Title

The Role of Faculty and Peer Interactions in Supporting Humanities Students' Persistence and Post-Graduation Aspirations: A Case Study

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Introduction

In recent years, popular discourse in the U.S. has increasingly questioned the relevance of humanities education in the 21st century (Alvarez, 2012; Jaschik, 2014; Kiley, 2013; Weissman, 2012). Concurrently, humanities programs in higher education in the U.S. have continued to suffer from diminishing institutional support (Brinkley, 2009; Brint, 2002; Brint, Levy, Riddle, & Turk-Bicakci & Levy, 2005; Zuckerman & Ehrenberg, 2009). Some scholars suggest that the decreased support for humanities education is due to its perceived lack of relevance both to institutional revenue generation and to student employment preparation, especially compared to STEM and pre-professional areas of study (Taylor, Cantwell & Slaughter, 2013). Although many students still continue to pursue degrees in the humanities, the social, cultural, and fiscal undermining of the humanities has made it crucial that scholars begin to explore the factors that support humanities students' educational experiences.

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of third- and fourth-year undergraduate humanities students in order to better understand their persistence despite increasing social and educational emphasis on STEM and pre-professional areas of study (e.g., business administration, management, nursing) and the employment skills related to these fields. For the purposes of this study, "persistence" was defined as students' continued commitment to a humanities major as evidenced by their "declaration" of and intention to graduate with a degree in a humanities discipline. The support of post-graduation goals was of particular interest due to the questioned relevance of humanities education to students' post-graduation employment (Alvarez, 2012; Kiley, 2013). Student interactions with faculty members in their respective departments and with their departmental peers was also explored due to longstanding research in higher education suggesting that such interactions have a profound impact on student experiences and outcomes (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978, 1991; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris & Cardoza, 2003; Terenzini & Theophilides, 1981). Drawing on participant observation and in-depth interviews with third- and fourth-year humanities students, this qualitative study investigated the following question: How do humanities students' interactions with departmental faculty members and peers influence their persistence and post-graduation goals?

Literature Review

Academic Capitalism and the "Humanities Crisis"

This case study is grounded in scholarship that explores changes in the national and global economy and the response of higher education institutions (HEIs). Scholars suggest that in recent decades a new, post-industrial economy has emerged which emphasizes privatization, entrepreneurialism, and neoliberal capitalism—all of which have led to increased instrumentalism and career-centrism in HEIs (Bok, 2003; Clark, 1998; Noble, 2001; Williams, 2013). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) call this new economic paradigm "academic capitalism" and posit that due to growing neoliberal policies that favor revenue generation, HEIs have begun to conform to a "knowledge-learning regime" that privileges forms of knowledge that have closer ties to the market economy. As a result, U.S. STEM and pre-professional programs that are more aligned with the market economy have received more institutional support in the form of program, personnel, and operational development (Brint et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2013).

Concurrently, HEIs have also taken up the call to produce highly trained workers for the new economy (Canaan & Shumar, 2008). Although colleges and universities have historically been concerned with career preparation, the decline in funding and support for humanities education in recent decades and increased support for STEM and pre-professional fields suggests that U.S. HEIs are placing an increased value on areas of study that have more instrumental or labor market value (Brint, 2002; Brint et al., 2005; Shumar, 2004; Taylor et al., 2013). As a result of this shift in institutional priorities, areas such as the humanities, may experience varying degrees of marginalization due to their perceived lack of relevance to student employment preparation and the labor market.

Recent data reported by the *Humanities Indicators* suggests that in several aspects, humanities education has become marginalized over the last several decades (AAA&S, 2015a). Although scholars vary in their assessment of the "humanities crisis," many acknowledge that the marginalization and subsequent decline in support for the humanities is a direct result of shrinking state support for higher education. From 1992 to 2012, U.S. government appropriations as a percentage of public HEIs' total operating revenue dropped from 37 to 22 percent (NCES, 2014), leading many public HEIs to increase their attention on revenue generating activities and programs in order to compensate for diminishing state support (Bok, 2003; Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Clark, 1998; Noble, 2001; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Williams, 2013). Due to STEM and pre-professional programs' stronger revenue-generating potential, these programs have received increased institutional support while humanities programs have become increasingly deprioritized (Brint, 2002; Brint et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2013).

On top of this shift in government funding and institutional priorities, humanities programs and students must also contend with social and cultural messages that question the relevance and value of the humanities in the 21st century. In December of 2012 the U.S. Florida state legislature proposed a two-

tier tuition system for students in the state's public universities that would suspend the tuition rate for students in "strategic areas," such as STEM, but allow tuition to increase for other disciplines. According to *The New York Times*, this sent a clear message to the public: "Give us engineers, scientists, health care specialists and technology experts. Do not worry so much about historians, philosophers, anthropologists and English majors" (Alvarez, 2012).

In addition to the dismissal of the humanities by public officials in Florida and elsewhere (Kiley, 2013), greater macro-level influences have also discouraged students from majoring in the humanities. The mounting cost of higher education, for example, as well as heightened concerns over unemployment after the 2008 financial crisis have made both students and parents in the U.S. wary of investing in humanities degrees that are perceived to be less valuable in the labor market than other degrees (Lewin, 2013). Students who do decide to major in the humanities are faced with messages from the media that not only question the value of their degrees but also their drive and work ethic. *The Huffington Post* for example ranked humanities majors as among the "worst college majors" to choose (Thomas, 2014) and *New York Magazine* reported on one study finding that "Humanities Majors Are Loafers" (Dahl, 2014). Although the article may have sensationalized the study findings, such examples provide evidence of the social and cultural messages that devalue humanities students and their area of study. According to one reporter, "Public consensus is that [humanities students] are going to fail. They cite minimal job offers with lower pay…and the growing perception that the true path to success lies in STEM degrees" (Agrawal 2014).

Adding to this discouraging outlook for the humanities is recent data indicating that humanities departments are graduating less students now than ever before despite the overall growing number of college attendees. From 1966 to 2010, the percentage of U.S. bachelor's degrees conferred in the humanities fell by half, from 14 to 7 percent of all degrees awarded (AAA&S, 2015a). In addition, many graduate level programs in the humanities have either restricted their enrollment, downsized, or have been dismantled altogether (Wilson, 2012). While the shrinkage of graduate level programs may not have a direct affect on undergraduate humanities students per se, such occurrences may discourage students from majoring in the humanities or continuing in their programs.

The Importance of the Humanities for Democracy

The marginalization of the humanities in U.S. higher education and the greater social context is especially troubling when one considers the importance of the humanities in fostering democratic citizenship skills. Currently, a variety of scholarship points to the value of humanities education in encouraging cultural

competency, appreciation for diversity, and democratic dialogue (Christinidis & Ellis, 2012; Donald, 2007; Engberg, 2007; Hurtado, 2009; Kent, 2012; Nussbaum, 2002, 2010). Hillygus (2005) explored the relationship between higher education and political engagement and found that humanities education was linked to improvements in civic education outcomes. Findings complemented a study by Nie and Hillygus (2001) that revealed that humanities and social science students were more likely to engage in community service and participating in politics after college. Nussbaum (2010) also argued that because the humanities help to teach "skills for life," such as critical thinking and negotiating across racial differences, cuts in humanities education "pose a threat to democracy itself" (p. 11). Hence, the marginalization of the humanities is not only a matter of shifting institutional priorities but threatens to weaken the historical connection between higher education and democratic citizenship skills (Christinidis & Ellis, 2012; Smith, 2011).

The value of the humanities in regards to its ability to foster democratic citizenship skills has perhaps never been more relevant considering the current political climate under the Trump administration. Since the election of President Trump in November of 2016, scholars and journalists have taken note of the social and political divides that have grown due to the Trump administration's polarizing agenda on issues such as immigration, education, and healthcare that many argue pose a threat to low-SES communities and communities of color (Bourbon, 2017; Foran, 2017; Wilson, 2017). It is especially troubling that humanities education continues to be undermined given this period of heightened political divisiveness that falls across class and racial lines.

Understanding Student-Faculty and Student-Peer Interactions

In order to gain a better understanding of humanities students and experiences that impact their persistence, this study focuses on the interactions and relationships that students build with faculty members due to scholarship that highlights the usefulness of examining student-faculty interaction as a contributing factor to student outcomes (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Lamport, 1993; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978, 1991; Theophilides & Terenzini, 1981; Woodside, Wong & Weist, 1999). In particular, Endo and Harpel (1982) found that different aspects of student-faculty interaction, including formal and informal interaction, faculty advising, and helpfulness of faculty were all strongly related to students' academic outcomes and satisfaction with their educational experience. More recently, Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010) found that student-faculty interactions played a crucial role in developing college students' academic self-concept, motivation, and achievement. Studies have also shown that faculty members taking an active interest in students'

academic progress may lead to significant increases in students' intellectual and professional development (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Cokely, 2000).

The conceptual foundation for this study is also grounded in scholarship that explores the connection between student-peer interaction and student outcomes. Seminal studies such as those conducted by Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993) have found that peer support is important for students' overall success in college. Richardson and Skinner (1992) as well as Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris and Cardoza (2003) have argued that peer support is crucial for student success since peers are often better able to provide students with context-specific resources, such as information about classes or professors, than external forms of support including family members. In addition, Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) found that positive and meaningful peer interactions play a significant role in influencing students' psychological adjustment to college.

Methods

Study Site and Participants

This study can be classified as a "basic qualitative study" as the aim was to explore how "individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds" (Merriam, 2009, p. 22). However, I also drew heavily from ethnographic methods of data collection, as my goal was to "understand the interaction of individuals not just with others, but also with the culture of the society in which they live" (Merriam, 2009, p. 22). The subject of study was the students within a humanities division at a public, research-oriented HEI called Western State University (WSU) (all names are pseudonyms).

WSU is a large, research-oriented public university located on the West Coast of the U.S. As a public institution, there is a large transfer student population and a relatively diverse student population in regards to race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. As a research-oriented university, there is a strong emphasis on STEM education and research. In addition, pre-professional disciplines are also popular areas of study with competitive application processes. Nonetheless, the university also boasts strong programs in the humanities that are highly ranked. Due to the relative strength of these humanities programs in an arguably STEM- and pre-professional centric institutional and social context, this site was an ideal location to investigate the role of student-faculty and student-peer interaction in supporting the persistence of humanities students and their post-graduation aspirations.

Within the humanities division, I focused specifically on four majors—art history, classics, English, and philosophy—because they are considered to be some of the "core disciplines" of the humanities and are consistently found in humanities divisions nationwide in the U.S. (AAA&S, 2015b). Participants were recruited through flyers and peer referrals to increase the sample size to four participants per major, for a total of sixteen participants. In order to limit study participants to those who had "persisted," all third- and fourth-year students who expressed interest in participating were screened in order to ensure that they had declared a humanities major and intended to graduate with their major. Students were also offered a $15 gift card as an incentive for their participation.

The final sample of participants consisted of students who self-identified as "White" (7), "Latino/Hispanic" (3), "Asian" (2), "Mixed-Race" (2), and "African American/Black" (2). Nine out of sixteen participants were female and all participants were between 20 to 24 years old. There was a relatively even distribution of students who identified as "middle class," "lower middle class" and "working class."

Interviews

Sixteen one-hour interviews comprised the majority of the data for this study. These semi-structured, individual interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Interviews began with general questions about students' backgrounds and the journey that led them to choosing their respective majors. Interviews were structured to then probe deeper into students' experiences with faculty and peers in their departments and how such interactions have shaped their persistence and post-graduation aspirations. In addition, students were asked how they felt their majors were perceived by non-humanities students as well as the university as a whole. A total of four interviews per discipline were sufficient in order to reach a point of "saturation" in which no significant new information was gained through further interviewing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Participant Observation

In order to help ensure accuracy and allow for the possibility of alternative explanations I also conducted participant observation in order to obtain additional information that may not have surfaced during interviews (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Blommaert & Jie, 2010). Participant observation included four hours of field research for each department, and consisted of visits to departmental offices, student club meetings, as well as departmental events. The undergraduate

student clubs associated with the four departments were: the Art History Association, the Classics Club, the English Colloquium, as well as the Philosophy Society. Prior to attending meetings, I contacted club leaders in order to gain permission to attend their gatherings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

Data Analysis & Coding

Both the interview transcripts and field notes from participant observation were coded in order to identify emerging themes across participants and fields of study (Merriam, 2009). Using constant comparative analysis, I began by identifying several emerging themes and developed more detailed sub-themes as new data became available (Bogdan & Biklan, 2004, p. 73). Web-based coding software (*Dedoose*) was used to facilitate the process. The first phase of analysis focused primarily on process coding as it became apparent that it was first crucial to get a sense of how students interacted with each other and faculty members in order to navigate through and persist in their academic programs. Emotion coding revealed sub-themes such as students feeling frustrated by societal and institutional messages that demeaned their fields of study. As the analysis continued thematic coding was used to identify how various codes could be categorized into more comprehensive themes that could be translated into a comprehensive set of findings (Saldana, 2013).

Trustworthiness & Positionality

In addition to data triangulation, the trustworthiness of the data collection and interpretation processes was ensured through peer auditing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the data collection process, observations were recorded in a journal and then shared with two colleagues who provided comments to help guide the initial process. The data coding and interpretation process was also shared with colleagues who reviewed transcript excerpts as well as the codes that were assigned to areas of text. Their feedback assisted in the assessment of my own biases and assumptions during the data analysis process. Trustworthiness was also enhanced through member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

An additional aspect that ought to be disclosed is my positionality as the author. As an undergraduate student I majored in history and later pursued an advanced degree in history. I consider myself to be a humanist and strongly value humanistic inquiry and am an advocate for humanities education. While I recognize the value of STEM (and other science-related) education, I am critical of the dominance that STEM has taken in regards to institutional and policy-related priorities.

Findings and Interpretations

Following the tenets of qualitative and ethnographic inquiry, the findings and interpretations are informed by participants' personal narratives and are illustrated through the use of "thick description" (Denzin, 1989). Personal narratives of participants are added whenever possible in order to provide a rich, contextual understanding of experiences. This approach of using personal narratives and data from select participants to present a theme, accompanied by quotations, is consistent with qualitative and ethnographic methods that provide insight into participant experiences and how they make meaning of those experiences (Carspecken, 1996; Creswell, 1998; Hochschild, 2003; Newman & Chen, 2007).

The Role of Faculty Accessibility in Providing Opportunities for Academic and Post-Grad Support

All participants indicated that their strong, personal interest in their respective areas of study was a significant factor in helping them to decide on a major; however, participants' persistence was affected by the level of academic support they received from faculty members. Overall, greater faculty accessibility allowed students to receive greater levels of academic support.

For Marie, a 24-year-old transfer student, majoring in philosophy was not an easy choice. Although she found the subject matter to be interesting, Marie originally balked at the idea of being called a "navel gazer" by her family and peers. Eventually, however, Marie decided to continue with her major due to the considerable amount of support she received from faculty advisors who helped her to see the importance and relevance of philosophy to both the social and natural world. According to Marie, it was faculty members' accessibility that provided her with the opportunities to explore her discipline in a meaningful way, which in turn, helped her to persist in her major. In describing the accessible nature of faculty members in her department, Marie stated that:

> Our professors—all of them that I've had and what I hear from other people's experience—are really open in terms of office hours or just discussing through email. You just get this sense that the professors really do enjoy you coming to talk to them. Because all of them, while being professors and writing and publishing and stuff are still happy to talk philosophy with you.

Marie recognized that her professors were busy with many responsibilities outside the classroom but despite this, were generous with their time in interacting with

students. According to Marie and other philosophy students, this accessibility was crucial in providing them with opportunities to receive much needed guidance and academic support.

Nellie, a fourth-year English student, also reported on the importance of faculty accessibility and the role that faculty played in helping her to feel supported in her coursework. According to Nellie:

> There are definitely professors here that go above and beyond. I've had a lot of professors who are willing to work with you. Most of the professors I've had are really supportive and write like a page of notes and help you out any time you're willing to come in and meet them half way. This has definitely helped me to do well in the English department and has helped me to complete the program.

Nellie acknowledged that to some degree cultivating a relationship with faculty members required that students meet faculty "half way." However, if students made an effort to seek out professors during office hours, for instance, faculty members were willing to provide various forms of support including detailed feedback on assignments. As a first generation college student whose parents were non-English speakers, Nellie explained that this type of faculty attention and support was crucial since her parents, who only obtained a sixth-grade education often "did not know how to support [her] academically."

In addition to providing support for current studies, positive relationships with faculty members, often facilitated by greater faculty accessibility, allowed students to gain support for post-graduation plans, such as applying to graduate school. For Carolyn, a fourth-year classics student, one faculty member in her department had become indispensable in assisting her with graduate school applications:

> So actually most grad programs that I'm looking at are rolling admissions which makes it a little confusing. I have a mentor in the department. He's kind of the undergraduate professor and he's helping me. For my senior thesis which I will submit for my application, he also helped me with that. So that's basically like what my game plan is to get into grad school.

According to Carolyn, the process of applying to graduate programs was "confusing" but she was receiving guidance and support from a helpful faculty mentor. This type of support was crucial for Carolyn as she had experienced some degree of insecurity about her major and career path since starting college. Some of the insecurity stemmed from her "strict and pragmatic Jewish parents" who

preferred that she switch to a biological science major and go to dental school due to the "greater salary and job security" offered by careers in that field. However, after receiving support from faculty members in her department, Carolyn decided to continue in the classics program and also to pursue a master's degree in classics upon graduation.

One student who reported having negative experiences with faculty members was Adam, who used the word "professional" multiple times when asked to describe the faculty members in the art history department:

> Everybody's countenance and comportment is—is very professional. It's not a personal experience. It almost feels like I'm in finance. Which is strange because we should be dealing with things that we're incredibly passionate about. But I think they, for some reason, channel passion into professionalism.

When asked to explain why the "professional" atmosphere of the art history department struck him as "strange" Adam explained that he had expected faculty members to be more accessible and to invite more engagement. He also revealed later on that a rigid professional hierarchy contributed to the lack of student-faculty collegiality and that professors often prioritized their own research and professional agendas over spending time with undergraduates. In fact, many students who were interested in completing an honors thesis had "to give it up because either their advisor didn't have the time…or for some bureaucratic reason couldn't do it." In addition to being confronted with these "closed doors," graduate students also did not provide much support as many of them had taken on the same attitude held by faculty.

When asked about whether or not undergraduates could expect to get into the university's graduate program in art history, Adam had this to say:

> Adam: Um…we're really looked at as kind of an annoying burden they have to deal with in addition to furthering their own research interests. So they really don't help us in that regard.
> Interviewer: Oh. That's surprising. Can you elaborate?
> Adam: You would think that, you know, they have a chance to stare at the future of art history, so why not put their stamp on it? But they largely ignore us.

As the vice president of the Art History Association, Adam was quite serious about pursuing a career in art history and had his mind set on going to graduate school. However, he indicated in his interview that he had difficulty getting support from faculty members (and even graduate students) in his department

because they were largely preoccupied with their own work. Due to what he perceived to be faculty members' lack of interest in supporting and engaging with undergraduate students, Adam also felt that getting into the university's graduate program in art history was not very feasible.

Although it was difficult to fully deduce why Adam's experience had been so different from that of participants in other departments, one thing was clear: students' perceptions of faculty accessibility influenced the degree to which they felt supported in their current studies and post-graduation aspirations. Ultimately, greater faculty accessibility led students to experience a greater degree of support while faculty inaccessibility and aloofness led students to feel marginalized in their own departments and less secure about their graduate school prospects.

Student-Peer Support: Sharing Information

One of the major findings of this study is that student-peer interactions also played a key role in supporting students' current educational experiences as well as their post-graduation plans. By observing student club meetings and asking participants about peer relationships, I found that students' proclivity for sharing information with one another helped them to make sense of classes, professors, departmental requirements, as well as career prospects. The sharing of information appeared to be a strong aspect of student-peer interaction for all four departments especially in the context of student club meetings.

During one Classics Club meeting, the vice president, Kathy, sets time aside to have a group discussion about upcoming classes:

> Kathy asks the group: Does anyone have a specific question about a class they're taking? One student mentions that he has heard of "Undergraduate Student Initiated Courses" but did not know what they were. Kathy explains that these classes are student-taught and offered for one-unit credit. She also tells them that it's "basically a discussion with ten other students, taught by one student and it's really fun." Some students seem interested in taking a USIC class and ask her for more details.

In addition to sharing general information about classes, students across all four disciplines also shared useful information about professors. During one meeting of the Philosophy Society, when a student asked the group if any of them had taken a class with a specific professor, one student responded by saying: "He's amazing but will make you talk in front of the whole class. He's also one of the best professors I've ever had." However, some students had more provocative comments about their professors that came with specific warnings:

During the middle of the meeting, as students became more comfortable sharing their class experiences, one student begins to tell the group about an English department professor whose poetry is "hypersexual." She warns the other students that this professor tends to favor non-conventional subject matter and to not take his class if that isn't their "cup of tea."

Supplied with useful information about professors and course characteristics, students reported that they were better able to determine which classes they should take, which ones they should avoid, and were "more prepared for the classes" they decided to enroll in.

In many ways, student's sharing of information with one another also helped them to make sense of their post-graduation career opportunities. During multiple club meetings across the four disciplines, students frequently shared information and tips about jobs they had heard of in addition to graduate programs they were applying to. The importance of these types of interactions also came up during many interviews. Jake, a fourth-year classics student he explained that:

> Most of the students in my program are passionate about classics, but they're scared of the employment situation since everyone keeps saying we won't get jobs. I talk to them and that's where I get my opinion not only about grad school but about jobs that are out there. So that's how I get more knowledge about the application of classics to jobs out there, and that's helped a lot.

According to Jake, his peers in the classics department have played an important role in providing him with information about career opportunities, and perhaps most importantly, ideas about how he can apply his classics degree to the job market. Examples such as this and others demonstrate that although humanities students were aware that degrees in their fields were criticized for their lack of relevance to the job market, they were also able resist this narrative by helping each other to draw connections between their majors and potential careers.

Student-Peer Support: Bonding Over Common Experiences and Difficulties

Another key finding in regards to student-peer interactions is that such interactions often provided opportunities for students to bond over common experiences and hardships. Often times these hardships and struggles were specific to humanities students and their majors. During one interview, Molly

discussed how talking with her peers in the classics department was crucial in helping her to complete her senior capstone project:

> Lots of times you have those moments where you're like, what am I doing? Should I be doing this anymore? We're all fourth years, we're all going through the same lengthy process with our projects and we talk about it with each other a lot. So everyone is basically each other's therapist—it's like, don't give up now! You're so close to finishing. Keep it up.

Clearly, completing a capstone project had produced some challenges for Molly including times when she questioned whether or not she should continue. However, discussing the process with her peers had provided some of the support she needed to complete her project. In addition, it appears that students also provided a degree of psychological support to one other by acting as "each other's therapist." An interview with Kelsey also revealed in more detail how bonding over common struggles and challenges provided students with the support they needed to complete their senior-year projects:

> It's nice to have people who understand what you're going through. I'm noticing that every time I mention my thesis—I talk about it like *every* day—it takes over my life at this point…and people in other majors have no idea why that would be a challenging project. So when you have a bunch of English majors who are in this heavy research-based university they're going to understand what you're going through.

Perhaps what is most interesting is that humanities students also bonded over the common feeling they had of being marginalized. During field observations, students sometimes made remarks to one another, usually in jest, that indicated a common understanding of humanities majors as being perceived of as "inferior" to other majors. Although they never made reference to disciplines they were comparing themselves to, it was clear they had internalized some of the stereotypes that humanities majors face, such as humanities classes being "easy" or "irrelevant to the real world." During one meeting of the Philosophy Society, for example, a student presentation on metaphysics involved a conversation on the relationship between mathematics, physics, and philosophy. Half way into his talk, the presenter (a philosophy student) stopped and quipped:

> Now, you're not going to believe this, but there are philosophers out there who have actually asked, does there have to be numbers

in physics?—that's how ridiculous philosophy is. Change your major NOW.

In response to this remark, most of the students in attendance chuckle and nod in agreement. By reacting in unison in such a way, students revealed their common understanding of how "ridiculous" philosophy may appear to those outside the discipline. However, the collective agreement over the "ridiculous" nature of their field of study is not something they seemed to feel bad about. In fact, there was a sense of camaraderie in the marginalization they felt as students of philosophy and they seemed to both acknowledge this marginalization and bond over it. Their mutual laughter and nodding signaled to each other that they acknowledged the peculiarities of their discipline but also that they were "in it together."

Data from participant interviews also supported the idea that students were able to develop solidarity over what are considered to be the eccentricities of their disciplines. Classics majors in particular spoke about how their knowledge of languages such as Latin and Greek seemed to set them apart from students in other fields of study. Participants explained that a comprehensive knowledge of Latin and Greek was fundamental to understanding the ancient world and for reading ancient texts. Nonetheless they felt that in the modern world and on their university campus, their knowledge of these ancient languages often went unappreciated. During an interview with Carolyn, she explained how Latin and Greek were considered to be "dead languages" by society and other students, and that studying these languages actually helped to create a common bond between classics students. According to Carolyn:

> Most people, when you say you're studying Latin, say like, oh, it's a dead language. So it's a little bit of adversity for us. But the same goes for learning Swahili. There's just a certain kind of cohesion amongst us, just because it's so unique.

Carolyn felt that Latin was viewed as a frivolous or unimportant. However, a consequence of this is that the students felt a sense of "cohesion" in their common experience studying a language that is underappreciated and misunderstood as "dead."

Overall, participant interviews and observation revealed that interactions with peers in various contexts provided numerous forms of support for humanities students' educational experiences. Sharing information with one another not only helped to alleviate concerns about fulfilling major requirements but also helped students to persist in their academics and post-graduation aspirations. Peer interactions that involved bonding over common hardships and feelings of

marginalization also helped students to develop a sense of solidarity with others who shared their experiences and appreciation for the unique qualities of their disciplines.

Discussion & Implications

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of U.S. undergraduate humanities students in the context of increasing social and educational emphasis on STEM and pre-professional fields of study. Hinging on this overarching aim was an exploration of how student-faculty and student-peer interactions shaped and supported humanities students' persistence and post-graduation goals.

This study revealed that student-faculty interactions were crucial in shaping students' educational experiences and that faculty accessibility helped to provide many students with the support they needed for persisting in their programs. Students also reported that having supportive faculty was often a major influence in helping them to make sense of graduate degree programs and application processes. Without such support, students such as Adam and several of his peers felt a sense of alienation from their department and also greater insecurity about their post-graduation prospects.

One implication of this finding is that faculty members and instructors ought to recognize the impact that they have on undergraduate student success and that their interactions (or lack thereof) with students play a strong role in influencing how students make sense of their current studies as well their plans to further their studies in graduate school. This implication is especially relevant for those who teach in areas of study in which students may experience varying degrees of marginality on campus. On a broader level, this study finding is relevant for all faculty members who teach at large universities where a high student-to-faculty ratio may leave students feeling a lack of personal connection with their instructors. Faculty members can help to create a welcoming atmosphere and increase their accessibility to students by providing sufficient office hours and as much personal interaction as possible. In addition to faculty efforts, student affairs officers and other administrators can help to increase student-faculty interaction by providing opportunities for students and faculty to meet outside the classroom. This recommendation is also supported by prior research demonstrating that student-faculty engagement and collaboration play an important role in encouraging student retention (Gregerman, Lerner, Von Hippel, Jonides & Ngagda, 1998).

Findings from this study also point to the importance of student-peer support. Both data from interviews and participant observation revealed the many

benefits students reaped from positive peer interactions that included the sharing of information and bonding over shared experiences. In addition, findings suggested that student-peer interactions frequently involved a level of bonding over discipline-related hardships. By relating to one another in regards to these hardships, students were able to develop a solidarity in their common identity as humanities students, which then helped them to persist in their programs. These types of interactions also helped them to resist the narratives they had encountered that were disparaging towards their areas of study. As many of these interactions came about during student group meetings, the importance of student interest groups in supporting students' educational experiences cannot be overstated. In fact, this finding supports other research pointing to the importance of student interest groups in helping students to develop both positive personal and academic self concept (Tinto & Goodsell, 1994). A clear implication of this finding is that campus- and departmental-level administrators should work to provide students with sufficient resources and support for student organizations especially since some students reported difficulties in finding enough funding and departmental support for club meetings and events.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it was conducted at a large, selective, research-oriented university with a high student-to-faculty ratio. Findings in regards to student-faculty interaction may have been very different had this study been conducted at a small, liberal arts college or even at a smaller public university. The same can also be said on the issue of student-peer interactions. Hence, the findings of this study are particularly relevant for R1 institutions and further studies investigating the potential differential impact of institutional type on the educational experiences of humanities students may yield valuable information.

An additional limitation of this study is that it does not yield any information on how gender or race may play a role in student-peer and student-faculty interactions. While such an investigation was beyond the scope of this study, future research may uncover important ways in which these aspects of identity influence students' relationships with their peers and instructors and ultimately their persistence in their majors. Although it has been widely acknowledged that STEM education has historically and persistently excluded women and racial minorities (Gasiewski, Eagan, Garcia, Hurtado & Chang, 2012), humanities education is also affected by gender and racial exclusivity depending on the discipline. Philosophy for example has historically been and remains currently highly overrepresented by white males (Leslie, Cimpian, Meyer

& Freeland, 2015). While further study could certainly benefit from a critical framework to explore how gender and race affect student persistence, scholars ought to take into account the differences in diversity depending on discipline and whether the issue is racial or gender representation.

Conclusion

An overarching aim of this study was to shed light on undergraduate student experiences in areas of study that may be experiencing varying degrees of marginalization due to the social and educational emphasis on STEM and pre-professional education as well as the restructuring of HEIs towards more market-oriented programs and activities. According to some scholars, an "academic capitalist" higher education environment favoring areas of study with closer ties to the market economy has contributed to the marginalization of humanities programs especially in regards to institutional support (Bok, 2003; Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Clark, 1998; Noble, 2001; Rhoades & Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Williams, 2013). Due to STEM and pre-professional programs' stronger revenue-generating potential, these programs have received increased institutional support while humanities programs have become increasingly deprioritized (Brint, 2002; Brint et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2013). On top of this shift in institutional priorities, humanities programs and students are also faced with social and cultural messages that continue to question the relevance and value of humanities education in the 21st century (Alvarez, 2012; Kiley, 2013; Jaschik, 2014; Weissman, 2012). Due to the arguably marginalized status of humanities students and the lack of research on their educational experiences (Berlowitz, 2010), this study sought to investigate the role of student-faculty and student-peer interactions in supporting their persistence in their majors as well as their post-graduation aspirations.

Many sources continue to paint a bleak outlook for humanities education in the 21st century and point to trends showing continued decline in institutional funding for humanities programs and student baccalaureate attainment in the humanities (AAA&S, 2015a; Taylor et al., 2013). Such trends are troubling considering the current political climate and the important part that humanities education plays in fostering students' democratic citizenship skills as well as other critical learning outcomes (Christinidis & Ellis, 2012; Donald, 2007; Engberg, 2007; Kent, 2012; Nussbaum, 2002, 2010). As HEIs assess their role in shaping student outcomes in the 21st century they ought to consider how shifting institutional priorities may exacerbate the level of marginalization experienced by disciplines that are crucial for fostering many important student outcomes. In addition, HEIs ought to consider how shifting institutional priorities might also

increase the marginalization experienced by students within specific disciplines. Short of a reversal in institutional as well as broader social and cultural trends, however, U.S. humanities students are likely to continue to experience varying levels of marginalization and as a result, their educational experiences may become a growing area of concern in the years to come.

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