculum and the approaches to the curriculum change students; perceptions of themselves and their world. And we need to know if the changes observed are the ones desired" (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 26). Therefore, it is essential that the student experience be closely examined periodically in order to develop a general education curriculum that closely aligns that experience with faculty objectives.

Of course, as noted in the THECB core curriculum guidelines earlier, the general education curriculum is not intended to restrict faculty teaching style nor is the primary aim to regulate the course system. "In colleges and universities organized by departments built around academic disciplines a tension between loyalties to the specialty and general education is built in. Sometimes the disciplinary major and general education are seen to be in opposition. But as Ernest Boyer observes, 'Rather than divide the undergraduate experience into separate camps – general versus socialized education – the curriculum of a college of quality will bring the two together'" (as cited in Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 39).

In its report the Boyer Commission (1998) describes the ecology of the university, which depends upon all members of the community having a shared mission. "Everyone at a university should be a discoverer, a learner. That shared mission binds together all that happens on a campus. The teaching responsibility of the university is to make all its students participants in the mission. Those students must undergird their engagement in research with the strong 'general' education that creates a unity with their peers, their professors, and the rest of society" (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 9).

As the purpose of higher education continues to be closely examined, this increased focus, combined with the alleged shortcomings of higher education, has led to the demands, both internal and external, for transforming undergraduate education. The concept of student outcomes has been applied to more than coursework, and the assessment movement has reached all aspects of higher education. All of these address the need for higher education institutions to be accountable to their constituencies.

These also underscore the value of integrated learning outcomes. "When the campus approach to learning is integrated and holistic, organizational structures are designed to support students as they construct knowledge, construct meaning, and construct themselves in society" (Fried, 2007, p.4).

How College Affects Students

Colleges and universities are being asked to demonstrate that they are fulfilling their obligations. This presumes that institutions can articulate clearly, not only their overall purpose and mission, but their expected outcomes for undergraduate students, in order to assess if and how these outcomes are being met. Given that many of the outcomes of undergraduate education are not discipline specific but developmental in nature, the question then arises regarding the tangible impact of college on its students and how this is ascertained. What are the changes from the freshman to the senior year? What can these changes be attributed to?

In their second volume of *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) address the subject of change during college. Following the format of their original work published in 1991, they reviewed the results of related research from 1989 to 2002. Without any claims of having been exhaustive in this effort, Pascarella & Terenzini have synthesized the extensive data into an invaluable compendium. While they describe many and varied examples of the changes documented during the undergraduate years, the authors are also careful to qualify these data. "As emphasized

throughout this book, freshman-to-senior change during college does not necessarily represent the impact of college. Nearly all the studies of change discussed in our synthesis lacked a control group of students who did not attend college….In addition, just as the fact of change does not necessarily represent the impact of college, the absence of measured change does not necessarily indicate the absence of college impact" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 578).

The changes in students during their college years can be attributed to their development and can be examined through various student development theories. Given the higher education focus on the student as the learner and the ways of knowing, how students develop is foundational to the discussions of the purpose of undergraduate education. "After careful review of human development theories and models, Knefelkamp, Widick, and Parker (1978) realized the futility of designing one 'comprehensive model of student development.' Existing developmental theories do, however, tend to group into several categories, including psychosocial theories, cognitive-structural theories, and typology theories. In addition, person-environment models have been introduces that provide guidance concerning the factors that influence development" (cited in Evans, et al., 1998, p. 10).

Several student development theories outline stages, levels, or phases that an individual may go through as s/he develops. These may be dependent one upon the other, such as in Maslow's needs hierarchy or Kohlberg's stages of moral development, while other are not linear, such as Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development. Cognitive-structural theorists, such as Kohlberg and Perry, derived their

principles from the work of Piaget. These theorists examine "changes in the *way* that people think but not *what* they think" (Evans, et al., 1998, p. 11). Development results not from the acquisition of more knowledge, but it consists of a sequence of qualitative changes in the way an individual thinks. Educators can play a significant role in coaching students along these developmental stages, phases, or evolutions.

Baxter Magolda (1999) has proposed a theoretical foundation for creating such conditions. "A constructive-developmental view of learning incorporates two major concepts: (1) that students construct knowledge by organizing and making meaning of their experiences, and (2) that this construction takes place in the context of their evolving assumptions about knowledge itself and students' role in creating it" (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 6). She refers to this process of composing one's own reality as self-authorship, a term coined previously by Robert Kegan in 1994. Self-authorship is further described by Kegan as internally coordinating beliefs, values, and interpersonal loyalties rather than depending upon external values, beliefs, and interpersonal loyalties (as cited by Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, p. xviii). In helping student make their way to adulthood, Baxter Magolda argues that educators, and student affairs professionals in particular, should create the conditions that promote self-authorship by being "good company for the journey" (Baxter Magolda, 2002, p.6).

The Senior Year Experience

How, then, can learning measured? "*Learning Reconsidered* defines learning as a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development, processes that have often been considered separate, and even independent of each other" (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & the American College Personnel Association, p. 2, 2004). As detailed within this review, academic education is most often organized into general education requirements, major requirements and electives…..General education, while based on the philosophy of "the full and creative development of the whole person" has not consistently adopted pedagogical approaches by which its holistic purposes could be accomplished (as cited in *Learning Reconsidered* by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & the American College Personnel Association, 2004, p. 8). A result of this examination and self-examination has been the attention focused on the senior year experience, which is the culmination of the undergraduate experience.

In 1990, the University of South Carolina coordinated the first of several conferences focused on the senior year experience. The purpose of these conferences was to raise awareness of the critical nature of the senior year in connecting all of an undergraduate student's experiences and preparing that student for career or graduate study. Not unlike the freshman year, the senior year is a stressful one of transition. The problems and needs associated with the transition out of the college setting have received little similar attention from college and university personnel, let alone

researchers (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, p. 5). The goal of their work revolved around this premise:

> Research on the senior year experience is limited because the topic has only recently received attention in the higher education community. More has been written about related concepts such as the purposes of higher education, desired outcomes of the undergraduate experience, and student development and transition issues during the college years. However, after reviewing the available literature and the contributions of the authors in this volume, we propose that the following characteristics are common to seniors: they are a captive audience; they have high expectations; they have special needs unique to them as students in transition; the senior year is the last window of opportunity to address any potential deficit before students leave (Gardner and Van der Veer, 1998, pp. 4-7).

In essence, they were looking at the senior year to provide evidence that the undergraduate experience had provided students with what they wanted (their goals) and what the institution offered (the university's expectations). These authors strongly endorsed the development of a senior year experience (SYE) that would address the themes common in the senior year. One of the elements of the SYE could be a senior seminar or a capstone course.

The Boyer Commission Report (1998) also recommends a senior year capstone experience. The importance of the senior year experience is related to several factors.

Undergraduate students tend to have lofty expectations by the time that they reach their senior year. As they plan to receive the degree, they also have high hopes of success. While this is a time of excitement and celebration, it is also a time of anxiety and self-examination. Several authors suggest that the senior year is particularly critical to student development because of the need for all students to reflect on and make meaning of the undergraduate experience (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, pp. 24, 27-28). The senior year raises issues of transition similar to those of the freshman year. Students are preparing for a change in surroundings and expectations whether they are moving into a job or continuing their studies in graduate school. Whatever path the senior is taking, it is expected that graduates are expected to be proficient in various skills beyond their academic course of study. The purposes and goals of the SYE as outlined in Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) are listed in Appendix C.

The Undergraduate Experience at Texas A&M

Since 1997, when it unveiled its strategic plan in the form of *Vision 2020: Creating a Culture of Excellence*, Texas A&M University has had a stated initiative of enhancing the undergraduate experience. Vision 2020 is the University's comprehensive strategic plan for the foreseeable future, and its overarching purpose is for Texas A&M University to attain its quest for become a "top 10" institution of higher learning. Of the 12 imperatives that were initially formulated, Imperative 3 focused on the undergraduate academic experience. "Provide a university climate that is learner-centered; emphasizes

academic rigor and high expectations of students, faculty, and staff; encourages involvement in the life of the institution beyond the classroom; fosters an environment of caring and concern; and promotes success and leadership development for all students" (Texas A&M University Vision 2020, 1997).

In the Fall of 2004, President Robert M. Gates appointed the university's Task Force for Enhancing the Undergraduate Experience and charged it with: 1) reviewing A&M data from earlier studies on facets of the undergraduate experience and contrasting them to national research findings; 2) critically assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the current undergraduate experience and related policies; 3) identifying and evaluating the best practices in undergraduate teaching and learning; and 4) recommending those practices that best "fit with and complement the unique Aggie experience" (Texas A&M University, 2005, p. 1).

In its aim to enhance the undergraduate experience, Texas A&M University purports to be a scholarly community that emphasizes academic rigor and inquiry, encourages involvement in the life of the institution beyond the classroom, instills an appreciation of the arts and sciences, integrates learning and leadership, fosters an environment of caring and concern, promotes success and leadership development for all students, and encourages engagement in life-long learning. To that end Texas A&M has identified what the University wants every undergraduate to be able to know and do when they graduate from Texas A&M University. Broad institutional indicators of undergraduate excellence have been identified to assess undergraduate success (see Appendix A). As the university proceeds with initiatives to enhance the undergraduate

education, it behooves campus leaders to ensure that the proposals include plans for the administration of any resulting programs. “If general education is designed to achieve certain purposes, such as acquiring writing proficiency or developing understanding of other peoples, then someone needs to oversee the programs designed to help students achieve those goals” (Gaff, 1999, 9-10).

How do graduating seniors at Texas A&M University define the purpose of undergraduate education? How do they make meaning of their undergraduate education? What opportunities do they have to integrate all of their undergraduate experiences in order to get closure? Regarding the latter, it is unclear if the senior year experience at Texas A&M University provides this synthesis and integration. It is also unclear if any efforts are made to convey to undergraduate students the expectations that Texas A&M University has of them as graduates. “The point of four years of undergraduate education is learning. We also take seriously, perhaps too much so, getting grades and graduating – forms of certification – but their importance would wither did they not signify that there had been learning. Institutions posit curricular goals to get clear about their educational objectives. But those goals are achieved, and the curriculum actually delivered, only to the extent to which students learn” (Weingartner, 1993, p. 101).

The purpose of this study is to identify if and how graduating seniors make meaning of their undergraduate education. Exploring graduating seniors’ understanding of their undergraduate education, as well as what Texas A&M University provides undergraduates during their senior year to help them to make meaning, will be valuable

as the University implements the initiatives proposed by the Task Force on the Undergraduate Experience. As noted earlier, research in the senior year experience is lacking. The problems and needs of graduating seniors continue to receive little attention from researchers or from practitioners. The finding of this study will contribute to this body of knowledge.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative research design, this study, based upon a constructivist paradigm, seeks to explore the answers to three research questions: 1) how do graduating seniors at Texas A&M University define the purpose of undergraduate education?; 2) how do Texas A&M graduating seniors make meaning of their undergraduate education?; and 3) what opportunities do Texas A&M graduating seniors have to integrate all of their undergraduate experiences in order to get closure? "In the constructionist paradigm, also called 'naturalistic, hermeneutic, or interpretive,' 1) the researcher-respondent relationship is subjective, interactive, and interdependent; 2) reality is multiple, complex, and not easily quantifiable; 3) the values of the researcher, respondents, research site, and underlying theory cannot help but undergird all aspects of the research; and 4) the research product (e.g. interpretations is context specific" (Broido and Manning, 2002, p. 436).

The research subjects, who were invited to participate from the pool of graduating seniors during spring 2007 at Texas A&M University, were interviewed individually by the researcher. The purpose of the interview was to collect the data needed to ascertain if and how these students were making meaning of their undergraduate education. "Interviews may be used for data collection in both quantitative and qualitative research. In general the public is accustomed to and trusting of this method of gathering information" (Fontana and Frey, 1998, p. 647-648).

This study constitutes the first research project developed at Texas A&M University to explore the reflections of seniors on higher education and to relate these to their perception of their actual university experience. In addition, this research provides both a qualitative and quantitative measure of the current state of the senior year experience.

Theoretical Framework

Baxter Magolda (1999) has proposed a theoretical foundation for creating conditions that would support the effective implementation of the initiatives to enhance the undergraduate experience at Texas A&M University. "A constructive-developmental view of learning incorporates two major concepts: (1) that students construct knowledge by organizing and making meaning of their experiences, and (2) that this construction takes place in the context of their evolving assumptions about knowledge itself and students' role in creating it" (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p. 6). This process is referred to as self-authorship. In helping student make their way to adulthood, Baxter Magolda argues that educators, and student affairs professionals in particular, should create the conditions that promote self-authorship by being "good company for the journey" (Baxter Magolda, 2002, p.6).

Drawing from her longitudinal study with young adults, Baxter Magolda found that students in her study reported learning better when their professors communicated a caring attitude and engaged with them. They also described learning better when

professors used examples that related to everyday life or offered real world assignments. Based in great part on these findings, she identified three principles that undergird this model: validating learner's capacity as constructors of knowledge; situating learning in the learner's experience; and defining learning as mutually constructing knowledge (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, p. xix).

Based upon this theoretical framework and these concepts, Baxter Magolda and King have developed a model for teaching that promotes student learning and development (2004, p. 5). "The Learning Partnerships Model introduced learner to these [societal and adult] expectations by portraying learning as a complex process in which learners bring their own perspectives to bear on deciding what to believe and simultaneously share responsibility with others to construct knowledge. Because this vision of learning is a challenge to authority-dependent learner, the Learning Partnerships Model helps learner meet the challenge by validating their ability to learn, situating learning in learners' experience, and defining learning as a collaborative exchange of perspectives" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, p. xviii).

Method

Data from an exit survey conducted on all graduating seniors was used to establish a baseline of the students' perceptions as they prepare to transition out of college and to gauge how these perceptions compare across the population. It also provided a point of departure for a more detailed insight carried out using individual

interviews for qualitative analysis. The interview method of data collection employed during this research study not only provided a rich account of what these students were experiencing during their senior year as they prepared to graduate, but it allowed for thoughtful reflection when each, as a research subject, considered and answered every interview question. "Measures for judging the quality of qualitative projects across various research traditions has been elusive…instead, we want to insist upon the idea of 'goodness' as a way to view, rather than to define, quality in qualitative research" (Arminio and Hultgren, 2002, 446-447).

Based upon this approach, the interview participant's point of view, interpretation, and subjectivity were of value in gaining insight into their undergraduate experience and how they made meaning of their undergraduate education as they prepared to transition to their next step. "Qualitative researchers seek to answer questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p. 8).

There are several advantages to using an interview research design as outlined by Hancock (2002, p. 13). "Data collection methods are time consuming and consequently data is collected from smaller numbers of people than would usually be the case in quantitative approaches such as the questionnaire survey. The benefits of using these approaches include richness of data and deeper insight into the phenomena under study." Borg & Gall (1989, p. 446) further include the unique interaction between the researcher and the subjects as one of the advantages of the interview research technique. Another example is that immediate feedback and follow up to responses are possible during an

interview, while the responses on a multiple-choice survey are generally shallow and inevitably fixed. By using field notes to document these sessions, the researcher was able to capture the students' responses in a manner that was less intimidating for subjects than having the interview audio recorded (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 241).

Instrumentation

Every semester, students at Texas A&M University who intend to graduate are expected to declare this intent by registering for graduation. Registration for graduation is completed on-line through the student's *myrecord* portal to the University's student record system. As part of this process, students are also asked to complete an exit survey, and the data from this survey are collected by the Department of Measurement and Research Services (MARS). The researcher was able to arrange to have included in the survey that was administered during January 2007 five statements that were explored during the individual interviews of this research study (see Appendix D). For students intending to graduate in May 2007, registration for graduation was open between January 2, 2007 and January 26, 2007. The researcher arranged to have a copy of this list of graduating seniors shared with her after the deadline.

On January 31, 2007, MARS made the original data file available to the researcher. The data file included the list of graduating students who had completed the graduating student exit survey, as well as their responses to the researcher's baseline questions (described in a later section), totaling 5,323 records. The list did not include

the small number of students who completed the graduation registration, but who then chose not to complete the exit survey. The list did include graduate students, as well as undergraduate students from the Galveston campus. Therefore, the first step for the researcher was to eliminate the records for graduates and Galveston students from the list of potential interview participants, in order to better define the population under study. Additionally, the decision not to interview Galveston students was made by the researcher to facilitate the logistics of coordinating interviews with students who are more than likely registered exclusively on that campus.

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board, a stratified sample of graduating seniors from each of the nine academic colleges was selected from the original data file of graduating seniors that was adjusted as described above. The goal was to interview at least two students per academic college in order to get a cross-section of perspectives with a total of approximately 22 students. From the larger academic colleges, the goal was to interview up to four students depending upon the number who were scheduled to graduate from that college. "The strategy of participant selection in qualitative research rests on the multiple purposes of illuminating, interpreting, and understanding…therefore, sampling strategies emphasize 'purposeful' selection of 'cases'" (Jones, 2002, p. 464). Initially, one student name was selected for, approximately, every 500 graduating seniors in each college, though this selection system did not work in three colleges because they have fewer than 500 graduating seniors. In those instances, one name was selected approximately every 50 students. Every effort was made to select a fair number of males and females and ample minority

student representation in the sample. Because the original data file did not indicate gender, the researcher occasionally verified this information through the student records system when a student' gender was not easily identifiable by the name.

The next step prior to inviting a student to participate in the study included verifying three more variables: 1) that the student was admitted to Texas A&M as a first-time in college (FTIC) freshman; 2) that the student was a domestic student; and 3) that the student was currently enrolled and residing in Bryan/College Station. Given that the interview questions related to the University's Core Curriculum requirements, the researcher concluded that it was more appropriate to interview only those students who had completed core requirements at Texas A&M and who had completed their high school education in the U.S. Initially, the researcher chose to send fewer than 40 invitations to begin with because she wanted to be able to monitor the breakdown of the participants as the invitations were accepted. Subsequent batches of invitations were fewer than 20.

Beginning on February 5, 2007, the researcher sent the first batch of invitations to 35 students who were identified through this selection process (see Appendix E). The letter of invitation included a description of the study and a date by which a response to the invitation was requested. These letters were prepared and printed as typical business letters, but they were initially delivered electronically to the student's listed e-mail address. More than the needed numbers of students were selected from the college lists of graduating seniors anticipating that some students would not respond to or would decline the invitation. If a student declined the invitation to participate or missed the

requested date of response, the next selected name from that college was sent the letter of invitation to participate until the necessary number of research participants was reached. Four weeks into the mailings, coinciding with Spring Break, the researcher decided to send 'second notice' messages for a couple of batches of letters instead of preparing new invitations. The subject line included the phrase "it's not too late to respond."

Throughout the period of time when invitations were being sent, the researcher focused on sending additional invitations to graduating seniors in the academic colleges that were not yet well-represented in the participant pool according to the original study protocol. The researcher also sent a meeting reminder at least a day in advance to those who agreed to participate. At the outset, the aim was to have representation from each of the nine academic colleges, but that proved to be more difficult to ensure than originally expected. For example, several majors, most of them in the College of Education and Human Development, require an internship or a semester of student teaching, which many fulfilled during this last semester. This meant that many of these students were enrolled in absentia and were not available for an interview. On the other hand, the response rate of students from three colleges, Agriculture & Life Sciences, Engineering, and Liberal Arts, yielded the needed number of participants within two weeks following the original selection process described above.

When the ongoing low response rate in six academic colleges started to stall the process, the researcher contacted academic advisors and faculty who she knew in these academic colleges. She explained the purpose of the study and her need to interview

students in each academic college. Advisors in colleges of Business, Education and Human Development, and Science offered assistance by recommending the names of a few students. The researcher checked these names against the list of graduating seniors. Through these steps, the researcher identified 14 additional students to invite. Over the course of the next four weeks, it was necessary to continue to send, proportionately, many more invitations to graduating seniors of these academic colleges in order to obtain adequate representation from each of those colleges. Likewise, more invitations to males than to females were needed, and despite this effort, the number of males who agreed to participate in the interviews was slightly below the percentage of males in the overall population of graduating seniors.

To facilitate the selection process of names for invitations, the researcher asked MARS if a list of graduating seniors could be provided to her which indicated those who were admitted as a FTIC freshman. A second run of the data file was sent to the researcher on March 8, 2007. The number of graduating seniors listed on this data file was slightly greater than the original data file because it included the names of students who had applied for graduation after the January deadline. This data file not only included an indicator for transfer students, but it also indicated gender and ethnicity, neither of which was included in the original data file. Table 1 shows the breakdown by academic college, gender, and ethnicity of this data file of graduating seniors, adjusted to include only those admitted as FTIC. This table also details the final number of invitation letters sent to students in each academic college and the number of acceptances by college, gender, and ethnicity. In all, 188 letters of invitation were sent,

22 accepted the invitation to be interviewed, and three responded with regrets because they were enrolled in absentia. Of the 22 students who accepted the invitation to be interviewed, only 20 actually followed through with making the arrangements to meet for the interview, even after communicating with the researcher several times via e-mail with the best of intentions.

TABLE 1. Invitation Letters Sent and Accepted by College, Gender and Ethnicity

College	N	Letters	%	Accepted	%
AG	496	19	3.8	3	15.8
AR	129	23	17.8	2	8.7
BA	493	22	4.4	2	9.1
ED	387	22	5.6	2	9.1
EN	544	10	1.8	3	30.0
GE	45	7	15.6	1	14.3
LA	675	32	4.7	5	15.6
SC	208	23	11.0	2	8.7
VM	214	30	14.0	2	6.7
Gender					
Female	1758	82	4.7	13	15.9
Male	1433	106	7.4	9	8.5
Ethnicity					
W	2677	158	5.9	15	9.5
H	288	10	3.5	4	4.0
B	74	10	13.5	3	3.0
O	127	10	7.9	0	0
I	14				
X	7				
Blank	4				
Total	**3191**	**188**	**5.9**	**22**	**11.7**

Data Collection

Data was collected through one individual interview with each participant. Once a student replied via e-mail to accept the invitation to participate in the study, arrangements were made via e-mail for an interview meeting (see Appendix F). Interviews were scheduled during weekday hours and around the students' class and work schedules. On average each interview lasted one hour. In an effort to provide a neutral, yet familiar environment, each interview, with two exceptions, was conducted in the same small meeting room of the Memorial Student Center (MSC) on the Texas A&M University campus. In order to facilitate one student's participation due to his class and work schedules, he requested that the interview meeting take place in a room of the Recreational Sports Center immediately after his work shift. On another occasion, the interview was held in the researcher's office in Cain Hall on campus due to scheduling conflicts and the timing of the arrangements. In general, the lunch hour was avoided so as not to have the distraction of eating during the interview. Bottled drinking water was made available, which all but one student drank during the interview. The MSC room included a small rectangular table with four chairs around the perimeter.

For the interview meeting, the researcher had a notebook, a copy of the student's letter of invitation, a copy of the information sheet (see Appendix G), and a copy of the interview protocol and questions (see Appendix H). The researcher opened each interview with an overview of the purpose of the study, a review of the information sheet, and a reminder that the researcher would be taking notes during the course of the interview. Students were then given the letter of invitation and the information sheet for

their records. Proceedings of the interviews were chronicled through the researcher's field notes for later analysis.

Each interview began with the same procedure, and the researcher used a set of twenty-one questions from which to prompt the discussion with each subject. Interviews were unstructured in that the questions were open-ended. The structure was in the set questions that were asked of each research subject in a specific order, although the course and pace of the interview were permitted to flow naturally. After opening with a description of the purpose of the study and providing the student with a copy of the letter of invitation and of the information sheet, the researcher proceeded with a brief introduction of herself, thereby acknowledging her positioning within the context of the study. Research has shown that the researcher's positioning has an impact on her/his access to the research subjects, on her/his credibility in the community being researched, as well as on the degree to which s/he can separate from the community being researched in order to be effective in collecting the necessary data (Eppley, 2006; Ganga and Scott, 2006; Crang, 2002; Crang, 2005). While not an "insider" in the sense of being a member of the undergraduate community, the researcher and the participants could relate to each other from a variety of other aspects. As members of the university community, their daily experiences overlapped and were, in some ways, shared. Concurrently, as part of the university's administration, the researcher clearly had an official, if not formal, role in relation to the participants as students of the same university.

Explaining to the participants that it was only fair that she share a bit about herself since she would know something about them, she briefly told them about: her position at the university; her status as a part time graduate student; her degrees from the University of Florida; and her immediate family. In this gesture, the researcher was "attempting to minimize status differences and doing away with the traditional hierarchical situation in interviewing. Interviewers can show their human side and answer question and express feelings" (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 658). By so doing, the researcher was establishing rapport and gaining the trust of the participants. Such rapport establishes a basis for mutual sharing (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p.658), and it also demonstrates to the participants that the researcher's potential for understanding them (Fontana and Frey, 1998, p. 367).

Typically, the researcher would include some comment about what her twelve year old daughter was involved in that week simply to provide context for the home life. Her introduction concluded with an acknowledgement that, while the data from the study would be of value to her personally so that she could complete her doctoral degree, the results would also be of value to her professionally. She explained that she had a professional interest in the subject, and that she hoped to use the findings as the university proceeded with plans to enhance the undergraduate experience at Texas A&M University.

Additionally, during the course of each interview, the researcher would comment on the student's responses if they related to her own experience. One example was a participant who commented that he was not from Texas, but from Virginia near D.C.

Having family who live in that area and being familiar with the region herself, the researcher told him that she knew the place to which he was referring. Another example actually worked in the other direction when a research subject shared as a result of what the researcher told her. While introducing herself, the researcher shared that her daughter had just received the results of the ACT test that she had taken as part of the Duke University Talent Identification Program for seventh graders. Coincidentally, the participant herself had taken part in the same program when she was of that age. It turned out that her parents had explained the results of the test to her in the same manner as the researcher had explained them to her own daughter. This type of exchange generally provided ways in which to dissipate some of the formality of having just met for the first time, thereby allowing for more ease in sharing as the interview questions were answered.

The interview meetings were completed within the scheduled hour, with all but one interview using the entire time. One lasted just under 55 minutes. After all of the planned questions were asked, the researcher provided the participant the opportunity to add any other observations that s/he might have. In a few instances, the student did add a few more comments, sometimes to elaborate on a previously answered question and a couple of times to raise an issue that had not been addressed directly. However, most of the students provided no additional observations other than to comment that the interview questions had covered the topic broadly and sufficiently. In bringing the interview to a conclusion, the researcher reiterated that the data gathered would be presented collectively with other students' experiences and perspectives. She also

reaffirmed that any individual examples or quotes would be used taking care not to reveal the identity of the respondent. She explained that she would follow up with each one of them after she had summarized the data. They would have the opportunity to review the summary if they had the time and the interest. Finally, she invited the students to feel free to contact her in the future as needed whether or not it was related to the research study. Within 24 hours of each interview, the researcher followed up each interview meeting with an electronic 'thank you' letter to each participant (see Appendix I).

Population Demographics

In theory, seniors who are graduating during the spring of 2007 should largely be members of the 'Class of 2007.' These students in the 'Class of 2007' entered Texas A&M University in the fall of 2003. Gathered from fall 2003 reports posted on-line by the Office of Institutional Studies and Planning (OISP), the entering freshman class included 6,726 FTIC students, of whom 26% were first generation in college. Considered "traditional" in age, the entering class members were practically all under the age of 21, and the number of female students was slightly higher than males at 52% of the entering class (Office of Institutional Studies and Planning, 2003). The ethnic breakdown of this class included 82.3% White, 10.2% Hispanic, 2.3% Black, and 3.8% Asian, which was practically identical to the overall undergraduate population that fall semester (see Table 2).

Overall first year retention for this entering class was quite strong at 90%, though it dropped in the second year to 85%. Retention data for the subsequent two years is not currently available for this class. However, given that the profile and year-to-year progress for this class is quite similar to other contiguous classes, it is reasonable to estimate that there would be a progressive decline in the junior year retention of this class to be down to 80%, a figure that would be sustained by a combination of retention and graduation numbers through the sixth year (Office of Institutional Studies and Planning, 2005).

Based upon these projections, it is likely that only 37% of the 'Class of 2007' would actually graduate during the spring of 2007. The population of graduating seniors would include students who began their undergraduate careers over the course of several different years. Regardless of this likelihood, OISP data on freshman class composition at Texas A&M University for the last several years supports the assumption that those who will be graduating seniors during the spring of 2007 will generally have been members of an entering class of freshman very similar in composition to that of the 'Class of 2007.'

According to the second data file provided to the researcher by MARS in March of 2007, 4,218 undergraduate students had declared their intent to graduate in May 2007 and completed the graduating student exit interview. Of these graduating seniors, 1,027 were admitted to the university as transfer students; therefore the researcher removed their records from this data file for the purposes of this study. Of the remaining 3,191 graduating seniors, those admitted as FTIC, 1,758 were female and 1,433 were male,

55% and 45% respectively. The breakdown of the number of graduating seniors by academic college and gender is shown in Table 1 in a previous section. The ethnic breakdown of the spring 2007 graduating seniors was the same for both the overall population as for those seniors who were admitted as FTIC. This breakdown was slightly changed from the August 2003 entering class, also listed on Table 2 for ease of comparison.

TABLE 2. Ethnicity Breakdown by Percentages for Various Populations

		Spring 2007 Overall UG	Spring 2007 Graduating Seniors	Graduating Seniors, admitted as FTIC	August 2003 Overall UG	August 2003 FTIC
Ethnicity	N	33,995	4,218	3,191	36,066	6,726
White	%	78.9	83.5	83.9	82.4	82.3
Hispanic	%	11.9	9.5	9.0	9.3	10.2
Black	%	2.9	2.0	2.3	2.3	2.3
Other/Asian	%	4.6	4.0	4.0	3.1	3.9
International	%	1.4	0.4	0.4	1.4	1.0
X	%	0.3	0.23	0.22	.85	0.15
Blank	%	--	0.2	0.12	--	--

Proportionately, there are slightly fewer ethnic minority students graduating May 2007 than there were in the entering class four years ago. The researcher did not have access to the class year of each student within this pool of graduating seniors, therefore there is no report on the percentage of spring 2007 graduating seniors who actually began their studies August 2003. Likewise, she did not have 1st generation data for the overall graduating senior population. However, she did get this information from the participants whom she interviewed, and it will be discussed in a later section.

Baseline Data

In an effort to identify if and how graduating seniors make meaning of their undergraduate education, this researcher undertook the project of individually interviewing graduating seniors to explore these and related questions. So as to provide a point of reference for this discussion, baseline data of the population from which the interview participants were drawn was collected through the graduating seniors exit survey that was administered by MARS during January 2007. The researcher made arrangements to include in the survey five statements that were subsequently explored during the individual interviews of this research study (see Appendix D). These statements were related to five of the questions asked during the interviews. They were reworded in order that they may be answered on a five point Likert-scale.

On January 31, 2007, MARS made the baseline data file available. This data file included the list of graduating students who had completed the graduating student exit survey. It did not include the small number of students who completed the graduation registration, but who then chose not to complete the exit survey. The data file for these graduating students, a total of 5,323 records, included responses to the researcher's five baseline statements. These statements were similar to five interview questions (see Table 3). They were reworded in order that they may be answered on a five point Likert-scale. There was one college exception. The College of Education and Human

Resource Development had formulated its own set of exit statements, thereby allowing only three of this study's baseline statements to be presented to those graduating seniors.

TABLE 3. Baseline Statements on Graduating Senior Exit Survey

	Statement	CEHD	Other colleges
1	As I prepare to graduate, I have thought about the purpose of my undergraduate education.	X	X
2	The University Core Curriculum enriched and broadened my undergraduate experience.		X
3	Based upon the goals that I set for myself when I entered A&M, I consider myself successful.	X	X
4	Based upon the expectations set for me by the University when I entered Texas A&M, I consider myself successful.		X
5	My goals are different than the University's expectations of me.	X	X

The baseline data file included graduating graduate students, as well as undergraduate students from the Galveston campus. The researcher eliminated the graduate student records from the list of potential interview participants, as well as from baseline data calculations. Initially, she excluded the Galveston seniors from those selected for interviews, as explained earlier. However, she intended to keep their responses to the exit survey questions in the baseline data calculations. Upon closer

examination, the researcher discovered that none of the five baseline statements were included in the exit survey for the students on the Galveston campus or for the College of Geosciences. As a default, the computer system had automatically entered a numerical value of '5' in the answer field for the five baseline statements of all of these students. The researcher removed the records for those students from the baseline data calculations to avoid skewing the results. Consequently, there is no baseline data for students in the College of Geosciences and Galveston campus.

The researcher adjusted the baseline data file one more time after she received the second data file from MARS in March 2007. This second file listed only undergraduate students who had declared their intent to graduate, and it identified the students who were admitted as transfer students. The researcher manually audited the two files and removed the records of graduating seniors who were admitted as transfer students. After removing these student records from the January 2007 data file of graduating seniors, baseline data was calculated on the remaining 2,953 records, of which 55% were female and 45% were male, identical to the gender breakdown of the second data file that included the late registrants. Table 4 shows a breakdown by academic college of the records used to calculate the baseline data. The disparity between the sizes of the academic colleges is readily evident in this chart, and this may be of significance in the later discussion of results. In the meantime, it is appropriate to note at this point that the College of Geosciences is the smallest in number of students. Referring back to Table 1, it can be seen that only forty-five graduating seniors from that academic college were excluded from the calculation of overall baseline data for this

population of graduating seniors. Unfortunately, there will not be any college-specific data to which to refer in the later discussion.

TABLE 4. Baseline Population Breakdown by College

College	N	%
AG	487	16.5
AR	115	3.9
BA	464	15.7
ED	358	12.1
EN	507	17.2
LA	641	21.7
SC	186	6.3
VM	195	6.6
Total	**2953**	**100**

As mentioned previously, the graduating student exit survey included five statements that were similar to five of the questions that were subsequently asked during the interviews. The five statements and the five possible responses for each are listed in their entirety in Appendix D. Collective responses varied from one statement to the next, which suggests that students were not simply choosing their responses quickly in order to get through the exit survey, but that they were considering their answers. Table 5 shows a summary of these responses. Based upon the answers to these statements, it is apparent that, at some level, graduating seniors do engage in reflection about their undergraduate education as they prepare to graduate. In response to statement 1 "As I prepare to graduate, I have thought about the purpose of my undergraduate education," 94% of the respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed.' Two other statements generated a

similar degree of positive response. Statement 3 (S3) posed whether or not students considered themselves successful according to their goals. 89% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they considered themselves to be successful. In response to S4, 91% believed themselves to have attained the University's expectations of them. In response to these two statements, at least 55% of the respondents 'strongly agreed.'

TABLE 5. Baseline Data All Responses

	S1		S2		S3		S4		S5	
Responses All Students	Fq	%	Fq	%	Fq	%	Fq	%	Fq	%
Strongly Agree	1718	58.18	721	27.78	1669	56.52	1445	55.68	538	18.22
Agree	1062	35.96	1105	42.58	971	32.88	917	35.34	661	22.38
Undecided	140	4.74	529	20.39	234	7.92	182	7.01	880	29.80
Disagree	26	0.88	180	6.94	64	2.17	41	1.58	673	22.79
Strongly Disagree	7	0.24	60	2.31	15	0.51	10	0.39	201	6.81

S1-5 = Statements 1 though 5
Fq = Frequency

Where there was less agreement in the responses was in the results for statements 2 and 5. S2 read, "The University Core Curriculum enriched and broadened my undergraduate experience." While over half of the respondents agreed with the statement, the combined percentage of 'agree' and 'strongly agree' was 70%, which was a considerable drop in comparison to the responses to S1, S3, and S4, and two-thirds of these were "agree." A quarter of the respondents to S2 were 'undecided,' while nearly 10% disagreed with the statement, again distinctly different from the responses to the

other three statements. Given that the Core Curriculum is expected to provide a foundation for undergraduate education, the responses to this statement were an indication to the researcher that students' experiences with these courses warranted exploration in the interviews.

There was an even greater spread in the responses to S5, which read, "My goals are different than the University's expectations of me." The majority of the respondents, 40%, agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. It is important to note that while the majority of these students responded in positive terms, the students were agreeing with a perceived difference or a negative. While nearly 30% of the respondents did not believe that there was a difference in their goals and the University's expectations, nearly as many were undecided. The researcher took particular note of the variation in responses to this statement as she prepared for the individual interviews. These results indicated another area of students' experiences that warranted particular exploration by the researcher during the interviews.

In order to examine these data more closely, the researcher broke out the responses by gender and then by academic college. The results by gender were not particularly different from the overall results. Overall, the relationship and distribution of responses of females and males were similar to those of the overall baseline population, although male responses were slightly less positive than the female responses (see Table 6). This distinction was most evident in the responses to S5. While 30% of both females and males were undecided about any difference between their goals and the University's expectations, 10% more of males than females responded that there

was a difference in their goals versus the University's expectations. In response to S2, a greater percentage of males were undecided or disagreed with the contribution of the Core Curriculum to their undergraduate experience.

TABLE 6. Baseline Data Male-Female Responses

	S1		S2		S3		S4		S5	
Responses All Students	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Strongly Agree	59.95	56.45	30.10	25.30	59.41	53.00	58.87	52.27	16.87	19.97
Agree	34.65	37.71	43.89	41.18	31.61	34.56	33.83	36.95	19.30	26.34
Undecided	4.61	4.92	18.33	22.59	6.61	9.60	5.96	8.14	29.85	29.80
Disagree	0.91	0.84	6.18	7.74	1.94	2.46	0.97	2.23	25.67	19.20
Strongly Disagree	0.18	0.31	1.49	3.19	0.42	0.61	0.37	0.40	8.31	4.92

S1-5 = Statements 1 through 5
F = Female
M= Male

When compared by academic college, the responses to these five statements yielded more divergence (see Table 7). The responses to each of the five statements reflected distinct differences in the experiences of seniors between eight academic colleges. There were no data collected for College of Geosciences graduating seniors; therefore, this college is not included in the comparisons.

TABLE 7. Responses to Statement 1 by College

"As I prepare to graduate, I have thought about the purpose of my undergraduate education."

	College							
Response	AG	AR	BA	ED	EN	LA	SC	VM
Strongly Agree	63.04	62.61	59.27	38.55	58.78	61.44	56.68	65.13
Agree	33.47	33.04	37.07	44.69	36.29	34.64	30.48	30.26
Undecided	2.46	3.48	3.23	11.17	4.54	3.13	9.09	3.59
Disagree	0.62	0.87	0.43	2.79	0.39	0.63	1.07	1.03
Strongly Disagree	0.41	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.16	2.14	0.0

AG = Agriculture; AR = Architecture; BA = Business Administration; ED = Education; EN = Engineering; LA = Liberal Arts; SC = Science; VM = Veterinary Medicine

Responses to S1 were, generally, very positive with at least 95% of the graduating seniors in six of the academic colleges agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had thought about the purpose of their undergraduate education (see Table 7). Approximately 60% of them strongly agreed. The two exceptions were seniors in Education and Science. Fewer seniors in these colleges were in agreement with S1, 83% and 87%, respectively, and in Education more than half of these positive responses were "agree." It can also be noted that a few more seniors in these two colleges than in the other six were in disagreement with S1, approximately 3% versus approximately 1% in the other colleges.

TABLE 8. Responses to Statement 2 by College

"The University Core Curriculum enriched and broadened my undergraduate education"

	College							
Response	AG	AR	BA	ED	EN	LA	SC	VM
Strongly Agree	28.54	13.91	35.56	0.0	19.13	31.03	22.46	32.82
Agree	43.12	49.57	45.69	0.0	42.01	44.51	20.86	45.13
Undecided	21.56	27.83	15.09	0.0	24.85	17.87	25.67	16.92
Disagree	5.13	5.22	3.23	0.0	9.86	4.86	22.99	5.13
Strongly Disagree	1.64	3.48	0.43	0.0	4.14	1.72	7.49	0.0

AG = Agriculture; AR = Architecture; BA = Business Administration; ED = Education; EN = Engineering; LA = Liberal Arts; SC = Science; VM = Veterinary Medicine

As was evident in the overall baseline results, responses to S2 regarding the University Core Curriculum generated a greater spread in responses. There were no results for Education because this was one of the statements not included for that college. When examined by academic college, the responses of seniors in the College of Science again stood out, primarily because their responses were nearly evenly distributed across four of the response options (see Table 8). While seniors in the other six colleges agreed by at least 61% and as much as 81%, only 46% of seniors in Science agreed with S2. Nevertheless, responses to S2 did elicit disagreement with the statement. Seniors in Science disagreed the most at 30%, and seniors in Engineering followed at 14%. It is worth noting that seniors in Business were the most positive about their opinion of the Core Curriculum. Not only were only 3.6% in disagreement with S2, there were only 15% undecided in their response to the statement. Likewise, seniors

in the BIMS program of Veterinary Medicine were very positive about the Core Curriculum with only 5% disagreeing and nearly 17% undecided.

Based upon the responses to S3, it is evident that graduating seniors believe themselves to have attained their goals successfully (see Table 9). In all but one of the academic colleges, at least 50% strongly agreed with this statement. The exception, again, was Science, which had the fewest seniors in agreement and only 39% who strongly agreed. It follows that Science also had the highest percentage of students in disagreement with S3 at 8.6%, although relatively low overall. Students in Architecture and Education were distinctly positive in their responses to S3 with the fewest responding that they were undecided and in effect, none in disagreement with the statement.

TABLE 9. Responses to Statement 3 by College

"Based upon the Goals that I set for myself when I entered A&M, I consider myself successful."

	College							
Response	AG	AR	BA	ED	EN	LA	SC	VM
Strongly Agree	55.24	59.13	58.84	67.60	58.19	52.82	39.04	53.85
Agree	34.09	34.78	32.11	25.42	31.76	33.86	42.25	32.82
Undecided	7.80	5.22	7.97	4.19	6.51	10.50	9.63	9.74
Disagree	1.85	0.87	1.08	0.0	3.35	2.51	4.81	3.59
Strongly Disagree	1.03	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.20	0.31	3.74	0.0

AG = Agriculture; AR = Architecture; BA = Business Administration; ED = Education; EN = Engineering; LA = Liberal Arts; SC = Science; VM = Veterinary Medicine

When considering their success in meeting the University's expectations, seniors in seven academic colleges believed themselves to be successful, with at least 50% in each college strongly agreeing with S4 (see Table 10). There were no data for Education seniors because students in this college were not asked to respond to S4. It is interesting to note that seniors in Science actually had the greatest number who responded in strong agreement with S4. In Science, those who agreed with S4 were more likely to agree definitively. Nevertheless, the seniors in Science were still the least positive overall in their responses to S4. Though a slight percentage, Science also had the most seniors in disagreement with S4 at nearly 5%. In this instance, composite responses to S4 by seniors in Agriculture were most similar to those in Science.

TABLE 10. Responses to Statement 4 by College

"Based upon the expectations set for me by the University when I entered Texas A&M, I consider myself successful."

	College							
Response	AG	AR	BA	ED	EN	LA	SC	VM
Strongly Agree	50.51	58.26	59.27	0.0	53.65	55.64	62.03	57.44
Agree	38.19	35.65	32.97	0.0	37.08	36.21	25.13	36.41
Undecided	8.21	4.35	6.90	0.0	7.89	6.58	7.49	4.10
Disagree	2.26	1.74	0.8	0.0	1.18	1.10	3.74	2.05
Strongly Disagree	0.82	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.20	0.47	1.07	0.0

AG = Agriculture; AR = Architecture; BA = Business Administration; ED = Education; EN = Engineering; LA = Liberal Arts; SC = Science; VM = Veterinary Medicine

As noted previously, graduating seniors were distributed all along the continuum regarding whether or not they believed their goals to be different than the University's expectations of them. This trend held fairly consistently across each academic college, with one exception – the seniors in the College of Science (see Table 11). Nearly one third of seniors in each of the other seven colleges responded "undecided" to S5. In contrast, only 6% of seniors in Science reported that they were undecided. Furthermore, while their peers' "strongly agree" responses to S5 ranged from 12% to 20%, 62% of seniors in Science strongly agreed that their goals were different than the University's expectations.

TABLE 11. Responses to Statement 5 by College

"My goals are different than the University's expectations of me."

	College							
Response	AG	AR	BA	ED	EN	LA	SC	VM
Strongly Agree	14.99	20.00	12.50	15.92	16.57	15.20	61.50	14.87
Agree	25.05	26.09	22.63	16.76	23.08	22.41	25.67	17.95
Undecided	32.03	33.91	31.47	27.37	32.35	30.41	5.8	33.33
Disagree	20.94	17.39	25.86	26.82	22.88	25.39	2.14	26.15
Strongly Disagree	6.98	2.61	7.54	10.34	5.13	6.58	4.28	7.69

AG = Agriculture; AR = Architecture; BA = Business Administration; ED = Education;
EN = Engineering; LA = Liberal Arts; SC = Science; VM = Veterinary Medicine

Interview Participants

Of the 22 graduating seniors who agreed to participate in the research study, two eventually did not follow through with the interview appointment. One was a white female student from Education, and the other was a Hispanic male from Liberal Arts. Within the remaining 20 participants, there was representation from all of the nine academic colleges at Texas A&M University, though there was only one participant each for the colleges of Geosciences and Education and Human Development. Aggregate demographic data for these participants is detailed in Table 12.

Aside from not having male participants from the colleges of Geosciences and Education and Human Development, the overall breakdown of the 20 participants yielded nearly precisely what the researcher had attempted to control for by college, gender, and ethnicity through the invitation process. 60% were females, 15% were Black, and 15% were Hispanic. Interestingly, upon interviewing the participants, the researcher further learned that one was a member of the Corps of Cadets and six were 1st generation in college, 5% and 30%, respectively, of the total participants. These were similar to the percentages of cadets and of 1st generation students in the general undergraduate population, which are 5% and 26% respectively. Through the interviews the researcher also learned that 14, or 70%, of the participants were actually 'Class of 2007,' meaning that they began at Texas A&M with the August 2003 cohort.

TABLE 12. Demographics of Interview Participants

	Accepted		Participated	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**
Female	13	59	12	60
Male	9	41	8	40
Black	3	14	3	15
Hispanic	4	18	3	15
White	15	68	14	70
AG	3	14	3	15
AR	2	9	2	10
BA	2	9	2	10
ED	2	9	1	5
EN	3	14	3	15
GE	1	5	1	5
LA	5	23	4	20
SC	2	9	2	10
VM	2	9	2	10
CORPS	1	5	1	5

AG = Agriculture; AR = Architecture; BA = Business Administration; ED = Education; EN = Engineering; LA = Liberal Arts; SC = Science; VM = Veterinary Medicine

Data Analysis

Examination of the interview data involved transcribing the interview notes for each of the participants, summarizing the responses for each interview question, and eventually grouping these responses under the five statements that were included in the exit survey as patterns emerged. Baseline data for the population was used as a point of reference for the data gathered from the interview participants. The participants'

average responses to the exit survey statements were compared to the baseline population averages, and the data gathered in the interviews was used to provide context and depth to it all.

The researcher began the transcription of interview notes while she progressed through the series of interviews. She endeavored to complete the transcription within a day, and not longer than three days, after an interview was held. At the outset, she was interviewing several students in one day, so keeping up with transcribing was difficult. Nevertheless, she found it essential to make the records while conversations were still fresh on her mind. In many instances, the researcher was able to note whole sentences as the participant was speaking. At times, however, she resorted to abbreviating the responses by jotting down key words from what was being said. The effectiveness of this practice, in great part, depended upon her timeliness in recording the interview notes after the meeting. In fact, she found that it worked very well for her, and she found herself using it more efficiently after the first couple of days of interviews.

For each of the 20 participants, the researcher prepared a record of the interview in the format of the interview protocol. Responses were saved by question onto this document with the participant's last name and date of interview in the footer of the document. Interviews were numbered, so each participant was also assigned the number of her/his interview for tracking later without using names. The interview protocol included demographic questions regarding the participant's class year, major, parental education, and other involvement while a student. Table 13 shows a breakdown of the participants and their individual demographic profiles.

TABLE 13. Interview Participants' Classification

PARTICIPANT	COLLEGE	GENDER	ETHNICITY	CORPS	CLASS	1st GEN
1	GE	F	W		2007	
2	EN	F	B		2005	
3	AG	F	B		2007	
4	LA	M	W		2007	
5	LA	M	W	Yes	2007	
6	AG	F	W		2007	
7	EN	M	H		2005	1st Gen
8	EN	F	W		2006	
9	SC	M	W		2007	
10	BA	F	W		2007	
11	LA	F	W		2007	
12	BA	M	W		2007	1st Gen
13	LA	F	W		2007	1st Gen
14	AG	M	B		2005	1st Gen
15	ED	F	W		2006	
16	AR	F	H		2007	1st Gen
17	VM	F	W		2007	
18	AR	M	W		2007	
19	SC	F	H		2007	1st Gen
20	VM	M	W		2006	

AG = Agriculture; AR = Architecture; BA = Business Administration; ED = Education;
EN = Engineering; LA = Liberal Arts; SC = Science; VM = Veterinary Medicine;
F = Female; M = Male;
B= Black; H = Hispanic; W = White;

The researcher then compiled the responses for each of the interview questions into 21 separate documents. These compilations were printed onto card stock sheets that were pre-perforated to make four individual index cards per sheet. The researcher began to print and sort answer cards even before all of the interviews had been completed. The

answer index cards were sorted into two small box files separated by a card with each interview question. All of the participants' individual responses were eventually printed and detached for the 21 questions.

TABLE 14. Comparison Survey vs. Interview Questions

		Interview Questions														
		I.1	I.2	I.3	I.4	I.5	I.6	I.7	I.8	I.9	I.10	I.11	I.12	I.13	I.14	I.15-I.21
Survey Statements	S.1	X	X	X	X					X				X		
	S.2		X			X	X			X					X	
	S.3										X					
	S.4							X	X			X				
	S.5							X	X				X			

In order to organize the data for analysis, the researcher first categorized the 21 interview questions according to the five survey statements. In this manner, the participants' responses to the interview questions were combined to provide depth to the responses to the survey questions. Using this process, responses to most of the interview questions were grouped with at least one of the survey statements. Interview questions 15 through 21 did not correspond directly to any of the five baseline statements. The data from these questions were incorporated in the next step when all of the data were

further grouped under the three overarching research questions for the study. The interview questions that were assigned to each survey of the five survey statements are illustrated in Table 14. The seven questions that did not correspond were shaded to denote that they were not assigned in this step of the analysis. Appendix D, which lists this study's exit survey statements, and Appendix H, which lists the interview questions, may be used as a point of reference in reading these tables.

The three research questions and the respective letter assigned to each are listed on Table 15. Table 16 shows the grouping of answers under each research question according to the source of data that will be used for the data analysis. There is also a key for the letter assigned to each data source. In this chart, it can be seen that the responses to interview questions 15-21 were assigned to the research questions. It can also be noted that there were no survey statements identified to correspond to the third research question, R.C. In retrospect, the researcher regrets that she did not use R.C on the exit survey.

TABLE 15. Research Questions

	Research Question
A	How do Texas A&M University graduating seniors make meaning of their undergraduate education?
B	How for graduating seniors at Texas A&M University define the purpose of undergraduate education?
C	What opportunities do Texas A&M graduating seniors have to integrate all of their undergraduate experiences in order to get closure?

TABLE 16. Interview and Survey Data by Research Question

Source of Data	Data Grouping for Analysis		
	R.A	R.B	R.C
	S.1	S.3	I.18
	S.2	S.4	I.19
	I.15	S.5	I.20
	I.18	I.16	I.21
	I.19	I.17	
	I.20		

S = Statement in Baseline Survey
I = Interview Question
R = Research Question

After the grouping was completed, the researcher began reading through each of the response cards identifying themes among what the participants told her. The themes identified were then compiled to develop responses to the research questions. After she had prepared a summary of responses for each interview question, the researcher contacted each participant individually via e-mail. She offered each the opportunity to read through the summary thereby incorporating member checking. She also congratulated them on their graduation and wished them well in their future endeavors. Four of the participants replied thanking the researcher for the offer, declining due to lack of time, and wishing her well in completing her research. Four other participants accepted the invitation and made arrangements to meet with the researcher to read the

results. These meetings were held in the researcher's office during office hours. She provided a printed office copy of the results and allowed the students to read through them on their own while she continued on other tasks in the office. At the conclusion of the review, the researcher offered to answer any question or to discuss anything that was of interest to the students.

Not only did the researcher want to share the results with the participants, but she needed to test the trustworthiness of the data collected. In qualitative research, it is important that the participants "recognize themselves in a story being written that includes their own view as well as the views of all those others involved in the research" (Jones, 2002). Throughout the interview series, she had engaged in some casual discussion with the latter interview participants regarding what she had learned so far from earlier interviews if conversation lent itself to doing so. Through member checking at the conclusion of the data collection, the researcher was not only testing "for factual and interpretative accuracy but also to provide evidence of credibility – the trustworthiness criterion analogous to internal validity in conventional studies" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Summary

This chapter will first provide a summary and the results of the participants' responses to each of the interview questions. The researcher believes that the openness with which participants shared about their undergraduate experiences warrants presenting what they had to say to each question before considering how what they may have said collectively answered the research questions. What follows are summaries of the responses to each of the interview questions with direct quotes from some of the participants included as examples. These were the summaries used for the data analysis according to the data grouping in Table 16 in Chapter III.

Interview Response Summaries

I.1. As you prepare to graduate, what have you thought about your undergraduate education?

Overall, the participants were thinking about their education, about their learning and preparation, and about its impact as they prepared to graduate. Half of the participants expressed actually having loved the overall experience. Several described the experience as life-changing. Many commented specifically about having thought

about what they had learned in classes, though several also commented on having learned more outside of the classroom on their own. A few were feeling let down, either by themselves (grades) or by the University. One participant described what she was thinking about within two different levels. "Hmmm…there are different ways to put it. There's the education level and the personal level (female, AR, H)." The other participants' observations fell into these two overall categories.

"I thought that my education would help me to get a job; learn for the real world; to think for yourself. Instead, I spent time regurgitating on tests information from lectures. This semester was different with the capstone course. I was forced to think for myself. Classes haven't expected that so far. We should learn to work well with others and social skills, but in reality, group work is a waste of time. The one who cares ends up doing all of the work. Classes in previous semesters didn't allow for enough problem-solving (female, GE)."

"I've thought about how it has prepared me, but not necessarily the classes…living on my own and the responsibilities. It has been good. I've really enjoyed it (male, LA)."

"I guess I have thought I could have worked harder; I should have gotten better grades; I've thought about the classes that I've taken, what I learned; how they apply to real life (male, SC)."

"I had to learn to be on my own. I found my confidence…I can be alone. Other changes include my perceptions. Here I've seen people from all walks of life and viewpoints. Some of it was eye-opening – being here, you can open and develop your

own thoughts and perspectives… Something not done at home, we didn't talk about issues. Here I was able to form my own opinions (female, BA)."

"That it went by really fast! My freshman year, I thought that this day would never come. I never believed that it would be this hard. I came here thinking that it would be like in high school. I didn't have to study in high school. I wish I had listened. We were told when we started that it would be hard and that we would need to study a lot…we were told that in our New Student Conference. I just didn't believe it until I started in my classes. I wish that I could go back. My study skills are much better now (female, SC)."

"It was worthwhile. I really enjoyed it. I've grown up a lot. If I knew then what I know now, I could have refined what I wanted to do from the start. Instead, it took me a couple of years to figure it out. I did a lot of maturing during that time (male, VM)."

Participants had enjoyed their time as Aggies. Their thoughts regarding their educational experiences were varied across a fairly broad continuum of depth.

I.2. How do you define the purpose of undergraduate education?

The purpose of an undergraduate education was described by the participants as an intermediate step (preparation or stepping stone or transition time) between high school and adulthood (job or graduate school). One participant described undergraduate education as having two purposes: job education and classic education. Other participant responses fell, by and large, into one of these two categories. One identified purpose was preparation for an occupation/career through focused study on a discipline,

and the other was the general upper level education for life that takes one beyond high school.

According to the participants, an undergraduate education is the time to grow and to learn about yourself. It is a time to try new things and to experiment. An undergraduate education should be well-rounded education and a learning experience. It is a time to learn to think; to learn about concepts; to learn how to learn. It is supposed to engage and teach you. One participant described it as an opportunity to "discuss touchy subjects." An undergraduate education also provides a variety of skills, which appeared to be divided under the two purposes: work skills and life skills. Even so, as the students described them, these sets of skills were not mutually exclusive.

"You need it….to prepare you for your life. Looking back – everyone was so immature; all of your experiences while at school have contributed to help you grow up. My jobs have contributed a lot – organization, administration, time management. Also, you can see what you don't want to do or how not to behave (male, SC)."

"It's a time to grow; for finding out who I am and want to be. It's a learning experience. Graduate work is so that I can better define myself (female, EN)."

"Wow, good question. The main purpose is to make sure that you are able to learn and think; not the content, but the skills (male, EN)."

"I define my undergraduate education as key to opening the door to possibilities; in order to achieve a level of success (female, EN)."

"Undergraduate education is a place that students go to have minds molded; not to just think in the box, but learn how to think. The faculty actually constrain students; they constrain students through grades. They stand between learning (male, AG)."

"I guess to prepare you for a career. You are going to be working the rest of your life. It's guidance beyond high school (female, AR)."

"To prepare you for whatever job you'll have (female, VM)."

"I guess just a way to prepare you for a job – there is such a focus on grades. It [the degree] somehow legitimizes a person, even if the person doesn't have other qualities. It's supposed to engage you…to learn how to get along with others…how to go out into the real world, with other people. Working has actually taught me so much (male, BA)."

While some of the participants seemed to be articulating their definition for the first time, others demonstrated a more complete understanding of the purpose of undergraduate education. Once again, their definitions were varied across a fairly broad continuum of depth and maturity.

I.3. Has this [definition] changed over the course of fours years?

Fifteen of the participants' thought that their definition of the purpose of an undergraduate education had changed over the past four years. It had become more defined for these participants. Of these, 12 described specifically realizing its value during the course of the four years and the opportunity that it afforded them to grow up without having to get a job. Three others came to the realization that an undergraduate

education is not an answer, but that it produces more questions. Nevertheless, a quarter of the participants did not think that their definition had changed in these four years.

"I remember thinking when I was a kid that I would be ecstatic when I was done with college…no more tests. The reality is that you have a lot of questions. It's easy to lose your track; you need to make your own way. Everyone asks what's next after your degree…(male, LA)."

"When I came here, I just saw it as something that I had to do. My family all went to college, so it was unacceptable not to attend. Now I wouldn't imagine not having done this (female, ED)."

"I think that I thought it was more. It's probably more eye-opening than I thought coming in, but with my eyes open, I realized that it's not enough (male, AR)."

"No, it's a necessity, I think (female, AR)."

"Yep, when I came in I didn't have a definition. High School was a joke, but this is not like high school. The professors expect you to want to be here, to want to be in the classes. They expect you to pick the courses that you want to be in and to learn from. I see it now for what it is, the opportunity (male, VM)."

It is in these responses that one can see the participants' realization of their own growth and development.

I.4. To whom, if anyone, have you talked regarding your college education as you prepare to graduate?

All but three of the participants admitted having spoken to someone about their undergraduate education as they prepare to graduate, though a broad spectrum of individuals named. Eleven of them had spoken to a family member. This was primarily to parents, though it also included siblings, grandparents, an uncle, and a husband. Nine said that they had spoken to friends, partners, classmates, and co-workers. Four said that they had spoken to University staff, such as an academic advisor, graduate students, faculty, and a counselor in the Student Counseling Center.

"I've talked to my parents, of course, and to co-workers because they want to know. And probably to classmates…not to my advisor – he's not very helpful (female, LA)."

"I have talked some to some of my classmates. We've talked mostly about grades. Also I have talked to some marketing majors who also are frustrated. We are struggling to get a job; these aren't well-paid jobs. As a freshman you come in excited, and then soon you see just how it really is. There's so much competition for grades, jobs, salary. It turns you away from learning. You just want to get out and get a job (male, BA)."

"Definitely to a lot of my friends! I'm the first of my group of friends to be ready to graduate. Some of them are in engineering. Their programs take longer, so I am the first to face these things. I've also talked to my parents. Everyone wants to know what I'll be doing next (female, SC)."

"Have I talked about my education? I mean, yeah, some of my friends and I are more progressive, and we like to analyze. The bad is easy to find; it's the good that is

not as easy to see. I've also talked to some professors, or they have spoken to us, mostly about the college (male, AR)."

"No one…I see myself as different. [pause] This is funny. It's [the interview] like a counseling session or something…I am more abstract. I can see more than one side. My parents think that everything that I do is great. I couldn't share with them because they wouldn't understand (female, AG)."

"Not really to anyone…I'm just kind of ready to graduate (male, LA)."

It is apparent from the participants' responses that many students do talk about their undergraduate experience and about what they are facing as graduating seniors. Even so, they are more likely to speak to family and friends than to academic advisors or professors.

I.5. What is the purpose of the University Core Curriculum?

As described by the participants, the intended purpose of the University Core Curriculum is to make students well-rounded by providing insight and breadth of study beyond the focused study of one discipline. Nine also said that it was intended to challenge thinking by prompting students to think "outside of the box." One used the example of being able to consider liberal versus conservative points of view. It also was intended to provide some basic skills, such as different thinking skills, needed for focused study in their chosen major.

While the participants described the intended purpose of the University Core Curriculum in positive terms, their experiences with the courses was varied. The most

negative reaction was that these courses were a complete waste of time although the same students saw the intended purpose as positive. Several students called the Core Curriculum "weed out" courses, explaining that they were designed to weed out or to fail students. Four participants from different majors used this terminology: agriculture, business administration, geosciences, and veterinary medicine.

12 of the participants did not believe that the Core Curriculum courses achieved the University's purpose. In explaining why not, they used not only their own experiences, but also their observations regarding their friends and classmates' experiences. Three pointed to the fact that the choices for courses that count as Core courses were too broad as a negative aspect because the Core should level everyone with a similar experience.

"The 'correct' answer is that the purpose is to know the broad range of issues; so you are not naïve and know how to communicate; so you are not pigeon-holed. To be a master, you need to have broad knowledge of everything, so you have the math's and sciences and history's. I 'clepped out' of many of my requirements, so I didn't have many of these courses at A&M. Some people consider it [the Core Curriculum] a waste of time, but it can be helpful depending upon the class (male, AR)."

"[The purpose is] To try to make students well-rounded to understand the world around them. But it depends on the professor. Some classes are so general – where's the depth? Or is the purpose the general understanding (male, AG)?"

"The basic purpose is probably to provide well-rounded balance and not only focus on one discipline. It levels everyone, with a similar experience. It does achieve this

to some extent; though some students are disadvantaged because the choices are too broad (female, BA)."

"I guess the purpose is to have a general knowledge base of most things, so you don't get stuck in one mind-set; to get more perspective. Be more diversified. Some students think they are weed-out courses; they are so large. I hated some of them – the professors made them not enjoyable. The communications course was good – it was taught by a graduate assistant (male, BA)."

"I tested out of half of these courses in the Core Curriculum….hmmm, but they are pre-reqs to further your degree. They are almost weed-out courses to see if we are up to being here at A&M. Some I don't feel that we need them. A lot of students are not diversified, so it may be for them. They're really courses for people who don't think outside of the box though the courses are not really effective even for those students. The experience here was almost high school all over again, a bigger high school (female, AG)."

While the Core Curriculum is intended to provide a valuable foundation, as well as skills, for the rest of the undergraduate experience, students' experiences with the courses that they take to make up these requirements is seems disorganized and ineffective in most cases.

*I.6. What was your classification when you completed your core curriculum courses***?**

Nine of the participants entered Texas A&M with credits towards the Core Curriculum requirements through advanced placement and dual-enrollment. Even so,

two-thirds of the participants completed their Core Curriculum requirements in their junior and senior year. Five explained that they had spread out the requirements intentionally, while a two commented that their departments stressed their own major core courses over the University Core. A few explained that they had difficulty in registering for the desired courses and that is why they had spread out the requirements.

"I 'clepped' many of the Core requirements, and most of the others I did while at home at a junior college. It was more comfortable and less expensive that way. I was probably done by the end of my sophomore year (male, AR)."

"I am taking two English's and a math right now. They stress taking your major courses in my department (male, AG)."

"In a way, I am still doing it. I am currently taking KINE [kinesiology]. The good ones are always taken. It also happened with foreign language. I couldn't get into Japanese, which is what I wanted to study, so I ended up with Spanish (male, LA)."

"Junior year – I spread them out intentionally in Engineering (female, EN)."

"Second year here; I came in with AP credits and dual enrollment (male, EN)."

"I spread them out. My advisor suggested that I do that so that I wouldn't have just the major courses at the end. I was a junior when I finished (female, SC)."

Again, if the Core Curriculum is intended to provide a valuable foundation, as well as skills, for the rest of the undergraduate experience, it seems counterproductive for students not to complete these requirements until their upperclass years. One may also consider the fact that so many students are entering the University with significant credits that exempt from parts of the Core Curriculum up these requirements. As such,

the 'common' experience for undergraduates is difficult to achieve under these circumstances.

I.7. What are the University's expectations of you as a graduate of Texas A&M?

17 of the participants answered that the University's expectations of them were that they be "Aggies" and that they "represent well." In elaborating, the participants pointed to the Aggie Code of Honor and what the Aggie Ring represents as concrete examples of the expectations to be truthful and honorable and to have character and integrity. Nine believe that the University expects them to have a good work ethic and to succeed in the work force/life. One gave the example of "to be the boss in five years," which is in reference to an Aggie joke that starts with "What do you call an Aggie in five years?" Three had not thought about it and did not know what the University expected of them. A few thought that the University's standards were high, one stating that the University expected students to make a change in the world.

"Shouldn't I ask you that? [laugh] …to display myself as an educated professional. It's about your character. That's what I like about A&M. It's a blend of education and honor (male, AR)."

"I think it has high expectations of what we'll accomplish. There's also the Honor Code. It expects that we have integrity and character (female, VM)."

"The University expects us to be an example of what A&M is, represents; we are expected to apply what we learned and to be a success in the work force (female, EN)."

"The University expects us to get out of here (flat rate tuition and tuition rebate) and give money back (Aggie Network). I had never thought about it before….(male, SC)."

"Honestly, I don't know. I know what I expect of myself…of course, they expect us to be great Aggie students; there are some things that we are not very good at, so they want us to improve…like the writing intensive courses. They want us to write well (female, AG)."

Most of the participants were fairly articulate about the expectation for them to be successful Aggies as exemplified in a variety of ways that would represent Texas A&M in a positive light. Although some participants referred to the attainment of the undergraduate degree, none stated that the University expected them to be engaged in learning for life or any variation thereof.

I.8. How has the University communicated its expectations of you?

Three participants said that they did not think that the University had communicated its expectations directly, and three others described knowing through a feeling.

"I don't know. It's just a feeling. It's also the whole community. What students expect from each other (female, AG)."

"Much of what the University expects is not directly communicated. It's one's perception. Companies tell you how much they value A&M grads because of the school's reputation (male, EN)."

"I don't think they really have. No one said that you should keep the (Aggie) Code after you graduate. You just love it and won't want to give it up (female, BA)."

The rest of the participants named a variety of different ways in which they thought that the University had communicated its expectations. Reminders from professors, the Honor Code being listed on every syllabus, and the NEO e-mail messages sent to them, particularly from President Gates, were the most commonly named methods through which the University communicated its expectations.

"From A&M - separate from society's expectations - there is much focus on study abroad and learning from other people. The big message is the need for diversity and travel…to counter the negative image of Aggies (female, LA)."

"Every piece of paper and every syllabus have the Aggie Code of Honor. In any meeting or organization, you hear about the Aggie Code and the Aggie Spirit (female, ED)."

"Through the colleges and the professors; the people putting pressure on you to succeed. The respect of A&M graduates by employers is reflected back on the University (male, AR)."

"Through what it says like the [Aggie] Code. Also through examples of former students and the traditions (female, VM)."

"That's a good question. I don't think it necessarily has…. (male, AG)."

It is interesting to note that repetition of consistent messages appears to be effective in getting students to remember the message. If this is so, a similar campaign

could be considered to communicate the purpose of the undergraduate education and the student's role in creating her\his education.

I.9. Which courses had the biggest impact on your learning? Why was this impact so big? How were these courses structured?

While one third of the participants described smaller classes (fewer than 15 students) when asked which had had the biggest impact on their learning, the size of the class was not as important as the professor. Three quarters of the participants described professors who related the material to real life or who brought the material to life. One third also recalled numerous opportunities for interaction with the professor even in larger classes. Four described professors who loved the material that they were teaching, and they "really want students to learn." They described a freedom to learn, to experiment, and to take risks. One participant appreciated a professor who, as she described it, was "teaching us, not changing us." These courses, on the whole, were not described as easy. In fact, they were described as challenging, and in a few instances the participant admitted to doing poorly in the course. The impact of these experiences was that as a result they realized what it would take to succeed as Texas A&M. One participant named the internship as having had the most impact on her learning.

"Hmmm, let me think…well, I can tell you that it's not a specific course; the ones that come to my mind are based solely on the teacher. It is in their passion and interest and in how they teach. One of the professors that comes to mind is Dr. Bergbreiter who taught my honors organic chemistry class. I don't want to be an

organic chemist, but he was inspirational in my wanting to learn more. There is also the physiology class. He was also a good teacher. He made things interesting. He didn't suck up to students by making it easy. It was hard, but worthwhile (male, VM)."

"I enjoyed my upper level classes; they put together what I learned in basic science to apply to the real world. They were smaller classes; not 300, but between 60 to 100 students. I felt more interaction with the teacher (female, VM)."

"Two come to mind, one that I took here and one that I took in junior college. One was a physical geography class. It was so interesting and amazing to learn about the nature of nature. As a Christian, I was in awe of God's work. The other class was in history at the junior college. It was a different type of learning – higher order learning. We had to analyze the issues, and we wrote papers. It was about learning more than memorizing just the facts. This was a smaller class (male, AR)."

"It wasn't really just one course…some professors' focus was just to get through it. 'Here is the material and spit it out on the test.' On others, they really want you to learn. One class that I am in now is on innovative products – the professor encourages experimenting and taking risks (male, BA)."

The approach of the professor to the course material and to the learners was clearly key on generating engagement and interest from students.

I.10. Based upon the goals that you set for yourself when you entered Texas A&M, do you consider yourself successful? Why or why not?

Fourteen of the participants considered themselves to be successful, though five of them went on to comment that their goals had changed. Of the six who did not think that they are successful, all cited not meeting their grade point goals as the primary indicator, though two also mentioned not completing the degree in four years. Eleven of those who thought themselves successful said that their goal had been to get a degree. Only two mentioned the goal of getting a good education and one mentioned having had a goal of getting involved in the traditions. One stated that he would consider himself a success once he got a job, while another said that she would feel successful once admitted into graduate school.

"Yeah, I am. I am prepared to do what I want to do, and I know who I am. That's what college is for – to prepare you for life. In that aspect, I consider myself quite successful (male, VM)."

"Yes, I do, I guess, because I am graduating, but I do wish that my grades were better. I've tried, and every semester they get better, but once they are down, it is so hard to bring them back up (female, SC)."

"My goals have definitely changed. But I will be graduating. I couldn't get into Mays [School of Business], but it's a blessing. I found a major that I enjoyed. I bettered myself, and I will graduate (female, ED)."

"I guess so; I don't know. Once I get a job…the point was to get a job better than at McDonald's (male, BA)."

Participants' hesitation in answering this question seemed to derive from several factors. Their initial goals, if they had formulated any specific ones, had changed by

choice or by need, and they had not necessarily reflected on this change as it was happening. In addition, the measures of success initially were more concrete – degree completed in four years with good grades. Although those measures were still being applied, particularly by the University, many participants were finding more dimensions to being successful.

I.11. Based upon the expectations set for you by the University when you entered Texas A&M, do you consider yourself successful? Why or why not?

Thirteen of the participants replied affirmatively that they thought that they had met the expectations set for them by the University. The remainder either responded that they had not or that they were not sure if they had. The most commonly mentioned indicator or measure of meeting (or not meeting) expectations was GPR. One third mentioned "being an Aggie" as an indication that they had met the University's expectations.

"I did what they expected; I went to class; I got good grades; and I'll graduate on time (female, LA)."

"Yes, I think that I am. I can go out and get a job – graduate school. I have options even though my academic advisor my freshman year called me stupid (female, EN)."

"Yes, I have upheld the Aggie Code of Honor and the ideals of the Aggie Ring. I've kept those in mind, as well as keeping grades and doing well (female, AG)."

"I am not really sure about that because of my major…there are very limited options to get employed (male, LA)."

"Yes, I do. I was never on academic probation, and I completed all of my classes. I had to keep up with this, especially since I was on a scholarship (female, SC)."

"Yes and no – very plainly you are expected to graduate in four years – but I will be using my degree successfully (male, EN)."

The measures of academic success were the concrete ones – degree completed in four years with good grades. Non-academic indicators of success included having been good Aggies by living up to the Aggie Honor Code.

I.12. How are your goals different than the University's expectations of you?

Eleven of the participants thought their goals different than the University's expectations of them. One participant was unsure and another stated that he was "driven only by my own goals (BA)." In explaining how his goals were different than the University's expectations, one participant stated the he is not a "typical Aggie (LA)," while four others pointed to being "typical Aggies" as an indicator that their goals were in line with the University's expectations. Three of the participants explained that their goals were more personal than the University's expectations. One summarized it as "personal vs. professional (female, AR)."

"I was shy, and they expect us to be involved. I didn't want to get involved. I didn't go to Fish Camp, not a lot of student organizations. I was active, though. I did go

to the games, and to Midnight Yell, although it was with my friends only. I never went to Open House (female, ED)."

"These are not really different; graduating, maintaining my GPR, and being an 'Aggie' in industry (female, EN)."

"They are pretty much in line, except that I wasn't in a hurry. I took courses that I enjoyed, had an interest in, not only those that were required. Some profs discourage taking time off, like doing a co-op, which I did (male, EN)."

"Mine are more specific…sure, I want what the University expects, to be successful, to relate well to others, and good character, but I also want to find something that I really want to do. I'd like to choose the kind of person that I'd like to be (male, AR)."

In the responses to this question one sees the participants placing their personal goals above the expectations that the University may have of them. That is not to say that the participants disagreed with the University's expectations, but they expressed being motivated to achieve their own goals, another example of maturation.

I.13. What, if anything, is missing in your undergraduate degree for the transition to your next step?

Although four participants said that nothing was missing from their undergraduate degree for the transition to their next step, overall, 16 identified at least one thing missing, with the most common answer being some type of practical experience. Specifically, they missed participation in research or lab work, practical

application, an internship, and familiarity with business practices. What they needed from these activities was "hands-on" and "real world" experiences that would help them to develop business and people skills. Three observed that their majors do not attract job recruiters. Two talked about having lost the "passion" and the "drive" that they felt when they first began their studies.

"In Engineering, an internship would have been valuable; what one learns in the classroom can actually be applied in the work setting. Students are on such a tight schedule that they don't see the time to develop this aspect, the practical application of knowledge (female, EN)."

"For me, [what's missing are] the plain business skills. The focus is on technical aspects of the field; we need to know how to communicate and interact with people (male, EN)."

"I don't see anything. I am ready to be an adult and to get a job (male, SC)."

"I wasn't required to do any internship; though difficult to arrange, it would be valuable. Real world experience is necessary even for graduate school. It teaches job responsibility and accountability (female, LA)."

"I need more experience. I need more experience in the lab. Advisors could have suggested doing lab work or volunteering in a lab. The microbiology organization has helped quite a bit, but it was a little too late (female, SC)."

"A&M could do better with more English classes. Some classes - most actually - are too large for the professor to assign writing projects. That is an area where I feel that I am lacking - in my writing skills. Specifically in BIMS, they could do better in

preparing you for after graduation. They provide information and contacts for professional schools, but what if you're not going to med school? They could use another course in this preparation. I am trying to go to med school, but I'm not in, yet. I've been disappointed that I may need to do more learning to be able to get a job. It's not like in engineering. That's probably the only degree where you can get a good paying job in your field with the undergraduate degree (male, VM)."

Experiential learning is an integral component of integrated learning and of self-authorship. Many of the participants recognized on their own that they lacked this type of experience for their next step.

I.14. What was your experience with the Core Curriculum requirement for International & Cultural Diversity?

There were mixed reviews of the participants' experiences with the Core Curriculum requirement for International and Cultural Diversity. Five participants described the courses that they took as boring, pointless, lacking impact, or not providing anything new or profound. Three of them observed that the courses that they took did not tie into the larger concept of diversity. Three participants met this requirement by studying abroad, and these experiences were very positive and educational. Two others thought that the courses that they took provide awareness and an understanding of differences, as well as finding common ground.

"I went to Guatemala for a language course and on a mission; and I studied abroad in Italy. These experiences were eye-opening. It was interesting to learn what

other people think of us and of life in general. It's totally different. Anyway, these counted for my Core requirement (male, AR)."

"I took Anthropology/People & Cultures. I thought it was really boring; it was a large class. The instructor read the slides. It didn't really have an impact. I could get the slides online from the web site (female, LA)."

"In order to kill two birds with one stone, I tried to take a course for this and for the humanities. The course touched on things that I knew and brought them to light, but there was nothing new or profound. None of the requirements are necessarily necessary. One can come into these courses with awareness or understanding of the topic and not really gain anything from the course itself. The purpose of these courses is "preparing you for life," and there are some things that we need to relearn (male, LA)."

"Pointless – the choices don't really fulfill this. It should open your eyes to these issues. The class name escapes me, but it had nothing to do with cultural diversity (male, EN)."

"Yes, I did two of those; anthropology and Greek mythology. I loved them. I really enjoyed anthropology. I probably wouldn't have taken them otherwise, if they weren't required. It was learning about cultures in the past and how there's a story to tell behind it. It was interesting, and in anthropology, the professor tied it to our culture and the present (female, SC)."

"I'm not sure what I took. What classes count for that requirement? I think that I took Women's Psychology. It talked a lot about how women are treated overseas, in the Middle Eastern countries. I didn't get that much from it. My girlfriend is from

Congo, so I think that I have learned more about these things from her. I don't feel that I know more about the rest of the world from this course. An anthropology would have helped, but I couldn't fit it in. You can cheat on the core requirement by taking classes that count for more than one requirement (male, VM)."

"Study Abroad filled that requirement, and it was great. The experience of trying to communicate and to find common ground and to understand each other…that was very valuable; I couldn't get that in the classroom (female, EN)."

As one of the components of the Core Curriculum, the responses to this question provide further example of the ineffectiveness of the current structure of the Core Curriculum.

I.15. How did you select your major?

Selection of a major was described as somewhat random and often the result of a whim or grade school fancy. More than 11 of the participants explained that they remained in the chosen major once they began their studies because they felt stuck once they started in a major. They were concerned with losing credits and time by changing majors. Four of them described a process of elimination in selecting a major (eliminating what they didn't like or what they were not good at). Another four chose their major because they took a class that they really liked. Three selected a major that was the family's interest, and one said that she was groomed be what she chose. Five of them selected their major based upon a specific career aspiration with two of them explaining that "it was what I was good at."

One participant's answer generally encapsulates students' experiences in selecting a major. "When I sent in my application, I had to choose a college. I didn't know what liberal arts meant. I initially picked psychology, and I changed at the new student conference. I always like English…that's why I chose it (female, LA)." Another describes his ambivalence once in the major. "It was a very popular major – a scholarship allowed me to pursue computer science. It hasn't fit me well, so I felt stuck in it (male, EN)."

"I was one of the lucky few; the major, environmental design, that I picked from the list turned out to be what I enjoyed. It's such a blind choice. My dad arranged for me to shadow a few physicians with different specialties when I was in high school. I was not interested in any of them in the end (male, AR)."

"By chance; one of my friends transferred in from Blinn into this major. I didn't even know that it existed. I met my advisor, who was good, and he was willing to help me. It made me want to be in the program. He suggested that I take a course one semester to try it out (female, ED)."

The process to select a major was described as random and lacking in guidance prior to the expected selection as freshmen.

I.16. Have you been asked to develop, present, and defend your opinion in any of your classes?

One third of the participants had not been asked to develop, present, and defend their own opinion in any of their classes during their undergraduate career. Half of them

said that they had been asked to do so primarily in their major courses, one specifically in the senior seminar only, though a few clarified that they had been asked to develop a position, but not necessarily their own opinion.

"Science is not about opinions; it's about facts. Maybe in English classes we would discuss the papers that we'd written (female, SC)."

"No, not that I can think of; in some classes you can defend test responses (male, EN)."

"Most philosophy classes do [ask you to develop, present, and defend your opinion]. Good ones always have discussion. I liked classes best when professors really focused on this. In other classes, maybe in group assignments or when debating with a professor (male, LA)."

"I have been asked in several classes, especially in my major. There are case study classes. I don't recall doing it before I was a senior, and I'm not sure that I would have been ready much before then (female, BA)."

An integral component of undergraduate excellence at Texas A&M is the ability to think critically (see Appendix A). Students need ample opportunities to engage in activities and problem-solving that will facilitate the development of such thinking. The participants did not describe having had much opportunity for this type of assignment.

I.17. When would you have been ready to accept more challenge, problem-solving, independence in your courses?

Six participants were not asked this question. The list of interview questions for the first three participants did not include this question. The researcher added it after rereading the answers to question #16. After it was added, she did not ask three participants the question because it would have been redundant given their responses to question #16. Of those who were asked, eight stated that they would have been ready to accept more challenge in their courses from the beginning. "Sprinkle a little bit on from the beginning in your freshman year; then the 2nd year really pile it on. You get better prepared this way. Otherwise, people get a big shock when they graduate (male, AG)." Two explained that while courses like this were "rough at first" and "difficult," they were worthwhile because they learned from them and became better prepared. Two others would have been ready sooner than their senior year, "but not much." Two simply answered that they would not have wanted this type of challenge any sooner than their senior year because these classes were too difficult.

"Remember that I didn't take many freshman courses because of the credits that I brought with me. The level of independence was there in those classes; they didn't baby us. It was rough at first. The studying was different from what I was used to in high school. There was much more application. I don't think that I am quite there yet (female, AG)."

"Definitely, I would have preferred more classes like this [soft skills]. You can take the material and make it your own. You care about it much more (male, EN)"

"You give your opinion and back it up. It's very challenging; you have to think for yourself. It forces you to think things through (male, AR)."

The participants would have welcomed more challenge in their courses even if such a format would have been difficult. The benefits were seen to outweigh the negatives.

I.18. Are you experiencing any uncertainty as you prepare to graduate?

Three fourths of the participants said that they are experiencing uncertainty as they prepare to graduate. While three of them attributed this uncertainty to "normal senior worries," most of them talked about the feeling in more specific terms. The descriptors ranged from stressful, scared, and apprehension. Three talked about the transition and one called it "the end of something." Another described it as weighing on her confidence. Over half of these worries were related to personal issues, while the rest of them were academic in nature. Some of them are concerned because their GPR's will not make them very competitive for employment or graduate school. Others wondered if they are really prepared for what's next. Five of them wondered what they would do next and just as many expressed doubt.

One described the feeling more as relief, and two said that it was more like joy and excitement. "It's more like joy… you're ready to move on! Graduate school is still in the plan [probably MBA]; after working first (male, EN)." One admitted that she had felt the uncertainty more so before she received word that she had been hired for a post-graduation job.

"Yes, I am [experiencing uncertainty]! I'm just hoping that I made that right choice in my major and that I'll like it when I start to work. I wonder what it will be

like. That's my primary worry right now since I'll be living at home. I'm looking forward to going back (female, SC)."

"Hmmm, yeah, I am…there are large decisions to be made. I am getting married; we're moving, probably to another state. Should I work for a couple of years first to get the business experience, or should I go straight to graduate school? These are life-altering decisions, but I am not scared. It's like when I came here. I can make the best decision possible. I can't be afraid to fail (male, AR)."

"I did before I had a job. It's very stressful. You don't know what's next… where I'll be living. How I would use my degree… now I have my house, my job… everything is in line… you don't know where to start… stresses on confidence (female, BA)."

"Yeah…I am. I don't really know what I am going to be doing; just going to go home and applying for jobs (male, LA)."

Most of the participants seemed to be having difficulty making meaning of their undergraduate experience at the same time as they dealt with real life concerns. As they have matured, these students recognized the fact that the "answers" do not necessarily come from others. They were worried about employment, graduate school acceptance, finances, family, and their education did not seem to correspond with this list.

I.19. What role could/should the University play in helping students to address uncertainty?

One third of the participants did not think that the University should play a role in helping seniors to address this uncertainty because they considered this the student's

responsibility. "Personal things are separate. A lot of things you go through are not academic, so it's not really related to the University (male, BA)." These students were of the opinion that the University already provides services to help students, such as the Career Center, the Student Counseling Center, and academic advisors. "The University offers many wonderful services. You need to let people find these on their own (female, BA)."

Even so, the other participants thought that the University could assist students in addressing this uncertainty. While one third thought that the Career Center was serving students' needs, more than a third had suggestions for improvement. For example, more career fairs are needed for a broader range of majors. These participants wanted to see their degrees actually applied. Observations specifically about the Career Center included that the Center needs to be expanded. It is too small to serve the needs of the number of students that A&M has. One participant suggested having more career counselors, maybe in the colleges, while two others suggested having academic advisors who could speak on career issues. Several did not believe that they should be charged for the services offered by the Career Center. Finally, two observed that the Career Center web site needs to be improved and developed.

"Their web site is very difficult – many of us have commented on this to each other. My generation is internet users. They need to make it more user-friendly and more complete (female, BA)."

"I think the University should go into each college. It should require each college to have a database or resource [someone] to help seniors. Yeah, there is some

personal responsibility to find out these things, but the college could help out by keeping track of this information. Who's doing what? What are the tips for applying to graduate school? You would just have to split it up by college. It would be too much for one person to know about all of the majors. Maybe you could have a counselor in the college to help students with graduation (male, AR)."

"Yes, I think it should, and they do, right? I always get e-mail from the Career Center. They do a good job. I attended a graduate student workshop just in case (female, AR)."

"I think that they should. Many students are uncertain. The University could have a program about what you could do with your degree. A course similar to BIMS 101 that was required my freshman year. They brought in professionals to talk about what they have done with their degrees. I have a friend who is in communications, and they don't have anything like that (female, VM)."

Many of the participants identified some ways in which the University could assist graduating seniors address their uncertainties, which suggests that these students would appreciate the companionship of staff or faculty during this time.

I.20. What role could/should the University play in helping seniors to prepare for graduation?

A quarter of the participants did not think that the University should play a role in helping seniors to prepare for graduation saying that students should be prepared. "I'm kind of a big kid now, so I should be able to take care of this myself (male)."

Two participants thought that it would be too difficult to provide the type of assistance needed because their needs are so different, while another felt that the senior class project had provided her with the necessary preparation.

Otherwise, a distinct majority of the participants thought that the University could better assist seniors to prepare for graduation. One third of the participants suggested offering a required course for seniors or at least some centralized support for seniors. Three suggested that the role of the academic advisor could include graduation counseling or maybe there could be mentoring for seniors. One participant commented that the Career Center provides assistance, but it is specific to getting a job. Several talked about other issues, mostly considered personal, that they were facing as graduating seniors: transition to work; moving; finances; applying for graduate school; and getting married.

"Could be helpful and beneficial, but as a part of the curriculum or degree plan. Seniors have little time; class demands are strenuous. They also are less open-minded and think they are too good for some programs, so they may not attend unless part of the curriculum (female, GE)."

"The University could help with the steps to prepare for graduation and transitioning to your new life. But you should be able to do this yourself. At some point you need to be on your own (female, ED)."

"Could it be more formal? Oh sure, but it could be more pressing on the students. It's a difficult question. One thing the University could is introduce a class…it

could cover things like what to do with the rest of my life. It's a big question. How to pay off loans? Looking for a partner for life, too…(male, LA)."

"Ah…hmmm, I don't know…you know? This is good…talking to kids, about how they feel….what they did. But doing that is hard, right? There are too many of us. You could have graduation counseling, talk about uncertainties, fear, questions (female, AR)."

Once again, many of the participants identified ways in which the University could assist graduating seniors address the transitional issues that seniors face, which suggests that these students would appreciate the companionship of staff or faculty during this time.

I.21. What opportunities do Texas A&M graduating seniors have to integrate all of their undergraduate experiences in order to get closure?

Over half of the participants said that they did not think that there were opportunities at the University for seniors to integrate all of their undergraduate experiences and to get closure. "I don't think that happens. You go through classes – some slowly. There's nothing really that wraps it up. There's graduation, but that really just shows that you're done (male, EN)." "As far as academically, there is no synthesis; I actually talked to someone recently about how odd I thought it was that I was just taking another round of classes…and yet it's my last semester. Otherwise, there are senior activities and traditions…elephant walk, Ring Dance, Aggie Ring, attending graduation… (female, LA)." In fact, three participants mentioned that maybe the

traditions were supposed to provide the opportunity for closure, though one commented "There are ceremonial things and traditions, but I'm not really into group things….Ring Dance…E-Walk…not really my scene (female, EN)."

Three participants who were in majors that require a capstone course said that the capstone provided some synthesis, though focused on the discipline. "The capstone course….it's taken the semester when you are graduating. It pulls it all together. I don't think the rest of the University does anything like this…probably would be good (female, BA)." One participant simply thought that it is up to the individual student to do this. "College is what you make of it. Independence is part of it. I want to make sure that my degree is worth something, so it's up to me. You have to take the time for it, and seek the resources that the University has for you. Some counselors are awful, but I sought the good ones. If you have no direction after four years, how are you going to make it out there? You may get a job, but you probably won't keep it long. (female, AG)."

Some participants mentioned a variety of ways that they are getting closure: through job hunting because she has had to identify her skills; by taking time off before beginning graduate school; through the required internship; when he gets a job. "I'll get the closure when I start to work. Then things in the past will come up to help me to do what I need to do (male, BA)." Another participant talked about applying in the future what she had learned. "Don't know; maybe in senior seminars – all is applied to something specific. They help facilitate finding those answers – [it will be] most

valuable for me to take time off. I know that I won't be able to apply what I've learned now until later (female, AG)."

One suggestion seemed to combine the practical, synthesis by remembering what he had done, with the ceremonial, a party with faculty and classmates to celebrate the culmination. "That's an interesting question….educational closure? Hmmm, actually, for me it's personal almost to the people that I've gotten to know. There should be closure with the professors, classmates, and friends. These people are soon to be my colleagues. Maybe it could be something social so that we could make the contacts for the future. Commencement is also something good for this, for closure. It could be a big party – something so that you could remember the things that you've done…so that you're not necessarily forgetting the things that you've done, but solidifying it. It's the camaraderie…(male, AR)."

"I'm not sure. I don't think that there are any [opportunities]. Maybe actual graduation, but that doesn't really integrate anything. My classes are going to end, and I'll leave. I'll abruptly leave…it seems like any other semester to me. I wish it weren't like that. My friends ask me, 'How do you feel?' It feels like every other semester (female, SC)."

"What is there to integrate it all? There's just the process of graduation when you reflect on what this really means; what classes you've taken; and hopefully what you've learned (male, VM)."

Overall, the participants did not identify any opportunities to synthesize the various parts of the undergraduate education to provide closure. Further, most of them

identified ways in which this synthesis could take place, which, again, suggests that these students would appreciate the companionship of staff or faculty during this time.

Survey Responses - Interview Participants and Baseline Population

All of the interview participants also provided responses to this study's survey statements that were included in the graduating seniors' survey. While the researcher did not pull this data out during the interview phase of the research protocol, she did so in the data analysis. Figure 1 illustrates the responses by percentages for the five statements from the baseline data of the graduating seniors exit survey. Figure 2 illustrates the interview participants' responses to the survey statements.

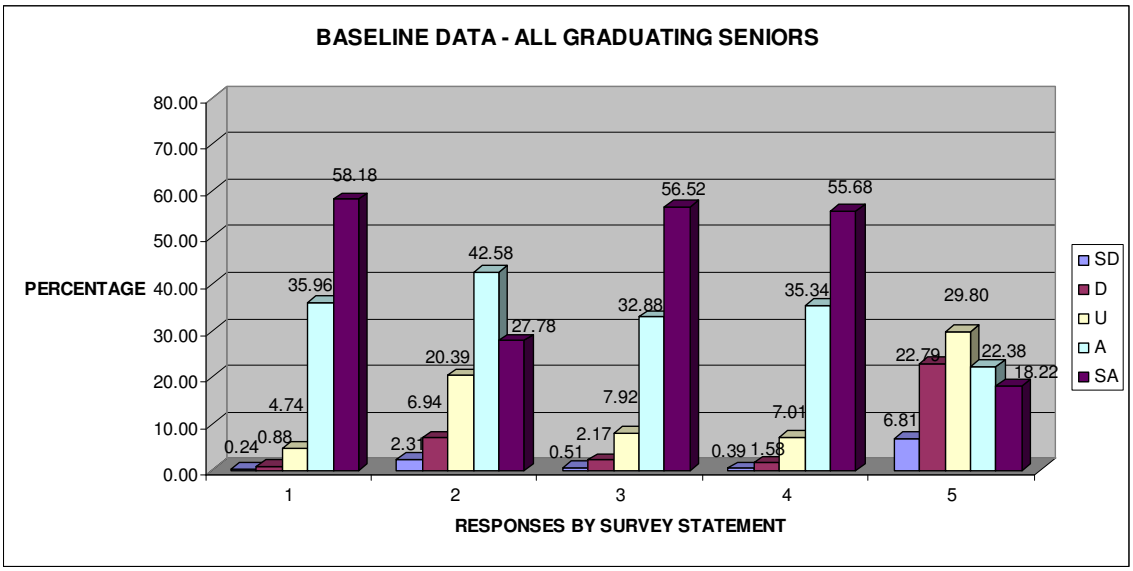

FIGURE 1. Baseline Data All Graduating Seniors

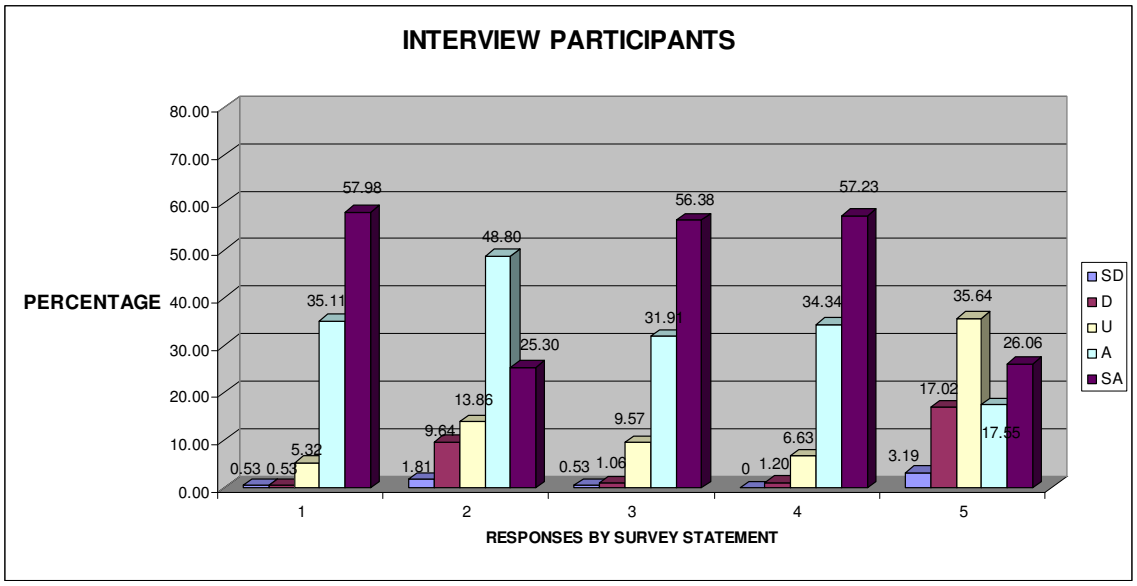

FIGURE 2. Interview Participants' Responses by Survey Statement

In comparing these result summaries, it becomes evident that the interview participants' responses to the survey statements were similar to the averages of the baseline population. Only in the responses to S5 was the pattern slightly different between the two charts. Otherwise, the averages of the responses of the interview participants reflected the baseline population's averages. What follows will be an examination of the participants' interview responses against the backdrop of the baseline data for these statements.

S1. As I prepare to graduate, I have thought about the purpose of my undergraduate education.

Nearly 95% of the graduating seniors agreed with this statement (Figure 3). As shown on Figure 2 above, the average of the interview participants' responses to S1.,

94%, was practically the same as the population's average. Through the interviews, it was clear that the students were reflecting upon their education, as well as on their time as undergraduates. As they reflected upon their undergraduate experiences, they were thinking about the educational aspects. They described thinking about the classes they had taken and if/how they would apply what they had learned in these classes. It was clear that for most, if not all, of the underlying purpose of an undergraduate education was to get a job. Consequently, for some the reflection was bittersweet as they described less than competitive grade point averages and a challenging job market as obstacles to securing good employment. Though several participants had always intended to continue their studies through professional school education, several others had only recently realized and/or decided on the need for graduate study in order to achieve the goal of a job worthy of higher education.

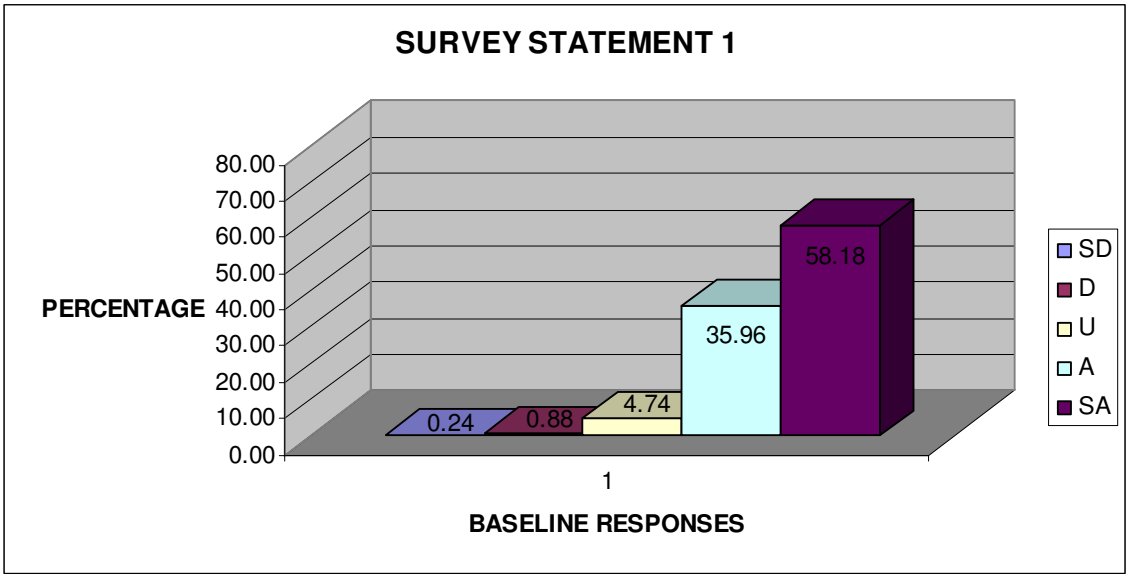

FIGURE 3. Responses to Statement 1

Even so, the actual purpose of an undergraduate was defined by the participants as more than career oriented. Undergraduate education provided a step between high school and adulthood during which students had the opportunity to explore and to learn about themselves. During their interviews, participants described undergraduate education as preparing them, not only for a job, but for life. They expected it to provide them with the skills necessary to be successful in all aspects of life, to be well-rounded.

For 16 of the participants, their perspective on the purpose of undergraduate education evolved after they started as freshmen. Some admitted to having attended college initially because it was expected by their family or because it was necessary to be educated for a career. While they had initially accepted that it had value based upon what their families or society said, they did not realize its true worth until they discerned aspects of value to them personally. This maturity may have contributed to their ability to identify if anything was missing from their undergraduate education for their next step. In realizing the opportunities afforded them through an undergraduate education, several of the participants talked about feeling rushed by the University to complete their degree and regretted not having had the time to explore more classes/topics. Two-thirds said that they lacked experience in order to make their education more appropriately complete.

As they prepared for graduation, most of the participants talked with family and friends about their undergraduate education. As reported by these students, the conversations revolved primarily around grades, job searches, and what was next. Even conversations with faculty or academic advisors pertained to career objectives.

Practically none of the participants described more abstract conversations that pertained to the purpose of their undergraduate education, their goals, or the culmination of their undergraduate careers.

*S2. The University Core Curriculum enriched and broadened my undergraduate experience***.**

According to the baseline data, graduating seniors' opinion of the University Core Curriculum was mixed (Figure 4). Though more than half of the respondents agreed that the Core enriched their undergraduate experiences, 30% were undecided or disagreed with the statement. This same response pattern was evident in the interview participants' survey responses, although a slightly greater percentage disagreed with the statement (see Figure 2). In their interviews, 17 of the participants described the intended purpose of the University Core Curriculum in positive terms, while their experiences were less optimistic.

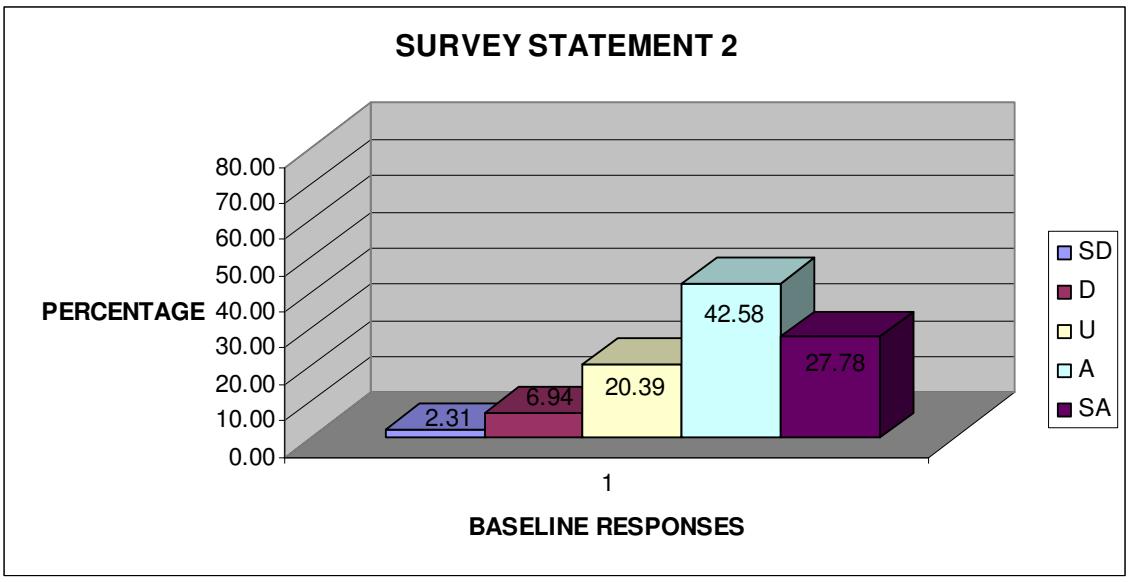

FIGURE 4. Responses to Statement 2

Three of the participants described their experiences in these courses entirely as a waste of time even if they stated that the intended purpose of the Core Curriculum was positive. For example, a third of the students who were interviewed described their experiences with the Core Curriculum requirement for International and Cultural Diversity quite negatively, lacking impact or not providing anything new or profound, although, as one put it, "it should open ones eyes to these issues." As described in the interviews, the experience with these courses was strongly related to the professors' presentation of the material, as well as her/his interaction with the class. These students expected more in their classes and from their professors, and they were disappointed in the manner in which material was presented particularly in the Core Curriculum courses. When describing courses that had the most impact on them, most of them recalled

courses that had challenged them. The professors in these courses were key to engaging students by making the material come to life.

It should be noted that nearly half of the interview participants entered Texas A&M with credits towards the Core Curriculum requirements through AP and dual-enrollment. For the purposes of this study, the data was not available of how many graduating seniors had entered Texas A&M with credits towards the Core Curriculum requirements, but it is fair to assume that the percentages across the population are similar to that of the seniors who were interviewed. It is not uncommon for freshmen to enter the university with some number of credits.

S3. Based upon the goals that I set for myself when I entered A&M, I consider myself successful.

Overall, graduating seniors agreed with this statement (Figure 5). 89% of the overall population considered themselves successful based upon their goals. This was reflected in the survey responses of the interview participants, 88% of whom considered themselves successful (see Figure 2).

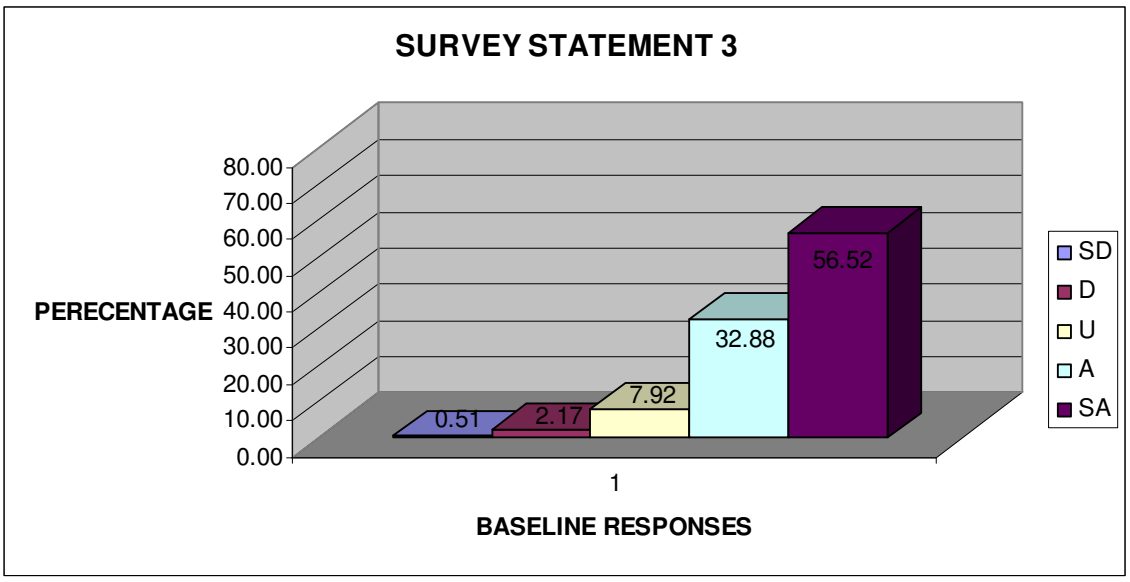

FIGURE 5. Responses to Statement 3

When asked in the interviews, fifteen of the participants thought themselves successful, though five of them went on to comment that their goals had changed. On the whole, these participants measured their success by the attainment of the undergraduate degree. Of the five who did not consider themselves successful, all cited not meeting their GPR goals as the primary indicator, though two also mentioned not completing the degree in four years. Overall, it seemed that students had not developed and/or articulated their goals with much depth even after embarking on the pursuit of their undergraduate degrees.

S4. Based upon the expectations set for me by the University when I entered Texas A&M, I consider myself successful.

As seen in Figure 6, 91% of graduating seniors believed that they had met the University's expectations and considered themselves successful in that regard. In their survey answers, those interviewed mirrored the baseline population's averages almost identically (see Figure 2).

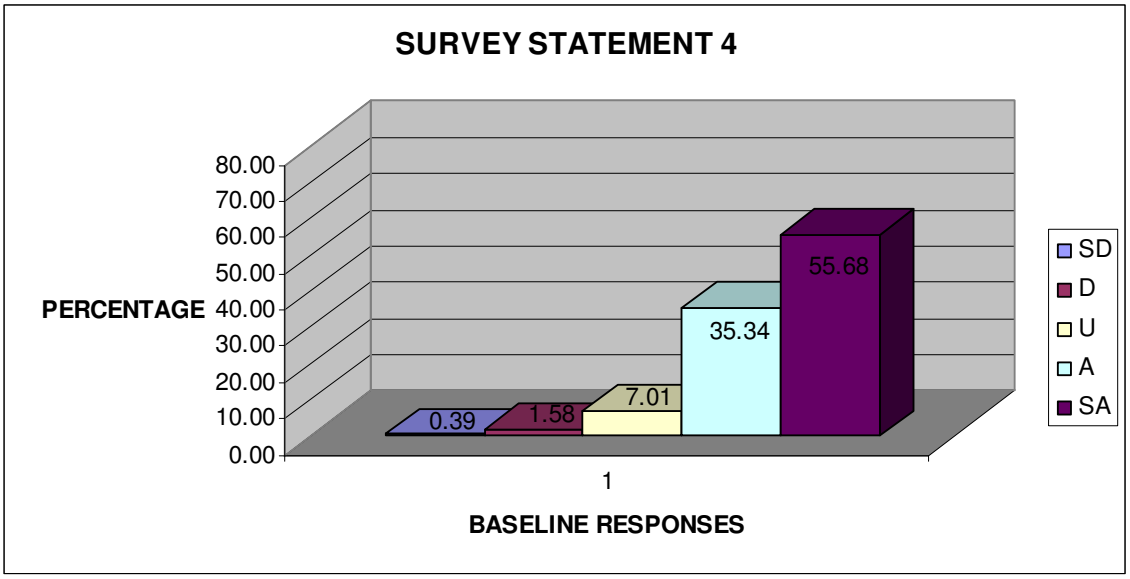

FIGURE 6. Responses to Statement 4

When asked in the interview, these same students were somewhat less affirmative. Just over half of them replied that they thought that they had met the expectations set for them by the University. A few more said that they were unsure if they had met the University's expectations than did in the response to the survey. This hesitation seemed to stem primarily from the fact that these students' grade point ratios were lower than what they believed the University would expect from them. Nevertheless, when asked earlier in the interview what they believed the University's

expectations were of them, nearly all of the participants answered that the University expected them to be Aggies and to represent the University well. In practice, this was described as upholding the Aggie Code of Honor and what the Aggie Ring represents by displaying moral character and integrity. As such, of those who thought that they had met the University's expectations, they used not only their grade points as an indicator of success, but they spoke of being "an Aggie."

How the University communicated its expectations was less clear. Although several students did not believe that the University had directly communicated its expectations, two-thirds named various sources. The most common was the Aggie Code of Honor, which participants stated, was listed on all syllabi, mentioned by most professors in class, and promoted by student leaders as a leadership standard.

S5. My goals are different than the University's expectations of me.

As noted in the previous chapter in the baseline data summaries, graduating seniors were not in agreement with each other in their response to S5 as evidenced by the spread in the responses. Even though more of the respondents, 40%, agreed or strongly agreed with this statement signifying that they did perceive a difference in their goals and the University's expectations (Figure 7), nearly 30% of the respondents did not believe that there was a difference and nearly as many were undecided.

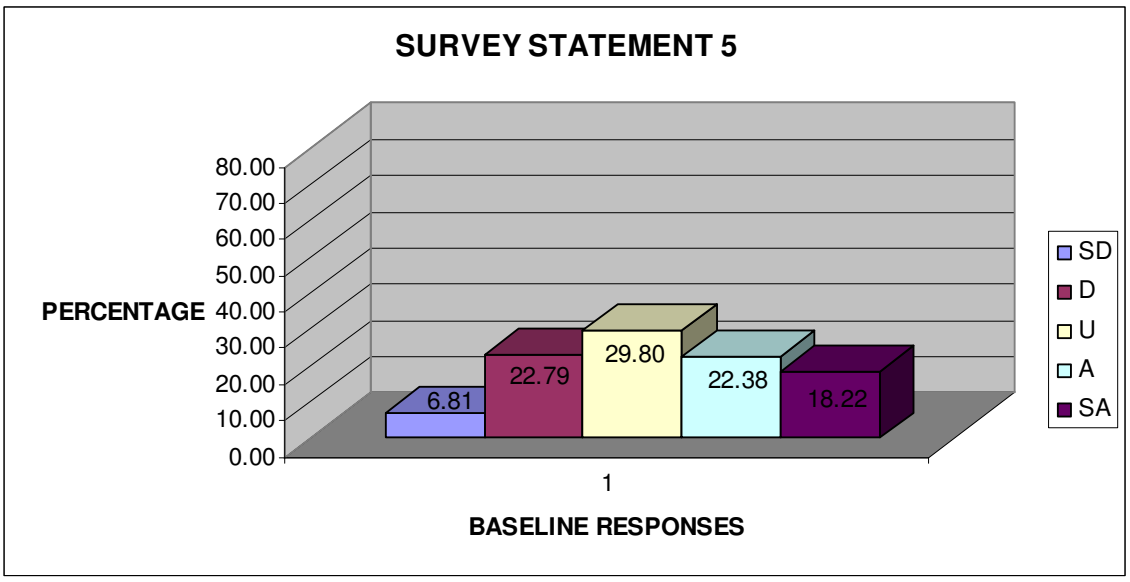

FIGURE 7. Responses to Statement 5

The interview participants' survey responses were very similar to the baseline averages, with the differences being that slightly more of them reported being undecided or strongly agreeing with S5 (see Figure 2). In their interviews, just over half of these students maintained that their goals were different that the University's expectations while a third stated that their goals were in line with the University's expectations. Being a 'typical Aggie' was what a quarter of the students thought that the University expected from its students, and this was not a goal for some of the participants. The overlap was reported primarily in academic goals. Otherwise, students pointed to their personal goals, as opposed to their academic goals, in explaining the differences between them and the University. While all of the participants had both personal and academic goals, most of the students seemed to keep these separate as they responded to the

questions. As such, they tended to respond to S5 based upon the set of goals that they were using to direct themselves individually.

The purpose of this study was to identify, through phenomenological examination, if and how graduating seniors were make meaning of their undergraduate education by exploring graduating seniors' understanding of their undergraduate education, as well as what Texas A&M University was providing undergraduates during their senior year to help them to synthesize their experiences and to bring closure. The researcher developed a research protocol that relied upon phenomenological data collection through interviews with a sample of graduating seniors. Baseline data from the population of graduating seniors was collected through the graduating student exit survey.

The researcher obtained a good sample of graduating seniors for the interviews through invitations. Of the 188 graduating seniors who were invited to participate, 22 students volunteered to be interviewed, of which 20 actually arranged for the meeting. The group of interview participants included at least one student from each of the nine academic colleges; the overall gender representation was nearly par with the graduating senior population; 15% were Black and 15% were Hispanic; 30% were 1st generation; and there was one member of the Corps of Cadets.

The baseline data from the graduating senior exit survey, which included records from eight of the nine academic colleges, proved to be very helpful as a point of reference when examining the participants' interview responses. Of note is the fact that the interview participants' survey response averages mirrored the baseline population

almost identically. The interviews with these students provide a dimension to the data that was not possible through the survey responses.

The students who volunteered to participate each arrived for the interview not knowing exactly what to expect, yet very willing and happy to participate. The researcher sensed in this willingness a sincere offer to help her out in completing the research. On the whole, the students' storytelling did not come across as driven by an agenda, although a few did ask at the end of the interview if the recommendations from this study could be considered for any changes. Even though the interview was only one hour long, the amount of time that each student had to dedicate to this meeting was probably 90 minutes or more.

The researcher noticed that most of the participants arranged to meet with her between classes or other commitments. Busy as they may have been, this was not apparent during the course of the interview. They were completely engaged and at ease while the meeting was in progress. At the conclusion, each one thanked the researcher for the opportunity to contribute to her research and, in a few instances when she was walking out at the same time, the student walked out with her. The researcher perceived in their demeanor and interaction with her an appreciation for the opportunity to speak about things that had been on their minds. In fact, several thanked her for being interested in their experiences.

As they reflected upon their experiences as college students, many of them described the experience as very positive and even exciting. In essence, they loved being Aggies. That was what most often came across initially from the participants

about their undergraduate experience. On the other hand, their responses to questions about the education itself usually came less quickly. Although they were willing to talk about their thoughts and experiences, many of the questions seemed to surprise them and even to be difficult, as if they had not considered them previously. This is noteworthy because reflection is instrumental in providing depth and clarity to understanding experiences and learning from them. In fact, the students' stories did not highlight many instances of reflection being a part of the pursuit of their degrees. Instead, their stories sounded more like a series of experiences without obvious links or integration of the various parts. One significant example of this apparent lack of coherence was their disparate experiences with the Core Curriculum.

The impact and effectiveness of the Core Curriculum may be questioned when students are not being exposed completely to meeting these requirements while at A&M. Additionally, one must consider that students are not taking these courses in the order nor within the time frame expected. Two-thirds of those interviewed completed their requirements their junior and senior years. The reasons why they completed requisites after their sophomore year not withstanding, one can speculate that the haphazard manner in which these courses are being taken may have a negative outcome on effectiveness of the overall Core Curriculum. At question here is whether or not the Core Curriculum can provide the intended foundation for the education of our undergraduate students when they do not share in a common, or often times, positive experience in the attainment of these requirements.

This near absence of reflection was also evident in the students' articulation of their goals, as well as their understanding of the University's goals for them. While they were able to identify specific goals, by and large, these were not necessarily embodied in the education that they received, but were more so exemplified by their grades and their soon to be conferred undergraduate degrees. As for the University's expectations, none of the students expressed having wondered what these expectations might be or why, even if they were unsure of them. They were better able to communicate the purpose of an undergraduate education. They had obviously given it some thought prior to the interviews, though the depth of these thoughts and what triggered them varied across the students. Most often the contemplation seemed to be caused by the "what's next?" question before them. As they prepared for jobs or graduate study, even the purpose of the undergraduate education revolved primarily around whether or not it had prepared them well for that next step. This was evidenced in their descriptions of their conversations with others as they prepared to graduate.

In fact, the last year in college, a time marked with impending transition in most, if not all, aspects of their lives, was not described by these students as a particularly reflective time as they were experiencing it. The demands of being a student coupled with preparations to soon become something else did not allow for much introspection. Furthermore, the curriculum did not incorporate any opportunities for introspection or for integration in the experiences of almost all of the participants. The fact that so many of the participants commented to the researcher that the interview itself had been helpful

in processing pointed to their desire to explore and process their thoughts, experiences, and even emotions.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

Graduating seniors make meaning of their undergraduate education. This is the story of 20 graduating seniors at Texas A&M University and tales of their senior year experiences. This dissertation argues that these students are at various stages of self-authorship and are in need of companionship from Texas A&M in the form of faculty and advisors in order to achieve the purpose of undergraduate education. We should be there, not to provide the answers, but to facilitate the process. As quoted by Baxter Magolda and King (2004), Parks, et al. in 1996 outlined this purpose of a college education:

> At their best, colleges provide space and stimulus for a process of transformation through which students move from modes of understanding that are relatively dependent upon conventional assumptions to more critical, systemic thinking that can take many perspective into account, make discernments among them, and envision new possibilities. The deep purpose of higher education is to steward this transformation so that students and faculty together continually move form naïveté through skepticism to commitment rather than becoming trapped on mere relativism and cynicism. This movement toward a

> mature capacity to hold firm convictions in a world which is both legitimately tentative and irreducibly interdependent is vitally important to the foundation of citizens in a complex and changing world.

Cognitive-structural theorists provide explanations for the progression of intellectual development, which can be used to examine the changes that undergraduates undergo from their freshman to senior years. Based upon the work of Piaget, cognitive-structural theories concentrate primarily on the ways in which individuals think and how they give meaning of their experiences. "Cognitive-structural stages are viewed as arising one at a time and always in the same order, regardless of cultural conditions. The age at which each stage occurs and the rate of speed with which the person passes through it are variable, however. Each stage derives from the previous one and incorporates an aspect of it; thus each successive stage is qualitatively different and more complex than the stages before it" (Evans, et al., 1998, p. 124). At lower levels of development, individuals look to others for their opinions, and they may need more guidance. "A student at a lower level of development will be more comfortable and may do better in a highly structured setting" (Evans, N.J., et al., 1998, p. 125).

Using this point of reference, one can examine the system that is the undergraduate educational experience at Texas A&M University and conclude that there is purpose and value to the structure of the first year of undergraduate education. Not only do the disciplines need to convey concretely what is needed to attain an undergraduate degree in a particular major, but developmentally, first year students need the structure that is provided by the listing of requirements and through the preparation

of a degree plan. Such structure provides them the parameters that they need within which to operate during a time when, developmentally, they are not likely to be ready to operate in the abstract or to develop the structure themselves. "The balance of providing guidance and enabling responsibility is a delicate one" (Baxter Magolda and King, 2004, p. xviii).

On the surface, and in more practical terms, a student's degree plan could be pointed to as her/his academic goals. In fact, that appears to be how many academic departments at Texas A&M University operate with their students. There are deficiencies with this practice that include a lack of engagement by the student and the limiting of exploration. "Envisioning the advising relationship as a mutual partnership means that both parties take an active role" (Baxter Magolda, 2002, p. 8). Unless the student knows that s\he should weave the classes on the degree plan into an 'experience,' the overall impact of these classes may be too shallow to generate the learning outcomes that the student may desire, and need, beyond the undergraduate degree. "*As a freshman you come in excited; then soon you see just how it really is. So much competition for grades, jobs, salary. It turns you away from learning. You just want to get out and get a job* (male, BA)."

Without the appropriate coaching, the degree plan is typically seen and treated by students as a 'to do' list. In fact, since most undergraduates use the degree plan as a 'to do,' they do not identify it, even at a surface level, as their goals. "*I don't know what goals I had [as a freshman] …degree, meeting people, getting involved, traditions…*(female, GE)." The reality is that they may not be asked to articulate their

goals in a detailed manner by anyone. Such an articulation of goals should separate academic and personal goals, as well as specific outcomes and indicators of success for each. At this stage, their one concrete goal is to get an undergraduate degree so that they can get a better paying job than a high school diploma would get them. They are not likely aiming for the undergraduate education for its intrinsic value, and without an environment that encourages and facilitates reflection, students may not reach that realization on their own. "*I remember when I was sitting in calculus honors freshman – thinking when will I ever use the derivative of… but then when I was interviewing for a job, the employer said that my degree was to teach you how to learn and how to work hard. I realized that I may not use all specific content, but I will use some concepts… it's supposed to teach me how to learn and how to work with others. Team work and some concepts… how to work with others, even if you don't get along* (female, BA)."

New undergraduate students may even accept that attending college is an obligatory and expected next step after high school, but it is unlikely that they believe this from their own lived experiences and conclusions. "Going back to the potter's wheel, using your own hands to reshape values and beliefs, requires a substantial transformation -- the shift from reliance on external authorities as the guiding force of knowledge and self-definition to an internal sense of self as the guiding force that grounds the construction of knowledge, self, and relationship" (Baxter Magolda, 2002, p. 4). Their belief in the value of higher education is typically based upon a family or societal expectation that they have accepted as truth. "*I knew all along of the need of an*

undergraduate education for success, and I always knew that I would attend college. Still I didn't quite realize its value (female, EN)."

The degree plan, then, becomes what students identify as the University's expectations of them, particularly since the language used with most things academic categorizes courses and actions as mandatory, pre-requisite, and required. Up until that time, that has been their experience in school, to follow the guidelines set by authority. They attended school because it was mandatory, and they complied by fulfilling the expected requirements. While there were some choices on electives and tracks, the high school goal was to become competitive for college admission and not to satisfy an educational curiosity. It is within this framework of experience that new students embark on their undergraduate education. "*I thought it was like H.S. all over again; as I got older and more responsibility, my attitude has changed* (male, SC)."

Symbolically welcoming new students into the *Community of Learners*, the University seeks to engage these new students in their own learning and to develop them into life-long learners; yet it receives students with rules and regulations for academic achievement, as well as measure of success, that are similar to what they have experienced up until then (see Appendix A). "*Well, I have a piece of paper with the degree plan; it told me the classes that I should take and what my grades should be* (female, SC)." The inspiring ideals of higher education that the University aspires to provide its students are diluted by quantifying and concretizing that which is intangible into rules, regulations, and degree requirements (see Appendix B). "*Yes, I consider*

myself successful … I wanted a good education, and I have gone beyond. Even with classes I was forced to take, I found my interests and passion (female, AG)."

The theories of ideal student development within models of integrated learning are not put into practice across the University in its delivery of an undergraduate education. What are stressed to students are the University's expectations regarding students' conduct and future achievements as Former Students. "*I think it has high expectations of what we'll accomplish. There's also the Honor Code. It expects that we have integrity and character* (female, VM)." The value of life skills are generally not as clearly communicated to students as the importance of character, integrity, and the Aggie Code of Honor. Coupled with the state of Texas' understandable push to establish academic progress standards by enforcing time limits on undergraduate degrees, students consistently receive messages that portray education as an end product to be applied externally when obtained through the conferring of the degree as opposed to an internal process to which they contribute through their college career and thereafter. "*My goals are more narrow. I focused more on my education and on my interests. I pushed further than university pushes. It was my personality and my friends – we push each other. My roommate…we influenced and pushed each. When I know I can, I can't get it out of my mind…*(female, AG)." Students feel rushed to finish, and many feel the pressure of grades as the measure of their achievements. Education becomes a set of requirements in the form of a degree plan that must be completed as quickly as possible by making the grades necessary to advance to the end goal of attaining an undergraduate degree. "A

college education has been commodified, understood as yet another acquisition to be made rather than a process in which you engage" (Crone, 2007, p. 18).

New students are expected to choose a major even before beginning their studies, and they do so in order to have the formula, or the plan, to achieve their goal of an undergraduate degree. They do not necessarily know what they want to 'be when they grow up,' and when they choose a major, they are typically not thinking about the opportunity for personal growth and enlightenment that higher education can provide. The University's pressure on students to choose and to graduate does not encourage time for exploration outside or within the major. "*Freshman year having to declare a major; we're not able to explore. Also it is limiting to feel the pressure to graduate quickly, like the tuition rebate, while I understand the reasons behind some of this* (female, GE)."

While students have some choices in the courses that they take in their majors, the boundaries are fairly prescriptive and restrict exploration. "*Dr. Dewald was an excellent professor; he broke the traditional pattern of teaching a class; it was very interactive. And my two graduate classes had discussion, open dialogue, and freedom to learn from each other. That's what's wrong with the program. Educating yourself is not fun* (male, AG)." The opportunity to explore is limited not only by the chosen major and accompanying degree plan, but also by the fact that students are expected to move quickly to graduation. This expectation is communicated broadly via the incentives to graduate early and the penalties for staying too long. "*The University expects us to get out of here -- flat rate tuition and tuition rebate -- and give money back. I had never thought about it before* (male, BA)."

Because undergraduate education has a prescribed structure, students have difficulty making meaning of it and making it their own. "The lack of necessity to reflect on their values, beliefs, and identities during college reinforced reliance on external authority" (Baxter Magolda and King, 2004, p. 28). They know how to follow the rules and to fulfill the requirements. "*Whoever was in Admissions at the time that I was admitted would think so because I am graduating. I consider myself successful because I completed my education in a timely manner* (female, AG)." They strive to achieve within the framework of "universally" accepted indicators of success – academic progress within a timeline and a quantitative grade point system of evaluation. On the whole, undergraduate students at Texas A&M are not challenged through their degree plans or in their academic programs to be co-creators of their education. "*Sometimes I think the University just wants to get you in and out… yes to finish, but not to feel rushed. And there wasn't great advising at first. I took extra courses through poor advising* (female, EN)."

Nevertheless, professors do expect a different attitude from students than what they may have had as high school students; they expect them to be engaged in their academic work. "*Yep, when I came in I didn't have a definition [for undergraduate education]. High School was a joke, but this was not like high school. The professors expect you to want to be here, to want to be in the classes. They expect you to pick the courses that I want to be in and to learn from. I see it now for what it is, the opportunity* (male, VM)." There are also the Vision 2020 imperatives at Texas A&M, one of which explicitly calls for the enhancement of the undergraduate experience. Even so, teaching

continues to be about the delivery of information and not about the creation of knowledge through student learning. "*My classes haven't taught. I have learned it outside from faculty and from conferences. You want not just to get an education, but to be an educated person; not just to take from the faculty because that's what they believe, but you want to take and add to it* (male, AG)." Many professors are reluctant to implement the curricular changes necessary to make integrated learning a reality, and this is not limited to Texas A&M University. "Little within the Harvard curriculum helps students think, reason, and argue about how our shared heritage applies to controversies of today. Instead, debate and discussion about public controversies take place in the extracurricular realm" (Lewis, 2006, p. 64). Across the country, higher education is deliberating these inconsistencies both through accrediting standards and on individual campuses.

At Texas A&M many students describe an undergraduate experience that included few, if any, classes in which they were asked to develop, present, and defend their opinion. "*I've done a lot of presentations, but I haven't really had to defend an opinion. No, I don't think so* (female, ED)." According to these seniors, most would have been ready to accept more challenge, problem-solving, and independence in their courses sooner in their undergraduate careers even if these courses were more difficult. "*You give your opinion and back it up. It's very challenging; you have to think for yourself. It forces you to think things through* (male, AR)." In fact, the courses throughout their undergraduate careers that students described as the most rewarding were, by and large, challenging courses in which the professor connected with the

students. Connections were sometimes facilitated by the fact that the classes were much smaller in size, but much more significant was the professor's use of a different teaching style, encouraging risk taking, relating the material to the real world. According to the body of work by Baxter Magolda, in order for a connection to be made between the information, or the knowledge, that is imparted by professors, the learning must be positioned within the context of the student's experience (Evans, et al., 1998, p. 158). "*Just last semester – the class tied everything to real world. The whys were easy to see/understand. Those types of classes have the most value. It had thirty students. This class was more hands on* (male, EN)."

Seniors begin to demonstrate maturation as students, and as they do, they seek more responsibility. "As first-year students, they assumed that there was one right way to get through college and looked to other for answers. As seniors, they realize that decision making is a complex process in which individual circumstances and context play important roles. They are also aware that they are responsible for their own decisions. These changes reflect movement from simple to complex cognitive structures" (Evans, et al., 1998, pg. 124). With this new level of understanding, students recognize the fact that the "answers" do not necessarily come from others. "*Yeah… [laughing]… now I'm feeling doubt that I never had before, even though I know what I want to do. The end of something….I didn't feel this coming out of H.S. I feel apprehension of going on* (female, AG)." They also realize that obtaining an undergraduate degree will not necessarily resolve all concerns for their future. Normal senior worries were expressed as uncertainty by most students. Even if they had enjoyed

their undergraduate education, which almost all had, and even if they loved being Texas A&M Aggies, which they all did, they were filled with uncertainty. "*Very much so – scared and excited. Scared more on the personal side, not so much in terms of academics…thinking about career as a woman and wanting to be a mom…starting all over again. I'm looking forward to it yet, making friends isn't easy* (female, EN)." Graduating seniors are coming to the end of a journey, to the end of their undergraduate education, and part of their uncertainty stems from their attempts to make meaning of it.

Talking about the college experience throughout the undergraduate years, and particularly the senior year, is instrumental in a student's cognitive development and to their making meaning of their undergraduate education. "Piaget stressed the importance of neurological maturation in cognitive development but also noted the significant role played by the environment in providing experiences to which the individual must react. Social interaction with peers, parents, and other adults is especially influential in cognitive development" (Evans, et al., 1998, p. 125). More recent work by various researchers has also emphasized the role and value of social interactions in the educational environment. Baxter Magolda has suggested that faculty and staff should strive to "be good company" for undergraduates as they move through the stages of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2002, pp. 2-9). In his book, Richard Light also emphasized the importance of good mentoring and advising to the experience of successful students. "When asked about academic advising received, successful students replied that academic advisors asked at 'key points' questions that forced them to think about the relationship of their academic work to their personal lives" (Light, 2001, p. 88).

A student's experience in finding or being offered a safe, yet challenging, environment in which to test this developing self can be haphazard and, at Texas A&M, dependent mostly upon the student's academic college and major. Academic advisors were described as helpful or harmful academically, and few students sought their academic advisors to discuss subjects beyond the degree requirements. In fact, these seniors did not describe being engaged by any of their professors or advisors in conversation about their education from the perspective of co-residents in a *Community of Learners*. As cited by Evans, et al., Baxter Magolda in 1992 suggested that at the core of improving educational practice was the "realization that learning is a relational activity and that education is often not relational" (1998, p. 159). Most of the students were not prompted to connect the experiences through any coordinated effort in their departments. Students were enrolled in their last semester of classes, yet nothing at the University, nothing in their interactions with the University, was different than any other semester. "*As far as academically, there is no synthesis; I actually talked to someone recently about how odd I thought it was that I was just taking another round of classes…and yet it's my last semester (female, LA).*" Those few who participated in a senior capstone course described this as the only opportunity to connect their learning and experiences, although even these students pointed out that these courses focus on the discipline and not on the undergraduate experience as a whole.

Still, many of these students did not find fault with the University for not engaging them in discussions about their senior worries or about their undergraduate experiences. At work were a couple of paradigms. Seniors believe that they should be

capable of addressing any concerns on their own. "*I don't know that there's a whole lot more. Don't know that at 23 you need someone to hold your hand. You need to be assertive and take hold of your life* (female, EN)." The other paradigm is that seniors believe that personal issues are separate from their academic life. "*Personal things are separate. A lot of things you go through that are not academic, so it's not really related to the University* (male, BA)." Their experiences at the University had done little to encourage an interweaving of their academic and personal lives in a holistic manner, which would have dispelled the belief that they should be separate.

When asked the purpose of an undergraduate education, seniors articulate insightful definitions, although most of them acknowledge not ever really thinking about the purpose before, much less talking about it. "*I would [say that I am successful], though my goals changed. I didn't graduate in four years; I'll be headed to grad school eventually. 2nd year I decided to enjoy and not only study* (male, EN)." Additionally, graduating seniors realize that there are life-issues that are not addressed by the degree plan and that success is not measured only by one's GPR or by how quickly one graduates. Seniors would benefit greatly from activities designed for self-reflection, as well as facilitated dialogue concerning how to address "what's next" concerns. "*It's so decentralized, and it's not the professor's job. Most classes have a range of student [classifications], which would make it difficult to address in classes. It would be nice to have a centralized effort for students* (female, LA)." Although they were operating under the paradigm that academic and personal life are separate, most of them suggested

ways in which the University could facilitate the preparation and transition of graduating seniors, most of them built into the curriculum or degree plan.

Conclusion

Based upon these students' experiences, it is apparent that, by and large, students at Texas A&M are not being guided by faculty or staff to make meaning of their undergraduate education. The statement with the purpose of their undergraduate education and an articulation of their own goals was never expected of them. Therefore, they fulfilled their degree plans much as one would check off a grocery list as the items were placed in the shopping cart. Even those students who defined the purpose of an undergraduate education with more depth did not necessarily experience their undergraduate years more cohesively. In fact, these students had the insight to point out that their definitions were the ideal and not the lived experience. "A number of promising approaches have emerged to build reflective practice and cumulative learning experiences into the curriculum in the senior year. Institutions that do this well have a clear point of view about institutional goals, student development, curricular structure, and pedagogy, and they usually make a substantial commitment to staff and faculty development" (Gardner and Van der Veer, 1999, p. 82).

Although the ideal would be to integrate undergraduates' curricular experiences throughout their years of study, it would be appropriate to provide some type of integrative experience at least in the senior year. "How do they take initiative, apply effort, persist to overcome obstacles, and, ideally, reflect on their accomplishment once

they have succeeded" (Crone, 2007, p.19). In the end, it was not about how college had impacted them, what the purpose of education was, or what they had learned. It was about how they had changed and how they had learned. "This distinctive mode of making meaning – which developmental scholars call self-authorship – captures the complexity inherent in typical college learning outcomes, such as critical thinking, mature decision making, appreciation of multiple perspectives and difference, and interdependent relationships with others" (Baxter Magolda and King, 2004, p. 2).

Some of the students got it without quite realizing it, but many others did not get it. "*I don't think that they have I [synthesis for closure]t…maybe going to graduate school or getting a job does it. I guess me personally…I guess some students just don't get closure…but should you get closure? Success is not on a timeline. Without closure, you are left with the drive to learn more* (male, AG)." Overall, this was to be expected in that self-authorship is a life-long process. Nevertheless, college is a time when students can and should develop a solid foundation for this self-authorship. "Frequent communication and an engaged academic adviser or student organization adviser are among the keys to maintaining student initiative and effort" (Crone, 2007, p. 19). With the "good company" of faculty, staff, and advisors facilitating their journey through an integrated curriculum, this foundation would more likely have been laid for these students.

Recommendations

An assessment of the University Core Curriculum's learning outcomes is imperative as more initiatives are developed in hopes of enhancing the undergraduate experience. "Understanding the barriers to coherence in the curriculum is the key to making improvements in the future" (Smith, 1998, p. 82). This assessment should include a study into the number of courses that can be counted towards meeting requirements of the Core Curriculum. A significant amount of an undergraduate's education is dedicated to these requirements; therefore, the University should be clear on the purpose of these and whether or not they are stated in attainable outcomes. In order to facilitate the implementation and development of these initiatives, Texas A&M should consider developing an administrative position to shepherd and implement these changes. The aim should be to provide an integrated learning experience to undergraduate students.

As a part of this integrated learning experience, students should be prompted from their first year to articulate their goals and their definition of the purpose(s) of undergraduate education. These should be reviewed and updated annually. In order to provide students companionship through these reflective steps, Texas A&M should consider new ways in which to engage academic advisors in the integrated learning model. Academic advisors can also play a significant role in creating an environment supportive of integrated learning through good mentoring and advising. As noted Light (2001), academic advisors can and do affect students in profound ways. With this in mind, the role of academic advisors at Texas A&M should be further expanded and

formalized and the preparation of academic advisors should be based upon integrated learning models for the whole University.

Related to this effort is the need to redefine the responsibilities of faculty in order for them to assume a greater role in undergraduates' learning. Where professors are concerned, a paradigm shift is needed in order to enlist them in the holistic learning of undergraduate students. "Faculty have a sense of responsibility to their own courses and, to a lesser degree, to their departmental majors, but few feel any personal obligation for the undergraduate degree as a whole" (Smith, 1998, p. 84).

Finally, the University should consider establishing a senior year experience initiative. This SYE could include a variety of experiences during the last year that would "facilitate integration, reflection, closure, and transition" (Gardner and Van der Veer, 1998) for graduating seniors. The recommendation is that such an initiative be centrally coordinated with only some parts being administered through the academic colleges. Furthermore, it should be developed based upon Baxter Magolda's research on promoting self-authorship and the Senior Year Experience 'Purposes and Goals (Gardner and Van der Veer, 1998, p. 22).'

Limitations of This Study

As explained previously, the results of this study are directly applicable only to Texas A&M University, although with judicious adaptation, they could be extrapolated to illustrate the senior year experience at peer institutions. Additionally, some limitation

exists that is specific to qualitative research. According to Borg & Gall, qualitative research does not differentiate between all of the contributing factors in a given situation making it "impossible to distinguish causes from effects" (1989, p. 384). Consequently, the results may be used only to describe the subjects' perceptions of their experiences, but they cannot be used to explain what caused the experiences.

Another limitation is that the population of this study is traditional college age, typically 17 to 23 years of age. As such, they are in the early stages of cognitive development. Recommendations in this dissertation for enhancing the undergraduate experiences are directed at students who are at that level of development. Even the majority of transfer students at Texas A&M University are of typical college age. An examination of the needs and levels of development of non-traditional students is required in order to formulate recommendations for the enhancement of their undergraduate experience at Texas A&M.

Implications for Future Research

As Texas A&M University continues to develop initiatives towards the enhancement of the undergraduate experience, it should consider studying in more detail the experiences of students by academic college. As quoted by Baxter Magolda in her book *Creating Contexts*, a report from the Association of American Colleges offered this observation about the undergraduate major: "The problem is that it [the major] often delivers too much knowledge with too little attention to how that knowledge is being

created, what methods and modes of inquiry are employed in its creation, what presuppositions inform it, and what entailments flow from its particular way of knowing. The problem is further compounded when the major ignores question about relationships between various ways of knowing, and between what students have learned and their lives beyond the academy" (Baxter Magolda, 1999, pp.12-13). Given that a student's overall college experience is dictated by her/his experience within an academic college and major, the decentralized college model at Texas A&M University can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the university's overall objectives for undergraduate student learning and competencies.

Future research on the experiences of seniors could focus more closely on subpopulations, such as minority students, cadets, and 1st Generation students. For example, when viewed collectively during the data analysis, the described experiences of 1st Generation students in this study seemed to suggest some underlying assumptions about and expectations of higher education that did not appear to be present in the other participant responses. This was particularly noteworthy because the six participants who were 1st generation were diverse and each from a different academic college. Several participants referred to normal senior worries during the last year. Finally, it would be interesting to see how Baxter Magolda's theory and model apply to a male-female comparison of graduating seniors.

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APPENDIX A

DEFINING AND IDENTIFYING UNDERGRADUATE EXCELLENCE AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

Texas A&M University is a scholarly community that emphasizes academic rigor and inquiry, encourages involvement in the life of the institution beyond the classroom, instills an appreciation of the arts and sciences, integrates learning and leadership, fosters an environment of caring and concern, promotes success and leadership development for all students, and encourages engagement in life-long learning.

1) What are characteristics of undergraduate excellence?

a. Achievement of learning outcomes, regardless of discipline, through exposure to a broad education in the arts and sciences, including
   i. opportunities to develop communication skills (writing and speaking)
   ii. opportunities to develop active learning habits
   iii. opportunities to develop the skills needed to be a life-long learner
   iv. engagement in activities that promote creativity and imagination
   v. an ability to assess and evaluate intended outcomes

b. Achievement of learning outcomes through an in-depth exposure to a discipline or disciplines including
   i. guidance in making an informed choice of major, with its application to career pathways, through sound academic advising and career counseling
   ii. access to one-on-one or small group learning opportunities with faculty and cocurricular professionals
   iii. opportunities to engage in research and inquiry
   iv. opportunities to apply learning directly through an internship, co-op, study abroad, honors, or another experience

c. Opportunities to learn leadership skills in a diverse and international environment, including
   i. opportunities to engage in a learning community or co-curricular activities
   ii. opportunities to engage in service

2) **What do we want every undergraduate to be able to know and do when they graduate from Texas A&M University?** (adapted from the work of AAC&U, Boyer Center, and Carnegie)

TAMU undergraduate students will:

a. communicate effectively in writing and speaking

b. critically analyze - - this includes
   i. identifying, formulating, and answering complex questions

ii. integrating historical understanding with current issues and questions
iii. problem solving
iv. identifying steps in decision-making
v. correctly interpreting quantitative data; recognizing limitations and assumptions of data and inferences; and calculating accurately the computations appropriate for the situation.
vi. identifying, retrieving, evaluating, and using information sources correctly and
vii. identifying the impact of technology on society and societal issues

c. possess personal integrity - - this includes developing a personal honor code in keeping with the values of the University, having responsible civic engagement, being role models for social ethics, being able to judge ethical conduct and argue both sides of an ethical dilemma, and interpreting the consequences of one's own actions.

d. contribute to society - - this includes
i. respecting different points of view and different cultures
ii. working effectively in a diverse and global environment
iii. working effectively as a leader and/or member of a team
iv. articulating the value to society and the workplace of a diverse and global perspective

e. master the depth of knowledge required of a discipline - - this includes
i. articulating current research and problems,
ii. knowing the methodology to address those problems,
iii. using methodologies and technologies as appropriate,
iv. analyzing, interpreting and/or applying the results,
v. integrating knowledge across fields,
vi. applying the creative process to synthesizing works inside, outside, and across disciplines

3) What are the broad institutional indicators of undergraduate excellence?
"***Measure what you value, rather than valuing what you can measure***" – Anonymous

Academic Preparedness of First Year Students
a. High school class standing-top 10% (1, 3)
b. High school class standing-top 25% (3)
c. SAT/ACT Scores (3)
d. Freshman National Merit Scholars (3)

Academic Preparedness/Achievement of Graduating Students
a. Pass rates for professional certification programs (1)
b. Other certification/licensure pass rates (1)
c. Job placement rates
d. Graduate school and professional school placement rates (in Texas only – 1)

e. Number of co-ops, internships, and other experiences, as well as their length in time
f. Number of honor society inductees
g. Number of students' studying abroad (3)
h. Number of students receiving national or international awards
i. Number of student receiving national or international scholarships

Retention, Progress, and Graduation

a. Persistence of first to second year (3)
b. Persistence of second to third year
c. Persistence of third to fourth year
d. Graduation rates – four years (1)
e. Graduation rates – five years (1)
f. Graduation rates – six years (1, 3)
g. Progress toward degree
h. Semester credit hours per student
i. Matriculation rates into degree programs
j. Graduation rates of student athletes

Quality of Learning Environment

a. Percentages of students living on campus (3)
b. Foreign scholars hosted by institution (3)
c. Quality of library holdings and services
d. Class size 1-19 students (1, 3)
e. Class size, 50+ students (1, 3)
f. Student-Faculty ratio (1, 3)
g. Percent undergraduate courses taught by tenure/tenure track faculty
h. Percent lower division courses taught by tenure/tenure track faculty (1)
i. Percent of tenure/tenure track faculty who are teaching (1)
j. Square footage classroom and lab space (1)
k. Number of co-curricular opportunities
l. Number of students involved in research
m. Number of inquiry-guided learning courses at the lower and upper division
n. Outcomes from national student surveys conducted at TAMU and elsewhere

Faculty Descriptors

a. Faculty compensation (1, 3)
b. Faculty demographic and biographic make-up (1, 3)
c. % Faculty with top terminal degree (3)
d. % full-time faculty (3)
e. Number of endowed chairs (1)
f. Number of faculty members in the national academies (1, 3)
g. Number of faculty members holding editorial board positions

h. Number of faculty in national advisory positions

Accessibility

a. Average educational expenditures per student per year (1, 2, 3)
b. State appropriated funds per FTE student and per FTE faculty (1)
c. Total general revenue per FTE student and per FTE faculty (1)
d. Average cost of resident undergraduate tuition and fees (1, 3)
e. Student demographic and biographic make-up (1, 3)
f. Percentage of Students on merit aid (need and non-need based)
g. Percent of student receiving Pell grants (1)
h. Total merit aid dollars/FTE student (need and non-need based)
i. Percent of unmet need

Research Descriptors

a. Ratio of federal research expenditures to all FTE faculty (1, 3)
b. Research expenditures by source of funds (1, 3)
c. Amount of sponsored research funds as a percent of general revenue (1)
d. Percent of FTE faculty holding grants by type of grant (1)
e. Competitive peer-reviewed research dollars
f. Total dollar amount of grants and contracts
g. Number of peer-reviewed publications
h. Number of books and chapters
i. Number of patents

4) How can we assess undergraduate excellence?

Evidence-based decision making and outcomes-based assessment: first, identify intended outcomes, second gather data about achievement of the outcomes, and third, interpret and use the data to improve the undergraduate experience. Fourth, this cycle of identification – measurement – improvement should become an accepted and normal part of our university.

a. Academic and co-curricular program review
b. Core Curriculum Review
c. Degree Requirement Review
d. Quality of all academic support and service programs
e. Quality of engagement in co-curricular programs and activities
f. Evaluation of faculty
g. Evaluation of administrators of college and interdisciplinary programs

APPENDIX B

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
CORE CURRICULUM CHECKLIST, CATALOG 127
(BLINN EQUIVALENT COURSES IN PARENTHESIS)

1. **Communication** (6 hrs min) _____
AGEC 404
ENGL 104(**1301**) [required]
ENGL 203(**1302**), 210(**2311**), 235, 236, 241, 301
COMM 203(**1315 / 1321**), 205, 243

♦2. **Mathematics/Logic*** (6hrs min) _____
MATH 141(**1324**), 142(**1325**): ARCH, BUAD
MATH 166, 131: LBAR, EDUC, BIMS
MATH 151(**2413**), 152(**2414**): ENGR, GEOS
MATH 171, 172: MATH, CHEM, PHYS
PHIL 240(**2303**), 341, 342

3. **Citizenship** (12 hrs min) _____
POLS 206/207(**GOVT 2305 / 2306**)
HIST 105/106(**1301 / 1302**) HIST, 226(**2301**)

4. **Natural Sciences** (8 hrs min) _____
At least 4 hrs must be from:
BIOL 113/123(**1406**)
BOTN 101(**BIOL 1411**)
CHEM 101(**1411**), 103/113, 107(1413)
GEOL 101(**1403**)
PHYS 201(**1401**), 218(**2425**)
ZOOL 107(**BIOL 1413**)
Remaining hrs may be chosen from above or:
AGRO 105(**AGRI 1307**), 301, 405
ANTH 225
ATMO 201/202
BESC 201
BIOL 114/124(**1407**)
CHEM 102(**1412**), 104/114, 106/116(**1405**), 222/242
ENTO 222
FRSC 304
GENE 301, 310
GEOG 203/213
GEOL 106 (**1404**), 307
GEOS 410
HORT 201/202 (**AGRI 1315**)
OCNG 251/252
PHYS 202 (**1402**), 208, 219 (**2426**), 306/307
RENR 205/215
ZOOL 225

♠v 5. **Social & Behavioral Sciences** (3 hrs min)_____
AGEC 105(**AGRI 2317**), 350, 429, 430, 452
AGED 340, 400, 440
ANTH 201(**2346**), 210, 225, 300, 314, 403, 404, 410
COMM 315, 320, 325, 335
ECON (any course) 202(**2302**), 203(**2301**)
ENGL 209, 311
ENGR 400
EPSY 320, 321
GEOG 201(**1302**), 306, 311, 330, 401, 440
HLTH 236
HORT 335
INST 210, 322
JOUR 102(**COMM 1307**), 301, 401, 440
KINE 304, 319
LBAR 204
LING 209, 311, 402
MGMT 475
POLS (any course)
PSYC 107(**2301**), any course (except 203, 204)
RELS 403
SOCI 205(**1301**), any course (except 220, 420)
VTPB 221
WMST 207, 300, 316, 317, 404, 424, 462
ZOOL 225

♣v6. **Humanities** (3 hrs min) _____
AMST 300, 320
ANTH 202(**2302**), 205, 301, 302, 303, 306, 308, 313, 315, 317, 324, 350, 351
ARCH 345, 430, 434,
ARTS 149(**1303**), 150(**1304**), 329, 330, 335, 349, 350
CLAS 351
COMM 301, 327, 425
ENDS 149, 150, 250, 329
ENGL 203(**1302**), 212, 221(**2332**), 222(**2333**), 227(**2327**), 228(**2328**), 231(**2322**), 232(**2323**), 235(**2307**), 236(**2308**), 251, 308, 310, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 319, 321, 322, 323, 330, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 345, 346, 347, 348, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 360, 361, 362, 365, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 385, 390, 394, 396, 401, 412, 414, 415, 431, 474, 481
ENGR 482
GEOG 202(**1303**), 301, 305, 323
HIST (any course) 101(**2311**), 102(**2312**)
HORT 203
HUMA 211, 213, 303, 304
LAND 240, 340
LBAR 203, 331, 332, 333
LING 307, 310,
MODL (any course ♣)
MUSC 200, 201(**MUSI 1306**), 311, 312, 315, 319, 321, 324
PHIL 111(**2306**), 251(**1301**), any course (except 240, 341, 342)
RELS 211, 213, 303, 304, 317, 351, 360
THAR 101, 155, 201, 280, 281
WMST 200, 333, 374, 461, 473, 474, 477

♥ 7. **Visual and Performing Arts** (3 hrs) _____
ANTH 324
ARCH 430, 434, 437
ARTS 103, 111, 112, 149(**1303**), 150(**1304**), 305, 312, 329, 330, 335, 349, 350
CARC 335
CLAS 352
ENDS 101, 115, 149, 150, 250, 311
ENGL 212, 219, 251, 312, 317, 340, 351, 356, 385, 412
FILM 201, 301, 394
FREN 414
GERM 334
HORT 203
KINE 160-174, 311
LAND 240
MODL 341, 352
MUSC 200, 201(**MUSI 1306**), 302, 311, 312, 315, 319, 321, 324
PERF 301
PHIL 330, 375
RUSS 341
SPAN 410
THAR 101, 110, 155, 201, 210, 280, 281, 407

8. **Physical Education** (2 hrs) _____
KINE 199 (**1101**) must be taken S/U
KINE 198(**1100**) Health and Fitness

v 9. **Int'l & Cultural Diversity** (6 hrs min) _____
ACCT 445
AGEC 452
AGED 422
AGRO 489
ANTH 205, 210, 300, 301, 306, 311, 314, 315, 319, 324, 403, 404, 426,
ARCH 345
ARTS 150 (**1304**), (350 study abroad only)
CARC 301, 311, 321, 331, 335
COMM 327, 335, 425
COSC (484 & 494 study abroad only)
ECON 312, 319, 320, 324, 330
ENDS 150, (484 & 494 study abroad only)
ENGL 222 (**2333**), 232 (**2323**), 251, 333, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 352, 362, 374, 378, 474
FINC 445
FREN 301, 322, 336, 414, 418
GEOG 202 (**1303**), 301, 305, 306, 311, 320, 321, 323, 402
GERM 305, 322
HIST 210, 214, 258, 301, 305, 307, 319, 324, 336, 339, 342, 343, 345, 346, 348, 352, 355, 356, 402, 405, 407, 412, 439, 440, 441, 449, 451, 455, 460, 461, 464, 473, 477
HLTH 236, 334
HORT 335
HUMA 303, 304
IBUS 401, 445, 446, 450, 452
INST 210, 322
JOUR 406, 407
LAND 240
LBAR 331, 332, 333
LING 307, 402
MGMT 430, 450, 452
MKTG 330, 401
MODL 222, 341, 342, 352, 362
MUSC 312, 315, 319, 324
PHIL 283, 416, 419
PLAN 415
POLS 317, 322, 323, 324, 329, 331, 338, 365, 366, 462
PSYC 300
RELS 303, 304, 403
RLEM 314
RPTS 340
RUSS 341, 401
SOCI 316, 317, 321, 323, 324, 325, 329, 330, 340, 350, 403, 419, 424
SPAN 312, 320, 410, 411, 412, 421, 450
TEFB 271
THAR 201, 281
VTPB 221
WMST 300, 316, 317, 333, 374, 404, 407, 424, 430, 461, 462, 473, 474, 477

v Underlined courses: If an Int'l & Cultural Diversity course satisfies another University Core Curriculum requirement, it can be used to satisfy both requirements.

♦MATH 141 & 166 and MATH 142 & 131 interchange upon change of curriculum (Medical schools require MATH 131)

♠Business majors must choose from PSYC, SOCI, ANTH, or WMST (Management and Marketing majors must take PSYC)

♠Education majors have limited choices and should check catalog

♠Construction Science requires ECON 202

♠Landscape Architecture requires SOCI 321

♣If MODL is used for this requirement, it must be in a different language than taken in high school, or, if in the same language, at the 200-level or higher

♣Engineering requires ENGR 482 or PHIL 482

♣Construction Science requires ENDS 249

♣Landscape Architecture requires ENDS 150

♥Landscape Architecture requires LAND 240

APPENDIX C

PURPOSES AND GOALS

(Gardener, J.N., & Van der Veer, G., 1998, p. 22)

Review of the proceedings from The Senior Year Experience and Students in Transition conferences suggests that there are three major purposes of the SYE movement: (1) to bring *integration* and closure to the undergraduate experience, (2) to provide students with an opportunity to *reflect* on the meaning of their college experience, and (3) to facilitate graduating students' *transition* to postcollege life. More specifically, the SYE movement appears to be pursuing ten particular goals:

1. Promoting the coherence and relevance of *general education*
2. Promoting integration and connections between *general education* and the *academic major*
3. Fostering integration and synthesis *within* the *academic major*
4. Promoting meaningful connections between the *academic major* and *work (career)* experiences
5. Explicitly and intentionally developing important student *skills, competencies, and perspectives* that are tacitly or incidentally developed in the college curriculum (for example, leadership skills and character and values development)
6. Enhancing awareness of and support for the key personal *adjustments* encountered by seniors during their *transition* from *college to postcollege* life
7. Improving seniors' *career* preparation and *preprofessional* development, that is, facilitating their transition from the academic to the professional world
8. Enhancing seniors' preparation and prospects for *postgraduate education*
9. Promoting effective *life planning and decision making* with respect to practical issues likely to be encountered in adult life after college (for example, financial planning, marriage, and family planning)
10. Encouraging a sense of *unity and community* among the senior class, which can serve as a foundation for later *alumni networking* and future *alumni support of the college*

APPENDIX D

SURVEY FOR GRADUATING SENIORS

I. Statements in Exit Survey for all colleges except Education

1. As I prepare to graduate, I have thought about the purpose of my undergraduate education SA A U D SD

2. The University Core Curriculum enriched and broadened my undergraduate education. SA A U D SD

3. Based upon the goals that I set for myself when I entered Texas A&M, I consider myself successful. SA A U D SD

4. Based upon the expectations set for me by the University when I entered Texas A&M, I consider myself successful SA A U D SD

5. My goals are different than the University's expectations of me.
   SA A U D SD

II. Statements in Exit Survey for College of Education

1. As I prepare to graduate, I have thought about the purpose of my undergraduate education SA A U D SD

2. [not asked]

3. Based upon the goals that I set for myself when I entered Texas A&M, I consider myself successful. SA A U D SD

4. [not asked]

5. My goals are different than the University's expectations of me.
   SA A U D SD

APPENDIX E

LETTER OF INVITATION

February 6, 2007
Aggie
4 Ct
College Station, TX 77840

Dear Ms. :

This letter is to invite you to participate in a research study regarding if and how seniors at Texas A&M University make meaning of their undergraduate education as they prepare to graduate. You were selected to be a participant because you have applied for graduation during Spring 2007. This study is being conducted with the support of the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Associate Provost for Academic Services.

Approximately 25 graduating seniors will participate in this study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to meet one time with me as the principal researcher for a personal interview. This interview may last up to an hour and will be recorded through field notes made by me during the interview. Nevertheless, the individual data from this study will be confidential, and the records of this study will be kept private. Individual names will not be used, nor will students be identified personally in any way or at any time in the research outcomes. While there are neither direct benefits nor compensation to you for participation, future undergraduate students at Texas A&M University may benefit from the information gathered as a result of this study.

Your perspective is valuable and would offer a unique contribution in this research study. I realize that this is a very busy time in your career as an undergraduate, but student participation is essential in identifying needs and experiences of graduating seniors at Texas A&M University. If you agree to participate, every effort will be made to facilitate your participation with minimal interruption to your other commitments. Interviews will be held on campus, and they will be scheduled during weekday hours around class and work schedules.

Please reply to this invitation Friday, February 9, 2007 or before if you agree to participate. I will then follow up with you to arrange an interview time on campus sometime in the next few weeks.

Your attention and assistance in this study are greatly appreciated.

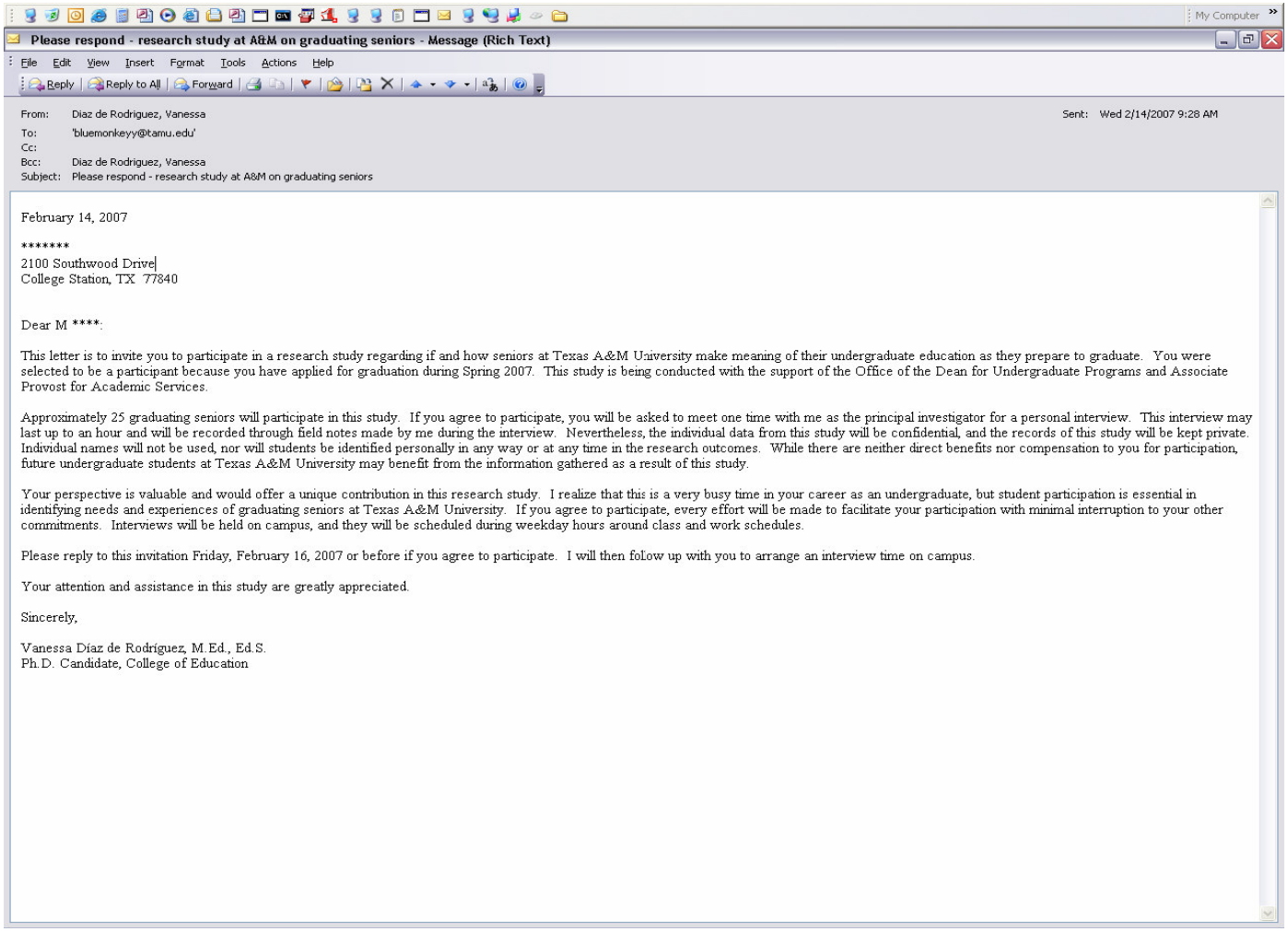
Sincerely,

Vanessa Díaz de Rodríguez

Vanessa Díaz de Rodríguez, M.Ed., Ed.S.
Ph.D. Candidate, College of Education

APPENDIX F

E-MAIL INVITATION



Please respond - research study at A&M on graduating seniors - Message (Rich Text)

File Edit View Insert Format Tools Actions Help

Reply | Reply to All | Forward

From: Diaz de Rodriguez, Vanessa
Sent: Wed 2/14/2007 9:28 AM
To: 'bluemonkeyy@tamu.edu'
Cc:
Bcc: Diaz de Rodriguez, Vanessa
Subject: Please respond - research study at A&M on graduating seniors

February 14, 2007

****
2100 Southwood Drive
College Station, TX 77840

Dear M ****:

This letter is to invite you to participate in a research study regarding if and how seniors at Texas A&M University make meaning of their undergraduate education as they prepare to graduate. You were selected to be a participant because you have applied for graduation during Spring 2007. This study is being conducted with the support of the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Associate Provost for Academic Services.

Approximately 25 graduating seniors will participate in this study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to meet one time with me as the principal investigator for a personal interview. This interview may last up to an hour and will be recorded through field notes made by me during the interview. Nevertheless, the individual data from this study will be confidential, and the records of this study will be kept private. Individual names will not be used, nor will students be identified personally in any way or at any time in the research outcomes. While there are neither direct benefits nor compensation to you for participation, future undergraduate students at Texas A&M University may benefit from the information gathered as a result of this study.

Your perspective is valuable and would offer a unique contribution in this research study. I realize that this is a very busy time in your career as an undergraduate, but student participation is essential in identifying needs and experiences of graduating seniors at Texas A&M University. If you agree to participate, every effort will be made to facilitate your participation with minimal interruption to your other commitments. Interviews will be held on campus, and they will be scheduled during weekday hours around class and work schedules.

Please reply to this invitation Friday, February 16, 2007 or before if you agree to participate. I will then follow up with you to arrange an interview time on campus.

Your attention and assistance in this study are greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Vanessa Díaz de Rodríguez, M.Ed., Ed.S.
Ph.D. Candidate, College of Education

APPENDIX G

INFORMATION SHEET

The Senior Year Experience at Texas A&M University

You have been asked to participate in a research study regarding if and how undergraduates make meaning of their undergraduate education. You were selected to be a possible participant because you have applied for graduation Spring 2007. Approximately 25 graduating seniors will participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to explore if graduating seniors at Texas A&M University recognize the purpose of undergraduate education as they reflect on their undergraduate experience.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to meet once with the principal researcher for a personal interview. This interview may last up to an hour and will be recorded through field notes by the researcher. The risks of harm associated with this study are minimal. Your name will not be used, nor will you be identified personally in any way or at any time. Nevertheless, because of the small number of participants, fewer than twenty-five, there is some possibility that you may be identified as a participant in this study. There are no direct benefits to you for participation, though future students at Texas A&M University may benefit from the information gathered as a result of this study.

You will not receive any type of compensation for your participation.

This study is confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only the principal researcher, Vanessa Díaz de Rodríguez, will have access. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Texas A&M University or with the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Programs. If you decide to participate, you are free to refuse to answer any of the questions that may make you uncomfortable. You can withdraw at any time without your relations with the University, job, benefits, etc., being affected. You can contact Vanessa Díaz de Rodríguez with any questions about this study.

This research study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board – Human Subjects in Research, Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, you can contact the Institutional Review Board through M. Melissa McIlhaney, IRB Program Coordinator, Office of Research Compliance, (979)458.4067, mcilhaney@tamu.edu.

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the information sheet for your records.

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
QUESTIONS FOR GRADUATING SENIORS

Purpose of the study

This study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. How Texas A&M graduating seniors make meaning of their undergraduate education?
2. How do graduating seniors at Texas A&M University define the purpose of undergraduate education?
3. What opportunities do Texas A&M graduating seniors have to integrate all of their undergraduate experiences in order to get closure?

Set-up for Interview:

1. Each interview will be held in a small meeting room of the MSC.
2. The researcher will take field notes during the interviews for later analysis.
3. Interviews will be scheduled during weekday hours and around the students' class and work schedules.
4. Interviews will not be scheduled at lunch time to avoid the distraction of eating during the interview.
5. Bottled drinking water will be available.
6. The room will include a rectangular table(s) with chairs around the perimeter.
7. The researcher will have a notebook to take notes, as well as a copy of the interview protocol and questions.
8. The researcher will open the interview with an overview of the purpose of the study, a review of the consent form, and a reminder of the need for the field notes.

I. Interview Questions

1. As you prepare to graduate, what have you thought about your undergraduate education?

2. How do you define the purpose of undergraduate education?

3. Has this changed over the course of fours years?

4. To whom, if anyone, have you talked regarding your college education as you prepare to graduate?

5. What is the purpose of the University Core Curriculum?

6. What was your classification when you completed your core curriculum courses?

7. What are the University's expectations of you as a graduate of Texas A&M?

8. How has the University communicated its expectations of you?

9. Which courses had the biggest impact on your learning? Why was this impact so big? How were these courses structured?

10. Based upon the goals that you set for yourself when you entered Texas A&M, do you consider yourself successful? Why or why not?

11. Based upon the expectations set for you by the University when you entered Texas A&M, do you consider yourself successful? Why or why not?

12. How are your goals different than the University's expectations of you?

13. What, if anything, is missing in your undergraduate degree for the transition to your next step?

14. What was your experience with the Core Curriculum requirement for International & Cultural Diversity?

15. How did you select your major?

16. Have you been asked to develop, present, and defend your opinion in any of your classes?

17. When would you have been ready to accept more challenge, problem-solving, independence in your courses?

18. Are you experiencing any uncertainty as you prepare to graduate?

19. What role could/should the University play in helping students to address uncertainty?

20. What role could/should the University play in helping seniors to prepare for graduation?

21. What opportunities do Texas A&M graduating seniors have to integrate all of their undergraduate experiences in order to get closure?

II. Demographic Information (completed by interviewer)

Class: (circle one) '04 '05 '06 '07 other_____

At Graduation….

Major: _____

As a first-semester student at A&M...

Major: _____

Parents' educational level: (circle one for each parent)

Mother: High School Some College College Degree Graduate Degree

Father: High School Some College College Degree Graduate Degree

Other Activities and Commitments

APPENDIX I

THANK YOU LETTER

Dear XXX-

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. Your insight and the experiences that you shared with me have provided richness and depth to my research, which will be valuable as I develop recommendations regarding the undergraduate experience at Texas A&M University. I very much enjoyed meeting with you yesterday and greatly appreciate the time that you dedicated to doing so.

I wish you all the best as you complete your undergraduate time at Texas A&M.

Sincerely,

Vanessa Díaz
vdiaz@tamu.edu
979.862.3959 Office

APPENDIX J

May 3, 2007

Dear xxx-

I trust that your semester has gone well and that you are looking forward to graduation. I am doing well, myself, and I am happy to report that I have made good progress in my research.

When we met for the interview, I told you that I would contact you later this semester to offer you the opportunity to read the compilation of my interviews. If you are available and interested in doing this, I will have a printed copy available in my office for you to review next week. Please let me know if this is something that would be of interest to you, and we can arrange for you to come by my office at a mutually convenient time.

In the meantime, I offer you my heartfelt congratulations as you complete your tenure as an undergraduate student at Texas A&M University.

Sincerely, Vanessa Díaz

****

Vanessa Díaz de Rodríguez, M.Ed., Ed.S.
Texas A&M University
TAMU 1257
College Station, TX 77843-1257
979.862.3959

VITA

Vanessa Díaz de Rodríguez
Texas A&M University, Department of EAHR
College Station, TX 77845-4226, USA
vdiaz@tamu.edu

EDUCATION

- Ph.D. in Educational Administration; December 2007
  Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas
- Specialist of Education in Counselor Education; August 1984
- Master of Education in Counselor Education; August 1984
- Bachelor of Science in Psychology; June 1981
  University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Division of Student Affairs, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843

- **Interim Director**, Department of Multicultural Services; Oct. 2005 – Sept. 2006
- **Associate Director**, Department of Student Life; July 2004 – Sept. 2005
- **Assistant Director**, Department of Student Life; Feb. 1996 – July 2004

Division of Student Affairs, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida 33620

- **Associate Dean Of Students**, Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs; Dec. 1990 - Jan. 1996
- **Assistant Dean Of Students**, Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs; Aug. 1989 - Dec. 1990
- **Financial Aid Specialist**, Student Financial Aid Office; June 1986 - July 1989
- **Financial Aid Counselor**, Financial Aid Office; June 1985 - June 1986

AWARDS

- **2005 SGA Champion of Diversity Award**, Professional Staff, Texas A&M University
- **2002 Enhancing Diversity Award**, Professional Staff, Texas A&M University
- **2000 Professional Staff** Award, Texas A&M University
- **1994 Outstanding Staff Advisor** Award, University of South Florida
- **1993 Outstanding Staff** Award, University of South Florida

CURRENT PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

- **AAC&U** – Association of American Colleges & Universities
- **NASPA** – National Association of Student Personnel Administrators
- **ACPA** – American College Personnel Administrators
- **Fulbright Association**