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A Qualitative Narrative Study about Mental Well-Being and Coping Strategies in Generation-Z Undergraduate Student Leaders

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A QUALITATIVE NARRATIVE STUDY ABOUT MENTAL WELL-BEING AND COPING STRATEGIES IN GENERATION-Z UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT LEADERS

by

Lacey Folsom, BS, MIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Doctor of Education

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY
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A QUALITATIVE NARRATIVE STUDY ABOUT MENTAL WELL-BEING AND COPING STRATEGIES IN GENERATION-Z UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT LEADERS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study was a qualitative narrative on the advantages experienced by Generation Z students who participated in leadership roles within university-sponsored student organizations. This study incorporated generational, coping, and transactional theories to help the researcher establish a potential link between the mental well-being of students and their participation in cocurricular university-sponsored groups. The primary goal of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how students perceived the influence of their participation in student organizations on their ability to handle mental well-being issues. It sought to explore whether factors such as time commitment, skill development, or an increased sense of belonging had an impact on how students managed and coped with these challenges. The findings of this study indicated three emerging themes regarding the well-being of student leaders involved in student organizations: (a) Student engagement with student organizations primarily results in feelings of support and an enhanced sense of community, (b) Lived experiences result in change of behavior and the implementation of coping strategies and learned behaviors, and (c) Challenges that negatively impact student well-being are primarily due to the internal pressure students place on themselves and the external pressure perceived by others.

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Finally, I extend my gratitude to my cohort, my colleagues, who quickly became friends. For their unwavering emotional support throughout the process, all of whom have left a lasting impression on me.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my family and many friends whose unwavering love and support served as a source of encouragement throughout my journey. A special acknowledgment goes to my husband, Randy Folsom, whose words of encouragement and confidence votes kept me going when my spirits dipped. I could not have done this without you. I am also deeply grateful to my loving parents and sisters who provided me with strength, support, patience, and motivation every step of the way.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

According to the American College Health Association (2022), there has been a consistent rise in the quantity of college students grappling with mental well-being issues, such as anxiety and depression. Feelings of anxiety and depression could potentially escalate to more severe consequences, including thoughts of suicide and ideations. According to Bellows (2021), a survey of 13,000 college students revealed that in 2020, one out of every five students displayed indications of suicidal behavior. The academic environment, social pressures, and the transition to adulthood can contribute to the overwhelming stress experienced by many students. It is crucial for educational institutions to acknowledge and address the mental health challenges faced by their students, offering adequate support and resources to help mitigate the risk of such distressing thoughts and ideations. Creating an open and compassionate campus culture can play a pivotal role in ensuring that students receive the necessary assistance and encouragement to navigate these difficult emotions.

Sarah Shulze, a student athlete at the University of Wisconsin, served as a poignant illustration of student suicide stemming from overwhelming emotions (Ledin, 2022). Despite being actively involved on campus as a student athlete, Sarah also interned at the state legislature and, by all accounts, had an active social life on campus where she had built a community of supportive friends. Following Sarah's death, the

institution made a commitment to increase suicide prevention programs and encourage students to seek counseling when they feel overwhelmed by the demands of college life (Lipson, 2018). Dartmouth University, which had multiple students commit suicide in a short period of time in 2020, partnered with a national organization, the Jed Foundation, to implement programs and policies that better support campus mental well-being (Bellows, 2021). For 35.7% of college students, the use of psychological or mental well-being services on campus was an important component of their success (American College Health Association, 2022). A decade ago, there was a presumed stigma that seemed to exist in undergraduate students toward mental well-being treatment, but incidents like Sarah's have encouraged institutions to increase access to mental well-being services on campus (Lipson, 2018).

As students confront the challenges of managing academic, social, personal, and financial aspects of their lives, they are susceptible to experiencing heightened levels of depression and anxiety (Scribner et al., 2020). Furthermore, the conventional college-age years coincide with a period when young adults are expected to make pivotal decisions that significantly impact their future, often leading to increased stress. This stress can be attributed to the myriad of developmental changes that occur during this phase of life. The phase of emerging adulthood, typically encompassing individuals between the ages of 18 and 29, is characterized by instability as these individuals grapple with identity exploration and the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Scroggs et al., 2021). According to a study of college-aged students, the top five potential life events frequently

reported to cause stress for college-aged students were beginning college, feelings of uncertainty about their future and careers, summer employment opportunities, moving or transferring to another university, and changes in living conditions (Petruzzello & Box, 2020).

During the emerging adulthood stage, people commonly experienced elevated stress and reduced positive mental well-being, increasing their risk of psychiatric disorders such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Halliburton et al., 2021). To face the emerging challenges of adulthood, people can use coping strategies to process their negative behavioral and emotional responses. Coping strategies are when the individual identified the problem and created strategies to change the situation impacting them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Failure to process stress resulted in feelings of anger, nervousness or anxiety, depression or sadness, lack of interest and energy, and physical irritability, such as upset stomach, headache, or muscular tension due to the allowing stress to manifest (Petruzzello & Box, 2020).

The adverse effects of stress can significantly impact student success. According to the 2022 results of the American College Health Association National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA), students claimed stress as one of the most significant factors that negatively impact their academics. The ACHA-NCHA Assessments from 2019 to 2022, consistently demonstrate that stress has progressively emerged as a more substantial concern in terms of student well-being. The latest study in this series indicated

that 44% of college students reported that their mental well-being had adversely affected their academic achievements (American College Health Association, 2019, 2022).

Background of the Problem

Over the past eight years, there has been an almost 50% increase in the diagnosis of stress and anxiety disorders among students (Stearns, 2022). In 2018, data from the American College Health Association revealed that 44.6% of college students described their stress levels as “higher than the average stress”, while 34% considered their stress to be “typical”, and 12.4% of students perceived their stress “exceptionally high” (Helmbrecht & Ayars, 2021). Furthermore, of the more than 26,000 students who completed the survey, 86% agreed that in the last 12 months they had felt overwhelmed by all they had to do (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Rising mental well-being concerns have been an issue for higher education institutions for decades (Stearns, 2022). A multitude of challenges and difficulties faced by students encompass academic pressures, workload, financial concerns, and the adaptation to college life, as indicated by Helmbrecht and Ayars (2021). In addition to these typical stressors encountered by college-aged students, the latest generation of students, Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010, have cited stressors related to social and political issues like gun violence, school safety, immigration, sexual harassment, and other current events (American Psychological Association, 2018).

In response to the increased usage of college mental well-being services, the United States Congress passed the Campus Care Act, which provided funding to develop

intervention programs for mental well-being on college campuses (Owen et al., 2006). Although student counseling centers on campus lead efforts to support student mental health, campus-wide mental well-being initiatives were gaining popularity. As a result of more inclusive educational practices, faculty, staff, and student leaders were able to attend trainings focused on de-escalation and coping techniques to aid their students and peers in navigating mental well-being concerns. Implementing high-impact learning opportunities such as learning communities and first-year seminars were also considered complementary health programs that can help reduce stress and build vital support systems for students (Hartman et al., 2017). There were several other educational programs to train members of the campus community to identify warning signs and recognize risk factors to determine when and how to intervene. These programs included mental well-being first aid and Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR), which can be used to train faculty, staff and students to respond to mental well-being issues (Bender et al., 2022).

Colleges are also implementing peer educator programs in which college students are selected and trained as peer mentors focused on health and wellness. These students are trained to promote healthy behaviors and positive decision-making (Wawrzynski & Lemon, 2021). Increasing the number of those trained to assist with mental well-being issues on campus was vital for educators because students who experience mental well-being problems during college may have adverse consequences such as lower academic

achievement (Benton et al., 2006; Halliburton et al., 2021; Scribner et al., 2020; Wolff et al., 2014).

Although peer mentorship initiatives can help foster student success, mentorship opportunities with faculty and staff have also demonstrated a significant impact on student achievement. Students who were known to have a support network of five or more trusted individuals upon whom they could depend during periods of stress or adversity exhibited a more positive perception of well-being (Wolff et al., 2014). Research conducted in collaboration with campus mental health counselors and co-curricular mentors discovered that the connections students developed with staff, coupled with the social support they received from peer groups, resulted in remarkable improvements in anxiety management and coping skills (Rehr & Nguyen, 2021). Positive relationships with academic motivation, the need for cognition, and positive attitudes toward literacy were also evident in frequent student-staff interactions (Haley, 2022).

In addition to access to mental well-being resources, there were positive correlations between the impact of student participation on student development and learning. Astin's (1984) Involvement Theory posed that co-curricular participation contributes to student success. Additionally, in their study, Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey (2014) underscored the significance of fostering a sense of community and belonging in the context of student success. Observing that students can accomplish this by becoming involved in a student organization or active participation in

structured campus activities, where they perceive an alignment with their personality and interests (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014).

Engagement in organizations that endorse positive lifestyle choices and effective self-management can have a beneficial impact on the well-being of undergraduate students (Olfert et al., 2022). Research also suggests that students with favorable well-being are more actively involved in the campus community, and exhibit better mental, emotional, physical, and academic outcomes (Wolff et al., 2014). To achieve a sense of well-being, students must create meaningful relationships and participate in experiences that strengthen their sense of belonging. In the context of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), which outlines the essential requirements for human well-being and fulfillment, the establishment of social connections is essential for an individual to attain a sufficient level of self-esteem (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014). Cultivation of positive relationships is a crucial factor, as students who lacked meaningful connections were at a higher risk of encountering "feelings of isolation, rejection, and unwanted solitude" (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 70). To ensure that these campus-wide efforts aligned with the changing needs of students, the following reports were developed to provide institutions with a clearer picture of student needs. Other significant resources include the Jed Foundation and Active Minds organizations, which focus on student mental well-being, specifically suicide prevention and awareness.

The American College Health Association comprises comprehensive data on college student health. The ACHA-NCHA provided college health service providers,

educators, counselors, and administrators with valuable data about their student's habits and behaviors (American College Health Association, 2022). The survey was initially introduced in 2000, subsequently modified in 2008, and then again in 2019. These updates encompassed the incorporation of gender-neutral and inclusive terminology, as well as adjustments to the survey's response logic. Specifically, questions that were frequently met with not applicable responses were removed, resulting in a transformation of the dataset (American College Health Association, 2022).

The Healthy Minds Study is another national study through the National Institutes of Health approved by the Institutional Review Board of Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Michigan (Healthy Minds Network, 2020). The study asked schools to enroll in the web-based survey, which used a randomly selected sample of students from their campus. Institutions received the data, including descriptive statistics from the sample of respondents. The data collected in the Fall 2020 data report align with other assessments of student mental well-being, claiming that feelings of stress, isolation, and loneliness have increased in recent years (Eisenberg et al., 2020).

Using the information from these assessments, institutions can support programs or initiatives that help engage students in high-impact programs that foster development and build stronger support networks of faculty, staff, and students. Given the shrinking resources and the increasing demand for accountability, all areas of higher education can be trained on how to address the growing mental well-being needs on campus.

Statement of the Problem

As Generation Z students take on leadership roles in student organizations on college campuses, the developmental experiences they gain from these roles will likely influence their mental well-being. While some students may derive positive outcomes from the developmental support these experiences offer, others might find that the experience either positively enhances or detrimentally affects their mental well-being and overall welfare.

Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010, comprises the majority student population currently attending college campuses (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Generation Z is a generation of digital natives growing up with technology infused into their daily lives (Loveland, 2017). This generation is also considered one of history's most racially diverse generations (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Mental well-being is a significant challenge for Generation Z students, who report higher rates of challenges with stress, anxiety, and depression (American College Health Association, 2022). Generation Z undergraduates participated in less high-risk behaviors than previous generations, but their mental well-being was among the highest rates of other generations (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Regarded as an exceptionally empathetic generation, 73% of Generation Z students view themselves as compassionate, and 80% perceive themselves as considerate when it comes to the challenges faced by others (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). However, this sensitivity to how others feel may affect their ability to cope and manage stress. A recent study of Generation Z students reported stress

as their most debilitating mental well-being issue, followed by anxiety and depression (American College Health Association, 2022).

Generation Z are now undergraduate student leaders in university-sponsored student organizations, where individuals are expected to provide leadership and navigate organization and membership relations (Haley,2022). Although participation was important in influencing a student's psychological well-being, it may also have adversely affected some students (Kilgo et al., 2016). Whereas some students may find the increased time devoted to experiences like student organization leadership positively influence them (Astin, 1984). Like all students, leaders must learn to identify the causes of their stress or mental well-being challenges and begin exploring coping strategies that help reduce the impact on their student success.

Coping strategies could be implemented to help people process negative behavioral and emotional responses to challenges. Coping strategies were most effective when individuals identified the problem and created strategies to change the situation that affected them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These strategies can help Generation Z, the current generational cohort of traditionally aged college students, manage their mental well-being. Generation Z has reported more challenges with stress, anxiety, and depression than previous generations (American College Health Association, 2022).

Student involvement is defined as the "amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 297). While involvement in student organizations can provide meaningful connections that can lead to

an increased sense of belonging and community, it can also serve as a stressor. Involvement in co-curricular experiences is in addition to students' academic responsibilities, and the additional time and energy devoted to co-curricular experiences may negatively affect the time that could be devoted to academic tasks such as studying and homework (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Students' participation in high-impact co-curricular practices, such as campus student leadership positions, has been connected to benefits such as a stronger sense of belonging (Haley, 2022). Participation in the Greek system, living on campus and holding a campus leadership position was positively correlated with an increased sense of belonging (Ribera et al., 2017). The elevated sense of belonging related to leadership in co-curricular experiences is why all study participants must have served as student leaders on campus.

Significance of the Study

Students who contend with mental well-being issues like anxiety and depression are twice as likely to drop out of college without obtaining a degree, it was considered crucial that higher education professionals integrate mental well-being awareness and coping strategies into curriculum planning whenever viable (Cuijpers et al., 2019). Furthermore, some institutions have expanded wellness programming to include problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies (Scribner et al., 2020). These strategies have helped students understand how feelings of stress and anxiety are triggered and how to process these feelings emotionally.

Mental well-being issues on college campuses have steadily increased over the years, and as a result, administrators have directed more campus resources to address the growing problem. In a memo to Vice Presidents of Student Affairs, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) introduced five strategies for colleges to address the increasing campus needs for campus mental well-being services. Through creative marketing and outreach, campus-wide notification and referral systems, peer-to-peer programs, and diverse access options, campuses implemented these services to improve student access to mental well-being resources (Lee, 2017).

Campus wellness programs such as stress fairs, safe spaces, or mindfulness activities provided students with the tools to manage their stress and anxiety by teaching stress management strategies (Olfert et al., 2022). Faculty have also included mindfulness and reflective activities in their course curriculum, which have been associated with a decrease in stress and anxiety in college students (Scribner et al., 2020). In order to put these programs into action, there is a necessity for heightened awareness of the concern and the provision of training for faculty and staff. Effective curriculum design commences with the content and the level of confidence that faculty members possess regarding the subject (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Resources like referral systems play a pivotal role in tackling mental well-being on campus, and instituting mandatory training to learn to identify and assist distressed students has significantly boosted response rates. (Scribner et al., 2020).

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

Limitations

Although the researcher still agrees that qualitative research was the appropriate approach for this study, it is recognized that qualitative research tools, such as interviews, are not designed to capture comparisons between larger groups. To enhance the credibility of this study, coupling qualitative methods with quantitative research could be beneficial. For example, employing a tailored survey for quantitative research and performing a statistical analysis may provide additional evidence to reinforce the findings obtained through qualitative tools. A quantitative study could be designed to explore any potential differences in challenges between students who are involved in student organizations and those who are not. Similarly, quantitative data could assist in determining whether noninvolved students perceive the relationships built during college as equally significant to their well-being as those students who explicitly identify these relationships as significant.

This study did not include the demographics of race of each participant. Although there was a broad demographic representation, the data were not systematically collected, preventing direct exploration of any nuances related to well-being by demographic. This aspect could be better addressed through quantitative study tools, where participants' racial demographics could be readily analyzed. Sorting this data by demographics would also help educators identify student populations that may require assistance.

An alternative angle to consider in future studies could be to examine students' tendencies to prioritize others' well-being over their own. It would be intriguing to determine whether this behavior is a characteristic of the generational cohort or if it is linked to specific personality traits attracted to leadership roles in service. Conducting a study that delves deeper into the impact of leadership on personal well-being could offer further insight into whether student leaders require additional well-being support compared to their noninvolved peers.

Delimitations

The objectives of the study were to understand to what extent participation in university-sponsored student organizations has on Generation Z student leaders. Using a qualitative narrative method, participants responded to open-ended interview questions in which they were asked to reflect on their lived experiences as student leaders and identify areas of growth and maturity as it relates to their own well-being. Although various types of research design could have been used, qualitative narrative inquiry was selected because it captures lived experiences through the stories of the participants (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

This particular topic was explored because existing research on the college student demographic noted that mental well-being issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression were influencing student success more than any other generation previously. This topic was intriguing because despite documented efforts by higher education

institutions to address mental well-being on college campuses, students continued to identify mental well-being as one of their greatest obstacles.

Additionally, it was discovered that college counselors often suggest getting involved in student organizations as a solution to combat feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression. Through the conduction of a literature review, the benefits of students seeking involvement opportunities were found to be successful and there was theoretical support that participating in cocurricular programs could have positive outcomes on student development. However, to better understand if these benefits were intentional as part of the design of the engagement opportunities or were a limited result for some students, an exploration of student perspective on their involvement experiences was required.

The selection of the interview guide as the data collection instrument was informed by previous research (Scribner et al., 2020) and each question aligned with the theoretical framework of the study. The semistructured format of the interviews allowed the participant to expand on concepts that they felt conveyed their individual experience. The decision to contain the sample to a small group of participants in a single institution was to ensure that each of the participant responses would have had the same opportunities to engage with the campus community and that the culture of participation on their campus would have been consistent for each participant. The decision to interview participants in the spring semester ensured that they each had at least one

semester in a leadership role and could speak to the reflective components of the questions asked during the interview.

Lastly, the decision to exclude any participants who were not part of the Generation Z cohort was to determine if the implied characteristics of the generation factored into the reflections of each participant's perspective on their success. There is extensive research on this particular generation, and the data collected could help inform future research on Generation Z as they enter the workforce or other phases of their lives. **Assumptions**

Considering that nearly 40% of college students reported having received help with mental well-being challenges in the past year (American College Health Association, 2022), it is assumed that many students will identify having some stress or mental well-being issue that challenges their ability to succeed. However, stress can be differentiated as manageable or unmanageable. Stress that is challenging yet goal-based can result in motivation or higher performance, whereas other types of stress can hinder performance or increase maladaptive behaviors (Kaszycki et al., 2020). Students who were hindered by the stresses in their life or who navigate mental well-being issues must find strategies to reduce the negative influence of these concerns on their health and success in college.

Understanding that involvement in university-sponsored organizations can positively influence student mental well-being (Olfert et al., 2022), Generation Z college students should be encouraged to participate in high-impact programs that provide opportunities for leadership development. However, according to Seemiller and Grace

(2017), Generation Z is more likely to participate if the approach incorporates a more interpersonal and collaborative approach.

Additional assumptions were considered due to the role of the researcher as the Director of Student Engagement. Students who interact with student affairs professionals can feel more connected because of personalized support and skills development gained through university-sponsored student leader experiences (Haley, 2022). In a role such as Director, the researcher can more easily recruit student leaders. In some cases, the participant may have served in a leadership role within the same department. The existing relationship with the researcher may lead to more honest and in-depth participation of the participants. However, the necessary steps to ensure the validation of information and the participants' willingness was supported by obtaining institutional permission (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A smaller sample size reflected the purposeful sampling technique, supporting in-depth analysis of qualitative research (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). The invited participants are intended to represent a sample consistent with a medium-sized, public, four-year university.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

This qualitative study used narrative inquiry to better articulate how involvement in university-sponsored organizations influences Generation Z undergraduate student leaders' mental well-being and which coping strategies they find are most effective to reduce the impact of their mental well-being challenges.

Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement (1984), posits that students who invest more time in activities are more inclined to achieve success in college. Furthermore, Kuh’s Theory of Student Engagement (2009) suggests that success may only be attainable if institutions intentionally establish programs that promote student engagement. However, according to Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984, 2011), if a student perceived the student leadership position stressful, even if that experience was developmentally positive, the student may struggle to find the appropriate coping strategies to manage the stress of the student leader position. According to Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984), coping strategies can either help the student control their emotional response or help them better understand how to alter the situation that is presenting the challenge. The generational worldview of student leaders may also influence the perceived benefits or consequences of the coping method. Most current student leaders are within the Generation Z cohort, who, although they may feel they have the power to change the world using social justice, characteristically also have increased levels of fear and uncertainty that may influence the effectiveness of the strategies used (Seemiller & Grace, 2017).

The following research questions guided this study:

(1) What conflicts or pressures arise for Generation Z student leaders in sponsored student organizations? (2) What are ways in which involvement in sponsored student organizations influences the well-being of Generation Z student leaders? (3) What coping strategies or support systems do Generation Z student leaders use to navigate and

prioritize their well-being while actively participating in sponsored student organizations?

Theoretical Framework

An analysis of generational, coping, and transactional theories aided the researcher in formulating a possible link between student mental well-being and involvement in extracurricular university-sponsored organizations. Using Strauss and Howe's Generational Theory (1991), an exploration of Generation Z revealed how they are uniquely different from their predecessors in how they interact with their environment and their expectations from campus experiences. The transition to college can be overwhelming and result in increased stress and anxiety. How students seek relief can be described through Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984), which described how students can identify the causes of their stress and employ the most effective coping strategy. Lastly, Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1984) was used to understand the various phases students endure during college and how they develop strategies to learn and overcome challenges throughout their college experience.

Strauss and Howe Generational Theory (1991)

The Strauss-Howe Generational Theory (1991) analyzes specific patterns of behavior intertwined with history to determine a cohort of individuals they refer to as "generations." The theory ultimately postulates that the United States has generational repetition on an 80-year cycle. Every 20 years, a new cycle of influence occurs, called a turning, and the generations of people born during those cycles have similar behaviors

and attitudes. Individuals within these generations encounter historical events and have similar social influences while in the same phase of life (van Eck Duymaer van Twist & Newcombe, 2021). Although there was other research regarding generations, Strauss and Howe are often credited with popularizing Generational Theory.

The Strauss-Howe Generational Theory (1991) emphasizes the concept of generational archetypes based on significant generational events or phenomena for each cohort or generation, which they describe as turnings. They theorize that, as the dominant generation, the reactions to these turnings impact the mood and values of society as a whole. Strauss and Howe use the term "saeculum," meaning "century," to describe the completion of each of the four turnings, which they believe happens every 80-90 years (van Eck Duymaer van Twist & Newcombe, 2021).

The Four Turnings of Generations

The High is the first turning, which follows the crisis moment of a previous cycle. This turning is an era when institutions are strong and individualism is weak. The most recent first turning was post-World War II, when America became a global superpower and the middle class saw an increase in prosperity (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Lifecourse Associates, 2012).

The Awakening is the second turning era focused on personal and spiritual autonomy. Society becomes stale of social discipline and an increase in activism. The most recent turning was considered the consciousness revolution that spanned the 1960s and 1970s. Rebellious riots and movements emerged through Vietnam War protests,

feminists, and black power movements and peaked with the Watergate scandal in 1974 (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Lifecourse Associates, 2012).

The Unraveling is the third turning of an era in which society strongly distrusts institutions and has a strong sense of individualism. Although many feel optimistic about their personal lives, they are pessimistic about the country and the social unrest that follows the awakening turning. The most recent third turning resulted in the economic crisis in 2008, but before that, it was considered the roaring 1920's ultimately ending in World War I and the prohibition (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Lifecourse Associates, 2012).

The Crisis is a response to feelings that the nation is in survival; the fourth turning is when institutions are torn down and rebuilt. After surviving the initial crisis, society has a sense of revival and begins to imagine how to regroup collectively. Examples of previous fourth turnings include the American Revolution of the 1770s and the Civil War in the 1860s. Howe suggested the next fourth turning would be in 2020 (Lifecourse Associates, 2012). Some pundits considered cultural protests and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic to be examples of the crisis for this most recent saeculum (Lichtenberg & Hoffower, 2021).

Those born within these cycles are predicted to share basic attitudes toward family, risk, culture, and values. Strauss and Howe believed that four archetypes are within each of these historical cycles and repeat sequentially. Strauss and Howe's (1991) identified the archetypes as prophets, nomads, heroes, and artists.

Archetypes Within Generations

Howe through his work with Lifecourse Associates (2012), continued to track generational trends and expanded on the four generational archetypes. The four archetypes, as described by researchers at Lifecourse Associates, are:

A *Prophet* is born after a great war or crisis-type event. As children, their desires are often indulged by their post-crisis parents. As teenagers, this generational cohort is narcissistic but passionate crusaders of spiritual awakenings and are moralistic midlifers, eventually becoming revered wise elders who guide society through another crisis. An example of a living generation is the Boomers, born 1943-1960 (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Lifecourse Associates, 2012).

A *Nomad* is born during a spiritual awakening cycle. As youth, the Nomad cohort is known to break out against the established institutional order. As children, they are not emotionally protected and come of age as alienated young adults but mellow as pragmatic midlifers that eventually age into formidable post crisis elders. Generation X, born 1961-1981 (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Lifecourse Associates, 2012), is an example of a living generation.

A *Hero* is born after a spiritual awakening; this cohort is raised in an increasingly protected society and is seen as heroic young team workers as they enter adulthood. As midlifers, they are overly confident but energetic and will become powerful elders to face a new awakening turning. An example of these generations is the G.I.s born between

1901-1924 and Millennials born between 1981-1996 (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Lifecourse Associates, 2012).

An *Artist* is born during a great war or other historical crisis. Children of these cohorts grow up overprotected and come of age as sensitive adults in a post-crisis world. They become indecisive midlife leaders throughout a spiritual awakening cycle and become overly empathetic, yet flexible elders. An example of living generations is the silent generation, born between 1925-1942, and Homelanders (Generation Z), born between 1995-2010 (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Lifecourse Associates, 2012).

Understanding the archetypes can help predict the needs and behaviors of future generations. For example, in 1991, Strauss and Howe (1991) correctly predicted that the Millennial generation would be change agents, pioneering a more clean-cut and homogenous lifestyle focused on teamwork and public service. While they predicted that the Homeland Generation would be risk averse, they could not predict the changes in technology that also greatly define the technologically native generation, which is now more commonly known as Generation Z.

Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984)

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined stress as the reaction to a situation perceived as challenging or surpassing one's available resources, and threatening their well-being (Scribner et al., 2020). The key stress factor includes harm, threat, and challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), individuals determine the best strategies to alter or control their natural responses to stress and deploy a coping

strategy to combat it. For example, when a "college student encounters a stressor, they evaluate or appraise whether the demand exceeds their available resources to deal with it" (Eisenbarth, 2019, p. 152). Stressors may be an upcoming test or trouble with a roommate. The stressor is frequently not the test itself, but rather the perception of its level of difficulty and the student's emotions concerning their ability to meet the challenge. When an individual expresses a lack of sufficient resources to address the demand, they need to employ coping strategies to handle the stress (Eisenbarth, 2019). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described two types of coping strategies to manage stressors.

Problem-focused coping is for when individuals know what is causing stress; they can identify the problem and create strategies to change the situation impacting them. In problem-focused coping, the goal is to eliminate or reduce the cause of the stressor. The challenge of problem-focused coping is that people cannot always control the source of stress, such as the death of a loved one. However, when stressful situations are within an individual's control, such as an upcoming exam or work-based stress, problem-focused coping can help manage the root of the problem (McLeod, 2015).

In *emotion-focused coping*, people seek to alter the situation by creating harm, threat, or challenge to control the outcome. In this strategy, people attempt to remove negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, or frustration to help reduce their stress (Green et al., 2010). To process and deal with unwanted stress, people need to work to reframe the situation (Eisenbarth, 2019). Emotion-focused activities include meditation, journaling,

positive thinking, forgiveness, and talk therapy (Legg & Raypole, 2020). Drug therapy was also used as an emotion-focused coping strategy, focusing on emotions caused by stress, not the problem (McLeod, 2015).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984, 2011)

Transition Theory by Schlossberg (1981, 1984, 2011) is used to describe the transitional nature of the college experience. In this theoretical framework, Schlossberg aimed to establish a model for adults undergoing different life transitions. College students undergo three distinct phases while in the academic setting, comprising the stages of entering, progressing through, and eventually departing from college (Patton et al., 2016). Each phase has transitions, which are any event or non-event that changes an individual's routine, relationship, role, or assumptions (Schlossberg, 2011). The student's behavior, development, or mental well-being could be impacted during each transition. However, the individual can control how they manage each transition using strategies. Strategies help people cope by attempting to reduce stress, ultimately changing the situation (Schlossberg, 2011). However, the time to process each transition was different for each individual. To manage a transition, individuals must realize and acknowledge the phase before fully integrating into the transition. Since the realization of the transition phase is first required, self-perception plays a key role. For example, if a change occurs and is not realized by the student, then the student is not impacted and never fully transitions. The impact is "determined by the degree to which a transition alters daily life", and the individual remains unimpacted (Patton et al., 2016, p. 37).

According to Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984, 2011), a transition can be further categorized into three categories, anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevent. An anticipated transition is an event that someone expects, such as graduating from college or getting married. An unanticipated event is not scheduled or predicted, such as the death of a loved one. A nonevent is a transition that was anticipated but did not occur, such as failing to become admitted to graduate school. Non-Events are expected and often result in disappointment when the anticipated outcome is not met (Schlossberg, 2011).

Intentionally created to help conceptualize students' stress experiences and use of coping strategies, the theory includes the four S's, which relate to how students cope with transitions (Scriber et al., 2020). First, the "individual" effectiveness in coping with transition depends on their resources in the following areas" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 38).

Situation is the first of Schlossberg's four S's, which identifies the relationship to the stress the person has during the transition. When faced with a transition, individuals must determine what triggered or caused the transition. Once the cause is determined, the timing and locus of control are assessed. The individual's degree of ease with the transition and their level of influence plays a pivotal role in shaping their position within the transition, along with their ability to maintain this new role throughout the transition period. The level of stress that the individual endures during transition is influenced by previous experiences with similar situations and any external issues that result in additional stress. This general assessment of the transition helps the individual determine

their level of responsibility (Patton et al., 2016). The second is self-reflection, referring to the person's self-esteem and ability to cope emotionally. These “factors can be classified into two categories (1) personal and demographic characteristics and (2) psychological resources” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 39). The first categories are socioeconomic status, gender, age, and ethnicity/culture.

Compared to psychological resources, psychological resources consider the individual's perception or outlook, resiliency, and optimism. Support is the third component of the theory, which includes social support. Social support is further categorized into four types: "intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions/communities" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 39). Support is further described as either stable, those that are role dependent, or support that is likely to change.

The final component is strategies. Strategies are deployed as a coping method with the intention of changing the situation and reducing stress (Schlossberg, 1984). Strategies can be categorized into three groups: those that alter the circumstances, those that influence the interpretation of the issue, and those that assist in the coping with stress after the fact (Schlossberg, 2011; Scribner et al., 2020).

Coping strategies are used when people face a transition and need to assess the transition. This step is an integral part of the coping process and is the reason why people respond to stress differently from one another. As individuals face a transition, they conduct a primary and secondary evaluation. A primary appraisal is the individual's perception of the transition as positive, negative, or irrelevant. In addition, individuals

needed to assess whether the situation is stressful, "is it perceived as a challenge, a threat, or a loss?" (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 64).

The second assessment is to determine whether the individual has access to the resources needed to cope. Resources are assets and liabilities individuals possess during the transition period that can be used to manage the transition (Patton et al., 2016). An individual may reassess those resources throughout the transition phase and move from a moment of stress to a feeling of relief. For example, students may be concerned about an upcoming final exam and feel that they need to prepare. As the end of the semester approaches, the student's feelings may shift as they feel they have a better grasp of the information needed to be successful. "An individual's appraisal and reappraisal of a transition as well as the available resources for coping can be examined using the 4 S's" (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 65).

Theoretical Framework Integration

This study integrated the components of the three theories described in this theoretical framework. Each of the theories was applied to conceptualize the constructs of this study and informed the design of the semi-structured interview guide for this qualitative narrative study. The constructs of the intended research are Generation Z, coping strategies, and student transitions.

Strauss and Howe's Generational Theory (1991) was used in the development of the interview guide to better understand the unique positionality of Generation Z, who primarily serve as current student leaders in university-sponsored organizations. Although

the theory does not fully define Generation- Z, it includes them as a generation within a larger cycle. The theory attempts to help researchers understand how Millennials compare to Generation Z. Generational Theory by Strauss and Howe (1991) assumes that Generation Z becomes a generation of artists, following the Millennial generation of Heroes. As artists, Generation Z is predicted to be overly sensitive as children, but with the likelihood to transform into flexible and considerate leaders later in life (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Taking into account the assumptions about the early years of this archetype, it is interesting to see that, as college students, Generation Z statistically suffers from the highest reports of anxiety and depression, claiming stress as one of the most prevalent causes (American College Health Association, 2022). Despite being considered sensitive young adults, Generation Z is expected to evolve into empathetic consensus-building leaders (Strauss & Howe, 1991).

Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984) was also used to develop the semi-structured interview guide. The questions that asked Generation Z student leaders how they respond to transition or other mental well-being challenges such as stress related to the principles of the theory. This theory was also used to define the construct of a coping strategy to better understand whether these and other coping methods are used to positively impact student leaders' mental well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), students who utilized problem-based strategies learn to identify the root of the stress or anxiety causing an issue and work to remove or reduce it from harming themselves. Those students who use

emotion-based strategies attempt to reframe their situation to see the long-term positive impact the experience can have on them. They may employ various methods to reduce emotional reactions to stress, such as journaling or talk therapy.

Lastly, Schlossberg's (1984) Transition Theory informed the development of the interview guide. It aimed to understand the different phases students undergo during college and their strategies for learning and overcoming challenges throughout their college journey. The coping responses according to the theory include problem-based strategies and emotions. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984, 2011) was also used to conceptualize the undergraduate experience as an existential period of transition and how they negotiate their transition experiences. Participant positionality within these transitions using the situation and self-tenets of Transition Theory was integrated into the interview guide to specifically ask about participant experiences related to transition and response to stress. Schlossberg (1984) described a series of phases that individuals process when faced with an event or experience. In these phases, people evaluate and determine their perceived ability to successfully cope with the experience using their strengths or seeking resources to aid them in the process.

Summary

Chapter One provides an overview of this study. The study explored how Generation Z students in leadership roles in university-sponsored organizations navigate mental well-being using coping strategies. Students often face academic, social, personal, and financial challenges throughout their undergraduate experience that can trigger

mental well-being problems. Students who do not have a diagnosed mental well-being issue may also struggle to manage their emotional and behavioral responses to these challenges. The behaviors, actions, and thoughts that students have in response to these positive or negative challenges are coping strategies. Students involved in university-sponsored organizations can participate in experiences that support student success, which can positively influence their mental well-being or provide effective coping strategies to combat negative responses to stress and mental well-being problems.

Chapter Two, will connect how higher education institutions can shift their perceptions of students' needs by better understanding how Generation Z differs from the previous generations of college students. As undergraduate students learn to adhere to the culture on campus, they have the opportunity to participate in experiences as part of a successful college experience. For example, a co-curricular experience a student may become involved in is university-sponsored student organizations, where students can take on leadership roles that can contribute to a more fulfilling college experience. However, despite the success of students connecting with positive development experiences, they may need help to cope effectively with stressful situations during college transitions. Understanding the mental well-being challenges students face can influence the coping strategies students use to manage their transition through college.

Definition of Terms

Anxiety - A recurring and intrusive emotion, anxiety is "characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes" (American Psychological Association, 2022).

Co-Curricular - Experiences that support and augment a student's formal classroom experience and co-curricular experiences can "create powerful learning opportunities for leadership development through collaborative projects" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 13). Examples of these projects include residential living, community work, and participation in student organizations (Astin & Astin, 2000).

Coping - The process of "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). The efficacy of the coping strategy is "sensitive to the environment and the personality disposition of the individual, ultimately influencing the appraisal of stress and the resources available" (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 31).

Depression - It is described as a period when interest is lost in most everyday activities (American Psychological Association, 2022). When experiencing depression, mood changes may make people feel "discouraged, sad, hopeless, or down" (Bell et al., 2014). The impact of depression in college students may impact their self-esteem, academics, sleep, and stress levels (Bell et al., 2014).

Engagement - George Kuh (2009) described two components of student engagement. The first is the number of time students devote to their studies and educational experiences linked to desired college outcomes. "The second is how institutions allocate their human and other resources organizing learning opportunities and services that encourage students to participate in and benefit from such activities" (Wolf et al., 2009).

Generation Z - Referring to those born from 1995 through 2010, referred to as digital natives, their entire life has been shaped by having and interacting with technology. This generation, who by 2020 made up a third of the population, is also considered the most racially diverse generation (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Integration - A term to explain the "extent to which students come to share the attitudes and beliefs of their peers and faculty and the extent to which students adhere to the structural rule and requirements of the institution and institutional culture" (Wolf et al., 2009, p. 414). Tinto (1993) further concluded that a student's involvement in extra and co-curricular activities contributes to their ability to integrate socially, and their "perceived level of integration influences their decision to persist or to depart" (Wolf et al., 2009, p. 415).

Mental well-being - "Mental well-being is the foundation for emotions, thinking, communication, learning, resilience, hope, and self-esteem. Mental well-being is also key to relationships, personal and emotional well-being, and contributing to the community or society. Mental well-being is a component of overall well-

being. It can influence and be influenced by physical health" (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Resources - Resources are described as the areas of campus that enhance student learning such as facilities, financial support, and human resources which includes faculty, staff and other support personnel (Astin, 1999). Yet it can also be used in this context as personal assets and liabilities that individuals use during the transition period to navigate the transition (Patton et al., 2016).

Sense of Belonging - A sense of belonging reflects the social support that students perceive on campus. It is a “feeling of connectedness, that one is important to others, that one matters" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 51). A sense of belonging may also be challenging for students from marginalized communities.

Stress - Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described stress as a reaction to a situation perceived as challenging or surpassing one's available resources, threatening their well-being (Scribner et al., 2020). In the transactional model of stress proposed initially by Lazarus (1966), the amount or severity of distress an individual experiences depends on their primary and secondary appraisals of the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). *Stress* is defined by the American Psychological Association (2018) as an emotional reaction to an external force, and anxiety is defined as constant and unwanted worry resulting in irritability, anger, fatigue, and insomnia.

Student Involvement - As defined by Astin (1984, p. 297), it is "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience". Astin (1984) further described how particular environments, such as involvement in residence hall communities and group affiliations, create positive relationships for student success (Abes et al., 2019).

Student Leader - Astin and Astin (2000, p. 23) describe student leaders as "individuals who have associated themselves with other like-minded students and have taken the trouble to acquire the knowledge, skills, tools, and capabilities that are needed to effect change through the group". For this study, student leader roles are defined as those where students have held positions on a college campus or within a student organization, such as president, vice president, secretary, or treasurer in a university-sponsored organization.

Student Success - An instrument to measure the extent in which a student engages in good educational practices and what they take away from their college experience (Kuh, 2001).

Trauma - The emotional response to an event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster immediately results in feelings like shock and denial (American Psychological Association, 2018). Likewise, student success and adjustment can be negatively impacted by traumatic campus events like campus violence (Liu et al., 2017).

Undergraduate - An individual seeking a bachelor's degree from a degree-granting institution.

University Sponsored Student Organization - An organization has a full-time employee assigned as the advisor as part of their professional job responsibilities. Most funding for the organization comprises either designated tuition or student fees from the institution. Examples of these types of organizations include the student government, campus programming board and orientation leaders.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

An initial review of the current generation of undergraduate students can contribute to a better understanding of how their needs and traits differ from those of previous generations as the worldview and goals of a new generation of undergraduates accept student leadership positions, and a review of how campus programs such as student organizations could provide opportunities for growth and development that positively impact student success is included. Nonetheless, during their progression into, through and out of college, every student is likely to encounter challenges that could impact their current mental well-being or introduce new stressors, necessitating the exploration of coping mechanisms to mitigate their influence on academic achievement.

Current Student Generations

Institutions must focus on how to meet the needs of the newest generations of college students. As the Millennial generation goes to work, Generation Z is in college, and their expectations for campuses to be engaging and provide safe and supportive environments are non-negotiable. The current generation of college students is considered the most ethnically diverse generation, including more low-income and first-generation students than any previous generation to have attended college (Dungy & Peck, 2019). Generation Z perspectives have been significantly influenced by technological advancements, concerns regarding violence, economic volatility, and

movements for social justice (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). The historical context that has served as a reference point for previous generations is no longer applicable to a generation fully entrenched in a technology-driven world, which presents both opportunities and substantial challenges to their well-being and sense of belonging.

Millennials

Millennials are typically categorized as individuals born between 1981 and 1996, although it is worth noting that definitions of this date range may vary depending on the source. According to the Pew Research Center, adopting 1996 as the endpoint provides analytical significance for the generation (Dimock, 2019). Significant historical economic and social factors primarily influenced the timeline have arguably defined the Millennial's formative years. For example, Millennials were old enough to comprehend the historically significant moments compared to younger generations. Those moments include the 9/11 terrorist attack and understanding the political polarization that accompanied the resulting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Politically, this generation was the ages 12-17, when they either participated as voters or remembered being part of the political conversation that elected the first black president of the United States (Dimock, 2019).

Generational Traits

In their work "*Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*," Howe and Strauss (2000) explored the characteristics of the Millennial Generation, introducing seven fundamental traits they employed to delineate millennial students. The seven core traits

are identified as *Special, Sheltered, Confident, Team-Oriented, Conventional, Pressured, and Achieving*.

The first of the traits used to describe the millennial generation is the term special. According to Howe and Strauss (2000), this term is a result of previous generations inculcating the generation to think they were vital to the nation and their parents' sense of purpose. This encouragement may have influenced the higher rates of self-esteem, assertiveness, and narcissistic personality traits within the millennial generation (Twenge, 2013). A generation notably known for "everyone getting a trophy" despite winning or losing, the parents' role in creating supportive environments that made each child feel special is speculated to be among the reasons ability and self-confidence remain some of the foremost traits of the generation (DeBard, 2004, Twenge, 2013). In addition, aphorisms such as “believe in yourself” and “you can be anything you want to be” were commonly used to engage this generation of young people (Twenge, 2006).

Raised in a post-Columbine environment, public schools were on lockdown and the market had an increase in child safety devices, resulting in the Millennial generation being characterized as being sheltered. The "baby on board" children grew into "zero tolerance" teenagers who expected that parents or people of authority would provide organized direction for their free time in the way of after-school programs, music and dance lessons, and more activities that filled the time that former generations previously used as free play time (DeBard, 2004).

Their bold confidence also identifies the generation, arguably fueled by countless awards and rewards for what authority figures judged as good behavior (DeBard, 2004). Millennials now expect good news and tend to assume that they will be acknowledged for it, believing that their good deeds will benefit society. This desire to be the best resulted in increased acts of community service. Millennials feel confident they can meet the expectations of anyone and complete the project but are only interested if the activity meets their own expectations of the beneficial outcomes of participating (DeBard, 2004).

The generation is also considered team-oriented, which Howe and Strauss (2000) claim is the result of early exposure to organized team sports like soccer, required school uniforms, and an emphasis on group learning throughout their education. In school, lectures were replaced with demonstrations, lab activities, and Socratic questioning activities to keep students engaged (Twenge, 2013). Upon entering college, Millennials witnessed the emergence of living-learning centers in residence halls, and their engagement in student organizations surged compared to previous generations. These developments aligned with the notion that Millennials value opportunities for communal gatherings (DeBard, 2004).

A generation of rule followers, Millennials are more comfortable with their parents' values than previous generations and are willing to accept and follow social rules, “doing exactly what their parents, teachers, and media have taught them” (Twenge, 2013 p. 40). A generation that inherently believes that the best way to get along is to go along is not known for challenging authority. A seemingly more conservative generation

than the generation before them, Millennials have been known to advocate for others and their rights, as long as they do not feel any rules or laws will be violated (DeBard, 2004). The achievement trait was one of the primary characteristics of the Millennial generation (DeBard, 2004). Millennials grew up in an education system that was hyper-focused on objective assessment, creating a sense of high-stakes testing that drove Millennials to focus on achievement. In addition, their parents encouraged higher education, resulting in one of the most educated generations in history (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Older generations may argue that academic rigor may not be considered as difficult for millennials, but they scored higher on intelligence tests than previous generations (Twenge, 2013). The desire to obtain graduate degrees increased by 59% among Millennial high school seniors (Twenge, 2006). However, in contrast to their ability to succeed, there was a pressure to excel. Millennials were pushed to study hard, avoid risks, and take full advantage of collaborative opportunities offered to them, which resulted in a generation with an immense sense of pressure to avoid any sense of failure (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Educators found that a realistic assessment of their performance throughout the learning process helped temper concerns about academic success (Twenge, 2013).

Millennials in College

As college students, Millennials were criticized for spending too much time on devices to engage in deeper levels of academic learning. Their "consumerism" attitude toward academic experience seemed like another acquisition rather than an appreciation

of the learning process (Provitera-McGlynn, 2008, p. 19). As educators shifted to accommodate the technologically advanced generation, they also stepped away from content or teacher-centered approaches in the classroom to a learner-centered approach that encouraged group work. Classroom instruction changed to include more videos, and textbook publishers even responded by shortening undergraduate textbooks into more digestible chunks (Twenge, 2013). This concept is described by Selingo (2013), as a shift of power from professors to students. This concept aligns with the “me generation” reference that society uses to describe a generation that seems to be more concerned with their convenience and satisfaction than with academic rigor and tradition (Bourke & Mechler, 2010).

Until the most recent generation of college students, Millennials were considered the most diverse generation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition to seeing increases in enrollment of racially and ethnically diverse students, the Millennial generation also saw a significant increase in women attending college, increasing the number of "first-year female students projected to earn a bachelor's degree from 68.9% to over 81.8% in 2002" (DeBard, 2004, p. 38). Cultural differences such as gender and racial equality were seen as non-issues and aligned with the exposure to cultural differences they saw online, on television, and in the diverse backgrounds of the people they knew (Twenge, 2013).

Generation Z

A generational cohort referred to as Generation Z includes children born in the late 1990s to mid-2010s (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Although referred to as the i-generation, net-gen, and other names, Gen Z is most often used to describe this newest generation of young adults. Although predictable in many ways, as generations before them, Gen Z is described as driven and more competitive than their predecessors, expecting to have the ability to customize their future to fit their goals (Stillman & Stillman, 2017).

Although Millennials were early adopters of technology, Generation Z is considered the true digital native (Koulopoulos & Keldsen, 2014). Many millennials can remember a time before technology, while Gen Z grew up managing multiple applications at the same time on their handheld devices (Loveland, 2017). The reliance on technology for everyday tasks has been integrated into everything from home appliances to light switches and toothbrushes. Gen Z views technology as an integrated part of their life, having had a smartphone or device to help them interact with the world throughout their lives (Koulopoulos & Keldsen, 2014).

Technology also helps them interact with the world around them and is often their primary way of communicating with the world. Texting, video calling, or direct messaging are all ways Gen Z can reach anyone from their class friend to their grandmother. How they communicate is also unique to the generation, relying on emojis, digital icons, and gifs, which are temporary image files to convey meaning in the least

number of words (Rue, 2018). Although social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter may have existed before many Gen Z babies were born, social networks have become the main communication tool, with many interacting online for up to ten hours a day (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). However, having continuous access to what their friends are doing has also caused a phenomenon called FOMO, which is the fear of missing out (Goedereis & Sasso, 2020). However, your fear may be misplaced, as more evidence shows that most people only share their achievements and happy experiences online. This false sense of authenticity may be related to increased mental well-being issues, such as depression, which reached all-time highs in the late 2000s (Twenge, 2017).

Technology

Just as online users have found a way to filter the view of their own lives, so has Generation Z, who utilize the customization of sites to filter the information they want to hear and see. Users subscribe to and follow specific accounts and rely on site algorithms to customize content. The rise in popularity of platforms offering insights into individuals' lives resonates with the idea presented by Seemiller and Grace (2016, p.74) who pointed out that Generation Z utilizes social media predominantly to "keep up with others rather than sharing their personal information". When posting to their accounts, they spend more time viewing others' profiles and content than creating their own.

Social media sites are just some of the online platforms on which Gen Z spends their time. They have also grown accustomed to having twenty-four-hour access to streaming services such as Netflix, and online buying sites such as Amazon, creating a

"get it when you want it" mentality (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The reality of placing a grocery order at 3 a.m. or binge-watching an entire season of a television show is a sense of normalcy for Gen Z. Baby Boomer and Generation X groups, who were born in the 1980s and before (Howe & Strauss, 2000), cautiously engaged with new technology, while Gen Z members are more willing to provide their personal data as long as their experience is seamless and they feel they are "receiving something of value in return" (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018, p. 46). Although personal sharing of information on-line is not abnormal for this generation, they also expect online services to allow users to customize their content and privacy. Privacy is an expectation from Gen Z users who regularly connect their bank accounts and other identifying information on multiple lifestyle applications. Gen Z is using technology to subscribe to convenience, from rideshare to food delivery. Gen Z changed the world of banking by using digital payment apps among friends, possessing digital wallets, and expecting that online payment systems are available for all transactions (Rue, 2018).

The expectation of privacy also extends to the social media sites they are engaging in. Sixty percent of Generation Z Facebook users have their profiles set to private, ensuring that only approved friends can access their information (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Other sites allow users to engage anonymously or avoid using identifying information altogether. The privacy element allows users to create personalized content curated for their chosen audience. The desire to customize reaches beyond their social platforms; 57% of Gen Z want to be able to customize aspects of their job, including

wanting to be involved in creating their future job descriptions (Stillman & Stillman, 2017).

Technology Integration

Another way Gen Z engages with online content is as a source of information. Having a wealth of knowledge at their fingertips, Gen Z looks to streaming platforms for advice and tutorials. They view social networks as more than a place to share recent vacation photos or inspirational quotes. Instead, they create and engage with videos that provide insight into how to do everything, from creating art and tips to overcoming common household issues or solving mathematical equations. As a generation skilled at learning independently, Gen Z is more likely to find a tutorial video online before asking for help (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Gen Z uses video tutorials on platforms such as YouTube and Tik Tok to supplement their learning. Many educational programs have begun to incorporate videos into their learning strategies for this more digital generation (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The ability to experience something virtually increases your connection to the content. As true digital natives, this generation uses technology to help navigate issues and stay connected regularly. However, as a generation that desires to see the authenticity in others, it is no surprise that they also value face-to-face communication, which "allows them to connect better and read the other person" (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p. 61). As with other aspects of their life, Gen Z will infuse technology into their communication but prefer meeting friends and family and even learning in an in-person format (Spears et al., 2015). Also, unlike their Millennial

counterparts, Gen Z prefers intrapersonal learning methods instead of early Millennials' teamwork and collaborative learning styles (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Although the expectation continues that they can utilize technology to complete their work successfully, the preference is to work alongside someone independently. Therefore, it is normal to find a group of Gen Z sitting at the same table, each on their individual screens. Although this is considered face-to-face, some sociologists call this type of interaction "absent presence," where the students are near one another but avoid meaningful conversation (Rue, 2018, p. 7).

Despite being fiercely independent, Gen Z can also become overwhelmed by the information and distractions at their fingertips. Although growing up with the Internet, Generation Z may require “directions from mentors, who can help channel their energy and provide them with the challenges they need to be successful" (as cited in Mohr & Mohr, 2017, p. 85). The massive amount of information they must process resulted in a filter in which they must ask themselves, "*do I need to know this? How does it affect me? Why should I care?*" This line of questioning is a filter that allows them to determine whether the information they are seeing is relevant (Rue, 2018, p. 6).

Diversity and Advocacy

Generation Z is considered to be more racially and ethnically diverse, with more Americans identifying as multiracial than any previous generation (Rickes, 2016, Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Generation Z is also considered to be from a higher number of urban areas, which exposes them to an increased number of cultural perspectives (Price-

Williams & Sasso, 2021). Another notable generational difference is a changed attitude towards the LGBTQIA+ community. In a world in which Generation Z controls the societal pulse, the same sex marriage is legal, gender can be expressed as fluid, and everyone can share their individualism through their online personas (Twenge, 2017). Generation Z's exposure to diversity has instilled a desire to ensure that others feel safe and supported, and that social justice issues are at the forefront (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Although their predecessors [Millennials] were often referred to as the "me" generation, Gen Z is considered more "we" centered, with the majority of their concerns centered around the well-being of everyone rather than solely themselves (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Seemiller and Grace (2017) also indicated that the prominence of this characteristic may be attributed to the social justice issues Gen Z has experienced in his life thus far. Although the oldest members of Gen Z were younger than ten when the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, occurred, the resulting military campaign in Afghanistan and Iraq has been ongoing for most of their lives (Goedereis & Sasso, 2020). Growing up in a constant state of war and knowledge of school shootings, they are acutely aware of the dangers around them and view the world realistically (Stillman & Stillman, 2017). Additionally, as witnesses of historical decisions such as legalization of same-sex marriage, public debates on immigration policies, religious freedom, and transgender rights, they are more likely to engage in movements related to social justice than previous generations (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). However, technology is also

infused in their advocacy work, with many using social networks to draw attention to their causes and concerns. In one instance, Twitter users used the hashtag #MarchForOurLives to coordinate a nationwide protest in Washington, DC, weeks after a school shooting in Parkland, Florida (Rue, 2018).

As generations enter their midlife and old age, they will continue to be impacted by historical events of their youth (Rickes, 2016). For both Millennials and Generation Z, watching civil unrest that was considered politically motivated, may have contributed to the increase in independent political voices among the newest generation of voters who struggle to identify with a major political party (Twenge, 2017).

Financial and Economic Perspectives

After watching the Millennial generation before them return home after college with little to no job prospects (Twenge, 2017), Gen Z may be eager to get their degrees and enter the workforce. However, Generation Z is greatly concerned about the rising cost of education and expresses their unhappiness about accruing debt for something that has not necessarily advanced the generations before them (Twenge, 2017). Hoping to "change the world" by inventing or creating something that positively impacts the world or becomes their own boss (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), Generation Z is increasingly interested in working for themselves. To better prepare them for their future as entrepreneurs, 79% of students hope to gain practical experience through internships (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Career paths are not the only customization Generation Z has in mind; many want to customize their college experiences by having more say in the

selection of their courses and integrating internships that would more likely connect them to future career options (Price-Williams & Sasso, 2021).

Gen Z has impacted more societal structures than education; they have also embraced the concept of a shared economy, changing how everyone does business. The increased utilization of companies like Uber and Airbnb has coined the term for the generation as "*weconomists*" (Goedereis & Sasso, 2020). The impact Generation Z has had on businesses has radically changed the way companies interact with consumers (Koulopoulos & Keldsen, 2014). As digital natives, Generation Z expects technology to work in their favor, engaging with online businesses that provide convenience. For example, Generation Z can rent a set of skis or a formal dress for an event online for a minimum fee. They can purchase new and used items at the touch of a button in an app or in-app marketplace where other users are selling and exchanging goods and services (Stillman & Stillman, 2017). For many Generation Z students, they can supplement their income by creating and selling items themselves or picking up shifts for ride shares and food delivery services when convenient (Twenge, 2017).

Although Gen Z is setting trends that separate them from their predecessors, they also share characteristics of the Silent Generation. The Silent Generation, those born between 1925-1942 (Howe & Strauss, 2000), and Generation Z are both considered adaptive archetypes who desire a more simplified way of life. Gen Z purchasing trends are finding that this newest group of consumers are intrigued with past trends, embracing "throwbacks" of an earlier time, such as vinyl records and tabletop board games (Rickes,

2016). The simple life, however, may have drawbacks, with some fearing that a childhood that is "over simple, over slowed, and overprotected may result in a generation that is more risk averse and conforming than prior generations" (Rickes, 2016, p.27). For Generation Z, technology is invisible, part of their everyday life, and so rediscovering experiences lost to their generation may be how they become inspired to truly meld the old with the new.

Generation Z Mental Well-Being

Fearful of the unknown and having more online relationships than in person may have contributed to a considerably less happy generation than the Millennials before them. Gen Z women were significantly affected, as 48% more girls felt left out in 2015 than in 2010 (Twenge, 2017). The overly confident Millennial generation tended to be more optimistic than other generations, and Gen Z did not follow suit. As Gen Z students entered middle and high school, the number of students who claimed satisfaction with themselves began to decrease and reached an all-time low in 2015 as early Gen Z students became high school seniors (Twenge, 2017). The rates of self-reported depression, anxiety and social anxiety have seen consistent growth (American College Health Association, 2022). However, the Center for Collegiate Mental Well-being anticipates that the more risk-averse Generation Z cohort may result in decreased drug and alcohol abuse (Rickes, 2016). Although Twenge and others anticipate a delay in typical behaviors traditionally tied to young adults, there is an increase in cyberbullying

incidents. Cyberbullying, the consistent negative interactions from a single user towards another user, increased 34% in 2016 from 19% in 2007 (Rue, 2018).

Student Co-Curricular Experiences

For students to successfully learn and grow while in college, Astin (1985) suggested that they must actively engage on campus. This concept spurred a generation of scholarship that compared student success with the time and ways students were spending their time and energy (Vetter et al., 2019). Over time, this concept evolved as researchers such as Kuh began to look at how out-of-class experiences not only resulted in learning, but students were acquiring valuable skills that they may not have been exposed to through traditional academic curriculum (Price-Williams & Sasso, 2021). This type of learning was co-curricular and researchers such as Tinto were finding that the time and energy spent on co-curricular experiences was positively influencing student persistence. According to Tinto (1993), as students became more socially integrated into the institution, they were more committed to completing their degrees (Guiffrida, 2006). Furthermore, other terms emerged from the research, such as *integration* (Tinto, 1993) and *engagement* (Kuh, 2009), where scholars found that the time and effort of both the student and the institution contributed to student experiences impacting student success (Vetter et al., 2019). The student affairs profession "embraced various iterations of the student engagement construct" (Kuh, 2009, p. 696), and found that student participation in various college experiences outside of the academic curricula had similar outcomes (Camerato et al., 2019).

Student Involvement

Students have found ways to organize around their interests since the founding of American higher education. For example, in 1823 students at the Oxford Union brought students together to debate current issues (Komives, 2019). Just as they did then, students continue to create organizations that meet their interests, with organizations that focus on various topics, such as intellectual, social, recreational, cultural, political, humanitarian, and spiritual groups. Research shows that participation in these student organizations is where leadership identity evolves, helping students clarify their values and interests while learning about themselves and developing new skills (Komives et al., 2005). In addition, the benefits of student involvement have encouraged student affairs practitioners to promote co-curricular involvement as a pathway to more significant learning and development in college" (Vetter et al., 2019). There are several theories that conceptualize and differentiate the distinctive ways in which students interact with institutional engagement programs that facilitate their involvement or facilitate their own on-campus co-curricular involvement.

Student Involvement Theory

Student Involvement Theory was conceptually introduced in *Preventing Students from Dropping Out*, by Astin in 1975, but was more formally presented later in a 1984 article by Astin (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). In the article, Astin (1984) described involvement as the amount of energy that students devote to their academic experience. The concept of participation primarily focuses on student behavior, describing a highly

involved student as an individual who has a rigorous devotion to studying, regularly interacts with faculty, and actively participates in student organizations, spending a considerable amount of time on campus. However, an uninvolved student may avoid spending additional time on campus, refrain from joining student organizations, and has little contact with faculty. The vast sense of involvement of the word is difficult to define and each student may look different.

Astin (1984) referred to involvement as a behavioral term explaining that involvement is more than what the student feels or thinks but instead what they do and how they behave. Substituting words such as value, care for, and stress for more active verb forms such as join, devote, attach, and commit to describe involvement (Astin, 1999). Focusing on the behavioral components of student success, Astin (1984) described the Involvement Theory using five basic postulates. Describing first that involvement is the investment of energy both physical and psychological in an experience or task. For example, an involved student would devote both time and energy to prepare for a chemistry exam by preparing notes and scheduling time to study. The second postulate is that involvement occurs along a continuum, in which different students invest different amounts of energy (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The third describes involvement as having both quantitative and qualitative features. For example, when a student is studying, they invest a number of hours towards this task (quantitative), but they also must invest energy into learning the content by comprehensively reading the material and not simply daydreaming (qualitative).

The final two postulates provide insight into designing effective educational programs for students, and Astin (1984) suggested that additional research be done on involvement to test these final two propositions (Astin, 1999). The fourth postulate emphasizes the active participation of the student in any program, stating that the "amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in the program" (Astin, 1985, p. 296). Encouraging possibilities for future research as to whether lack of motivation is related to low-quality participation, Astin (1999, p. 527) proposed that researchers ask, “to what extent can high-quality participation compensate for lack of quantity?”. The final postulate focuses on how institutions can enhance educational effectiveness, stating that "the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (Astin, 1985, p. 296).

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984) is based on various pedagogical concepts. One key idea pertained to the notion that a student’s achievement is linked to their exposure to a variety of courses, wherein experienced professors impart knowledge to students with the aim of fostering comprehension and retention of information. However, Astin (1985, p. 299) argued that "simply exposing the student to a particular set of courses" may not result in the intended outcome. Further, suggesting that the theory was most successfully applied when the student had an intrinsic interest in the topic, but ultimately failed to actively involve the student in the learning process.

Astin (1999) also considered Resource Theory when developing the Theory of Student Involvement. This was based on the concept that resources such as libraries and laboratories (facilities), faculty and staff (human resources), and financial aid, endowments, and research funds (fiscal) were brought together student learning and development would result. However, the limitations of Resource Theory primarily lacked focus on how the student would engage with these resources. Using an example from Astin (1999), if the institution provided a multimillion volume library but students did not make effective use of the library, then the resource was not benefiting the student learning process.

The concept of individualized or eclectic therapy also contributed to the concept of student involvement, in which Astin (1984) connected the third postulate, suggesting that different students will invest different amounts of energy (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). If students differ so much, then the way to connect them to higher levels of involvement would allow them to experience college in a unique, individualized way. Student Involvement Theory "attempts to identify the curriculum content and instructional methods that best meet the needs of the individual student" (Astin, 1999, p. 521). Although the theory placed the focus on the student, aligning with Astin's (1984) emphasis on student participation in learning, it would be logically difficult to implement in a higher education setting. The needs of each student vary greatly and would be difficult to put into practice.

Effort and interest were not the only components of the Student Involvement Theory; Astin (1984) also suggested that a student's time should be considered a factor in their success. For example, if the institution's goal is to have a student better understand a particular principle, the more the student interacts with it, the more likely they are to connect. However, time is difficult to control for college-aged students and institutions must be aware that students invest their time in a wide array of matters that reduce the amount of time they must devote. For example, traditional students may have the privilege to devote their time and energy to student organizations or other social activities, while other students may have jobs or family commitments that require their time and attention.

In addition to time constraints, it is important to also consider how students who do not fit within the dominant culture of an institution may face obstacles to participation. Although Astin later noted that studies have focused on traditionally aged students, it was observed that participation could make student experiences richer and more fulfilling if interventions had the intention of making the learning environment of all students more effective (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). However, for students of color, veterans and those identifying within LGBTQIA + communities, the institution as a whole may be considered a hostile environment, which could influence the individual's motivation to be more involved (Tillapaugh, 2019). Adopting a more discerning perspective, Tillapaugh (2019) suggests that higher education professionals can assist students of color in

fostering connections by reevaluating ideas related to resilience, societal constructs of identities, authenticity, and agency.

Impact of Student Involvement

"The time and energy that students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and professional development" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2014, p. 410). The concept that the impact of college is determined by the amount of effort an individual student devotes to their curricular and co-curricular experiences was notably first discussed by Astin (1984) but continued to be reaffirmed as research supported that students who do more in college get more from it (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Since the expansion of the student affairs profession in the 1960s, research on how involvement in campus activities has also contributed to future career and leadership success (Komives, 2019). A study by Thomas and Cheese (2005) concluded that experience-based learning combined with on-the-job experience and life experiences were the most effective learning strategies to assist career and leadership development (Marcketti & Kadolph, 2010). The educational experiences that arise from participating in activities, clubs, organizations, and student government have traditionally played a pivotal role in supporting the increasing emphasis on defining college outcomes for students (Komives, 2019).

When measuring student outcomes like grades, retention, and graduation, academic involvement such as studying, asking questions in class, and completing

homework has led to more significant effects on student success (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). However, a substantial portion of the research that centers on learning and personal growth often overlooks the positive effects on psychological well-being, with co-curricular engagement being identified as the most potent factor (Kilgo et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, co-curricular involvement could have adverse effects for some students and not others (Komives, 2019). Ultimately, the student has the power to decide how and who they spend their time with and doing (Astin, 1984). For certain students, engagement in a handful of experiences suffices to meet their requirements, whereas others may discover the advantages of the sense of belonging and institutional connection derived from their participation (Sasso & Paladini, 2021). For example, if a student is highly involved in multiple experiences on campus such as being a resident assistant, playing intramural sports and serving as a student leader in multiple organizations, they may find that their involvement had a positive effect on their psychological well-being (Kilgo et al., 2016). However, other students may find that over-involvement, which "implies that after a certain threshold is reached", might experience a negative impact from their involvement (Vetter et al., 2019, p. 48). However, the perception of the student could also influence a sense of belonging and willingness to become more deeply involved. For students of color, "mistreatment or discrimination due to race on campus may result in feelings of invalidation and weakness", negatively affecting their psychological well-being (Koo, 2021, p. 199). Additionally, students who commute may

find a stronger sense of community and connection through the classroom networks they belong to rather than co-curricular experiences (Sasso & Paladini, 2021).

In 1991, Pascarella and Terenzini published a review of 2,600 research studies in their book *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research*. In this book, the authors addressed six basic questions: What evidence was there “(1) that people changed during the time they were attending college? (2) that change or development during college resulted from college attendance, (3) that different types of postsecondary institutions had a differential influence on student change or development during college, and (4) that the collegiate experience produced conditional, as opposed to general, effects on student change or development. (5) What evidence existed on the effects of different experiences within the same institution? (6) What are the long-term effects of college?” (Weidman, 1992, p. 222). Their findings produced two persistent themes: the depth of a student's effort and involvement in the institution they attended. First, focusing on similar themes from Astin's (1984) work, the greater the effort a student makes, the greater the likelihood of success. The second theme emphasizes the pivotal significance of individuals in a student’s life, encompassing both fellow students and faculty, as well as the quality of the learning environments they establish and the level of stimulation their interactions offer for various forms of learning and personal growth (Weidman, 1992).

Later in 2005, Pascarella and Terenzini published a second volume, How *College Affects Students*, reviewing 2,500 studies. Their reviews were organized around student

outcomes in this volume and the initial six questions posed in their first volume. In a review, Astin (2005) expressed appreciation for the work and encouraged all faculty and students in higher education, as well as college administrators, to use their work as a reference on how students were affected by the college experience. One of the only criticisms of the book was to see a more in-depth comparison of their initial findings in the light of the latest evidence relating to "student race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status by type of college attended" (Astin, 2005, p. 121).

Astin (1984) proposed that involvement considered the time and energy students spent but also acknowledged the influence of their environment. The input-environment-output (I-E-O) model proposed by Astin (1984) was primarily utilized when researching involvement. When using Student Involvement Theory in research, it has been typical to focus on measuring time on task instead of energy expenditure. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) student surveys based at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA asked students to indicate how often they participated in various educational activities (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). This survey asked first-year students to quantify the amount of time they spent doing activities in high school. To determine the amount of time a student was involved in both academic and social endeavors, students who completed their first year of college were asked about the time they spent on tasks throughout their first year. Tasks such as campus employment, living on campus, participating in clubs, engaging with peers, and interacting with faculty members are the type of involvement typically measured (Koo, 2021).

Although Astin (1985, p. 298) believed that the student controls the extent of their involvement, the theory also discussed how the institution played a significant role in student involvement, in that the "effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement". Using the CIRP survey, institutions could measure "involvement in various groups and alter institutional policies and practices based on their findings" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 412). CIRP also hosted annual workshops for institutional representatives to learn to interpret their reports and design further longitudinal studies with their data (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). To further assist institutions with interpreting the data, HERI created constructs that measure a single trait or aspect of a student's life, for example, faculty interaction. In their CIRP survey, instead of asking students if they interacted with faculty, they asked about the different types of students and faculty interaction, for example, guidance about their academic program, feedback on academic work, and opportunities to work on research (HERI, 2022).

Integration

As the interest in understanding the role of institutions in student involvement grew, researchers delved into how resources could be channeled to shape the student experience. These resources encompassed physical assets like facilities, as well as human resources in the form of faculty and staff, and financial resources, including financial aid (Astin, 1999). For example, Tinto’s Theory of Integration (1993) posited that students who were connected to the social and academic life of an institution were more likely to

stay enrolled within that institution. Furthermore, it was stressed that meaningful connections students made by joining student organizations and making friends helped individuals successfully integrate into the campus community (Smith, 2018). However, there are stressful conditions that may have impacted student persistence, such as academic difficulty, inadequate finances, lack of student involvement, or poor institutional fit (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). However, Tinto (1993) posited that it is not the condition itself that resulted in departure, but the student's response. Although some students are able to cope with the transitions experienced in adjusting to social and academic life in college, others may have more difficulty.

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1975, 1993)

For decades, researchers have found that student involvement positively impacted student success. Much of the current literature on involvement is informed by Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement, which focused on how students spend their time in college. This theory continued to be widely supported, as follow-up research affirmed that involvement and student success were closely related (Kulp et al., 2021). Building on this research, Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993) introduced the concept of integration, suggesting that students who successfully integrated into the social and academic aspects of college were more likely to persist and graduate than their peers. Initially developed to study student dropout rates, Tinto's (1993) theory evolved, exploring how the relationship of students involved in academic and campus life and their feelings of connection to the institution and enhanced sense of belonging and

affinity with the institution (Kulp et al., 2021). Tinto played an integral role in introducing the institution's role in student success.

According to Student Departure Theory, the ability of an individual student to succeed in college depended on their ability to adapt to the academic and social environment. Tinto (1993) suggested that, as a student integrated into the academic and social components of college, they were more likely to stay at that institution through graduation. However, students could have experienced varying challenges throughout their college career that resulted in departure. Such challenges as academic or financial were previously used as reasons for dropping out, focusing the onus of responsibility on the student instead of considering the institution's responsibility to provide social and academic connections to the campus (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). However, Tinto believed that although these variables may be involved in the departure of students from the institution, previous theories did not consider the voluntary and involuntary components of the departure. Initially using the works of Durkheim (1951) and Van Gennep (1960), Tinto (1988) considered how students transitioned through three distinct phases when coming to college. Positing that when students were unable to establish membership in these new communities, feelings of inadequacy and isolation may result (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). However, each student's response to these transitions differed, leading Tinto to believe that successful integration relied more on the perceived level of integration of the students in their decision to persist or leave (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

In 1975, Tinto posited that students who integrated into the campus community increased their commitment to the institution and were more likely to graduate. This concept was adopted from a study called The *Rites of Passage* by Van Gennep, who presented stages describing the transition from youth to adulthood. These stages were separation, transition, and incorporation, each requiring the person to change the patterns of interaction between themselves and the community and the time they are moving between (Tinto, 1988). Similar to the stages Van Gennep developed, Tinto included the process of student persistence in college in the Student Departure Theory. In theory, students separated themselves from previous associations such as high school and place of residence. For example, students who chose to decrease communication with friends from high school and make fewer trips home were, according to Tinto, in the process of separation. However, it was also noted that some students may struggle with the separation stage, especially if their new community was drastically different from the local community from which they recently departed. Tinto believed that a sense of separation must be achieved before being able to move to the next stage of departure. However, a "transition from a known member in one group to that of a stranger in a new setting, could result in feelings of isolation" (Tinto, 1988, p. 442). The inability to establish membership in the new community Durkheim (1951) and Tinto (1993) posited could potentially result in a response such as individual or egoistic suicide (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Feelings of isolation could be especially heightened for students of color, who may suffer a loss of identity when separated from their culture (Tillapaugh, 2019).

Critics argue that Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993) focused on residential white students and ignored students who are non-traditional in terms of race/ethnicity, age, and full-time enrollment status (Davidson & Wilson, 2014). In a critique of Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993), Guiffrida (2006) said that to culturally advance the theory, it must be recognized how cultural and familial connections could benefit students of color. Further stating that the Van Gennep (1960) Theory of Rites of Passage, which was used to describe the three phases that a student experienced when joining a new group, did not consider the assimilation from one culture to another (Guiffrida, 2006). Since the introduction of the Theory of Student Departure, the response from those in the field has reflected that assimilation is not required to persist, noting that the focus was that all students should find some sort of membership in a community that helped them feel connected to the campus (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

In the second stage of Student Departure Theory, students transition from the reliance and comfort of their lives prior to college to their new community's cultural norms and experiences. Although retention rates are taken after a student's first year and the beginning of their subsequent years, this may not be indicative of the reason for departure. Tinto (1988) explained that some students persisted throughout the first year but did not establish personal bonds that tied them to their new community, resulting in loss, bewilderment, and a sense of isolation. In the transition stage, students must immerse themselves in their new community, adopting norms and behaviors.

However, if the degree of difference between the norms of the new community and their past is too substantial, the likelihood of persistence is greatly reduced. A student's prior experiences may not have prepared him to successfully navigate his new community with as little effort as a peer. The differences between the past and current communities may have been more than just their ability to persevere. This type of impact often became a reality for students from marginalized communities who were first-generation, nontraditional, or from rural or low socioeconomic backgrounds. Although "some students were willing to "stick it out" even under the most severe conditions, there were others who withdrew under minimal stress" (Tinto, 1988, p. 444). This perseverance could have also been attributed to the student's sense of motivational orientation, which was different for a student of color. As the “motivations of a student of color differ from the motivational orientations of their white peers” (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 453).

The third stage of Tinto's Student Departure Theory (1993) integrates or incorporates the larger college community. Suppose that the student has effectively navigated through the process of disengaging from their previous experiences and has successfully managed the transition. They have learned to embrace a lifestyle within their new community, establishing routines and adopting values that resonate with both peers and the institution. While the student may have become more familiar with his physical space, social interactions were the primary source of actual incorporation, and therefore relationships with students and faculty alike were necessary to achieve this stage. However, considering a more cross-cultural approach to Tinto's Student Departure

Theory (1993), an argument could be made to also include supportive relationships from the student's family and friends that students would greatly benefit from (Guiffrida, 2006). Failure to build any of these meaningful relationships can lead to isolation and ultimately departure from the institution (Tinto, 1988).

The foundation of Student Departure Theory was building communities in which students felt a part of and had relationships that helped them feel connected with those that shared their community (Tinto, 1993). Institutions created programs to help facilitate these stages, reducing the number of students dropping out. One of these was the orientation programs that introduced resources within their new community. However, these programs could "often be short-lived and did not provide the sorts of extended contact needed for establishing community membership" (Tinto, 1988, p. 446). This resulted in students who understood the importance of building community but had not yet found it.

Recognizing that cultural connections could fulfill this sense of membership; institutions also increased the number of spaces on campus where students of color could find cultural connections with their peers and members of the local community. It was also considered that "cultural connections could play a much larger role in students of color college student persistence than simply facilitating social integration into the university" (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 458). Students could also find communities through exposure to more repetitive type programs such as fraternity and sorority life, residence hall associations, student government, and other extracurricular programs. Although a

student's probability of integrating increased with participation in these types of programs, Guiffrida (2006) cautioned that these programs were not always easily accessible for first-year students or students of color. However, Guiffrida (2006) also suggested that helping students of color and those from marginalized populations like first-generation students connect early with university social systems could fulfill their needs and reduce departure rates.

Academic and Social Integration

The two dimensions of integration are academic and social connection to the campus (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Colleges have both academic and social characteristics, and a student's likelihood of departure is determined by their perception of the formal and informal experiences of each (Tinto, 1993). A critical dimension of success at college is having a sense of belonging with peers and on campus. "It can affect a student's degree of academic adjustment, achievement, aspirations, and even whether a student stays in school" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 1). The various transitions that students experienced during a traditional college experience could simultaneously be exciting and overwhelming. As first-year students navigate a new environment, they also learn to balance their social desires and coursework while adjusting to college-level academic standards. The unique relationship between academic and social experiences in college influences a student's decision to stay or leave college. Tinto (1993) theorized that students' goals and commitments are influenced by their involvement in academic and social systems during college (Strayhorn, 2019). The role involvement with others on

campus, especially interactions with diverse peers and faculty, impacts a student's likelihood to persist (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). While both academic and social integration influence student integration, the student and institution find that one dimension of integration has a more positive impact. For example, Tinto in 1998 noted that due to their limited amount of time on campus, commuter and community college students may find that academic integration is more important than social involvement in connecting students to their communities (Davidson & Wilson, 2014).

For first-year students who are traditional-age, they also experience a life transition of emerging adulthood, where relationships and environments are the foundation of health (Bowman et al., 2019). Other students who are impacted by the transition are non-traditionally aged students and commuter students who do not reside on campus. Students who commute to college may have difficulty ever entirely separating from their home residence and "may not be able to fully integrate into the social and intellectual life of the college" (Tinto, 1988, p. 443). In addition, commuter students are increasingly composed of students of color, first-generation students, or non-traditional, such as part-time or adult learners who might also be married or student parents (Sasso & Paladini, 2021). For commuter students, time is even more precious. Commuter students are less likely to engage in co-curricular experiences because they do not live on or near the campus and therefore cannot devote the considerable amount of time that Astin claimed is necessary to be involved. As a result, they are described as

“disengaged, apathetic, or inferior despite a void of research to support these claims” (Sasso & Paladini, 2021, p. 17).

Other populations impacted during the transitional phases of college are students who work while attending college. They are considered more likely to miss out on co-curricular experiences. Nearly 80% of part-time and 40% of full-time students work while in college, dramatically changing their college experience compared to their non-working peers (Kruger, 2018). Working off-campus can deprive them of additional opportunities to study, take advantage of academic resources, and could inhibit their participation in co-curricular experiences (Dungy & Peck, 2019). In addition, students of color can struggle with an amplified challenge of feeling as if they belong on campus, resulting in “simultaneously feeling marginalized" and not feeling appreciated or embraced for their diversity (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 51).

Initial research into the persistence rates in college students found that an overwhelming number of reasons students dropped out was related to lack of involvement. As he and others such as Chickering continued their research into persistence rates (Astin 1977, 1982; Chickering, 1974), one of the most influential involvement factors for persistence was students who lived in residence halls (Astin, 1985).

In *College Student's Sense of Belonging* (Strayhorn, 2019), an anecdote featuring James, a first-generation college student, was employed to illustrate student experiences. James became a member of the "Explorations" living-learning community, which was

tailored for students aspiring to pursue careers in science and technology. James did not make this decision on the advice of an academic advisor or consultation with his family. Instead, James decided to join because the concept of being part of a community of his peers that likely shared common interests reduced his worries about making friends or feeling comfortable in a "space that was otherwise foreign, unfamiliar, lonely, and unwelcoming" (Strayhorn, 2019). Many students, like James, seek ways to meet their basic needs. Finding and connecting with these programs early in their college career could have insurmountable benefits for their ability to succeed and persist to graduation.

Students residing in campus housing possess greater opportunities and time to cultivate a more profound connection to campus life. During the 1990s, a surge in the establishment of living-learning communities within residence halls consistently yielded positive outcomes (Hernandez et al., 1999). Furthermore, a study by Pike and Hansen found that residential programs that included faculty and peer interaction, peer support programs, dedicated academic advising, and intellectually stimulating programming had significantly higher levels of involvement and interaction with the institution (Pike & Hansen, 2010). However, students who commuted lost the educational benefits of student involvement due to their proximity to campus, leading to a loss of academic and social integration (Sasso & Paladini, 2021). Scholars have identified that participation in structured or formal activities benefits college students (Eubank & DeVita, 2020).

Engagement

Research consistently shows that involved students "achieve higher grades and persist at higher rates" (Komives, 2019, p. 16). Although Quaye and Harper (2014) cautioned that although a student could be involved, they may not be engaged. Engaged students commit to the time and effort as involved students do. However, they expect the institution to provide experiences that allow them to achieve their goals through purposeful activities.

Kuh (2009) extended the interpretation of engagement, proposing that students invest time and energy in activities that have been empirically associated with college success. However, Kuh (2001) suggested that it is worth noting that engagement is also shaped by the strategies institutions employ to encourage student involvement in these activities. The intention of engagement is to connect with students through intentional programming resulting in "growth and development in holistic ways both inside and outside the classroom" (Komives, 2019, p. 20).

Kuh's Theory of Student Engagement (2001, 2003)

Kuh (2009) and others saw engagement as an expression of how student behaviors and effective educational practice were linked and not as an extension of involvement. Therefore, Kuh’s Theory of Student Engagement (2001) ultimately involved two elements, “what the student does and what the institution does” (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

As it became evident that there was a link between student engagement and desired outcomes of college, Kuh (2001) explored how the institution could allocate resources to support student success. Resources such as curriculum and support services encouraged students to participate in activities that positively impacted persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation (Kuh, 2009). However, the concept of shared responsibility for student success was driven by concerns that involvement theories were applied to full-time, traditional-aged, residential students and failed to consider students from historically underserved groups (Tillapaugh, 2019). Kuh believed that despite your circumstance, "participating in educationally purposeful activities directly influences the quality of a student's learning and overall educational experience" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 413).

Using engagement as a measure, institutions were challenged to intentionally provide educational experiences that channeled students' participation in activities that directly or indirectly improved student learning.

Kuh (2001) persisted that for these experiences to be truly impactful, the student must not be solely responsible for seeking out experiences. To promote student participation, institutions are essential to intentionally shaping experiences and environments (McCarrell & Selznick, 2020). For example, institutions can promote collaborative and interactive learning by encouraging more student-faculty contact and participation in high impact practices, employment, and other experiences (Kuh, 2009). The concept of engaging students in active learning has been used by student affairs

professionals and encourages institutions to promote higher levels of student engagement (Kuh, 2009).

However, it is also important to note that student satisfaction, learning, and development may increase if the conditions are in an environment that is more inclusive and affirming. For students of color, the campus space may not be a place where they want to get involved or engage themselves. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on motivating students to engage in campus life for success, but it has overlooked the underlying reasons why some students opt not to partake in campus activities (Tillapaugh, 2019). Considering that engagement emphasizes actions that institutions could take to increase student engagement, institutions must look critically at how engagement practices have "historically marginalized those who do not meet the set outcomes and expectations" as initially proposed in Kuh's Theory of Student Engagement (Tillapaugh, 2019, p. 203).

In the 1990s, as Kuh and others explored different theories on student development, so did accrediting agencies and state officials who requested institutions provide measurable outcomes of educational practices and collegiate quality. As a result, Kuh (2001) and associates worked to design a tool that could provide institutions with a more comprehensive examination of how students were engaging on their campuses. Using the data, the hope was that the institutions could more effectively explore how student behavior and effective educational practices were linked.

As a result, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) project was developed. Led by researcher Kuh under the guidance of various student development scholars such as Astin, Chickering, Gardner, and Pace (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009), the NSSE is used to identify major benchmarks of student engagement (Tillapaugh, 2019). The benchmarks include (a) level of academic challenge, (b) active and collaborative learning, (c) student faculty interaction, (d) enriching educational experiences, and (e) supportive campus environments (NSSE, 2021). Intended to "represent clusters of good educational practices" and serve as a starting point for understanding engagement (Pike, 2013).

The first of these tenants regarding academic challenges is about setting high expectations for student performance by focusing on the importance of the effort put forth by the student (Kuh, 2009). When promoting active and collaborative learning, institutions were encouraging students to become more intensely involved in their education so that they could gain the problem-solving skills needed to learn in different settings and environments (Kuh, 2009). Creating relationships with faculty and staff is an important tenet of engagement. Interacting with faculty and staff in and outside the classroom promotes mentorship and a desire to become a lifelong learner (Kuh, 2009). In addition to these relationships, students can experience learning opportunities outside of traditional academic programs. More diverse experiences like study abroad, internships, and participation in co-curricular activities like student organizations "provide opportunities to integrate and apply knowledge" (Kuh, 2009, p. 701). However, student

participation in experiences does not always yield the desired result if students do not feel that their institution is committed to their success. To achieve this level of engagement, institutions must intentionally cultivate positive environments that convey to all students that they are supported and can succeed (Kuh, 2009).

Using NSSE data, scholars posited that some engagement opportunities such as learning communities, service learning, and internships were highly impactful (McCarrell & Selznick, 2020). The reasoning behind why these high-impact programs "have potent effects on all students" is that they require a considerable amount of time and effort. Furthermore, they are often facilitated outside the classroom and require the student to "engage with faculty, staff, and peers through meaningful interactions" (Camerato et al., 2019, p. 61).

Engaging Students

Expanding on the idea of student involvement, Kuh (2001) suggested that institutions have a responsibility to promote meaningful learning opportunities that students could choose to participate in. Suggesting that institutions can influence student retention by intentionally creating high-impact programs. This research grew an increasing interest in co-curricular participation, which blends academic curriculum with the benefits of social interaction. This includes undergraduate research, community-based learning, study abroad, and internships (Mayhew et al., 2016). Additionally, supported is the concept that institutions intentionally engage students in co-curricular experiences like student organizations, finding that students demonstrate higher levels of development

(Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Co-curricular student organizations are defined as when students commit to being involved in membership-driven groups, organizations, and teams such as student government, fraternity and sorority life, cultural and political organizations, and community service organizations (Kulp et al., 2021).

Student Organizations

Student organizations exist on nearly all college and university campuses, encouraging "individuals from similar backgrounds to meet and share commonalities" (Rosa et al., 2020, p. 45). In addition to the social integration benefits, Astin (1993) found that time in student organizations was positively associated with student's public speaking, leadership abilities, and interpersonal skills. Additionally, Foubert and Granger (2006) found that participation in student organizations also contributes to positive psychosocial development in the following areas: clarification of purpose, educational involvement, career planning, life management, and cultural participation. "Specifically, co-curricular involvement (i.e., student organizations, Greek life, among others) can significantly predict several aspects of psychological well-being, including students' personal growth, positive relationships with others, and purpose in life" (Kilgo et al., 2016, p. 1043).

Similarly, research also shows that first-year students who join student organizations have a stronger sense of purpose than their peers who did not join student clubs or organizations (Jones & Morrow, 2022). A sense of purpose can also be associated with a feeling of belonging when an individual engages in a system or

environment in which they perceive themselves becoming an indispensable component of that system or environment (Jones & Morrow, 2022). The sense of belonging is also a significant factor in student persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007). However, not all students gain a sense of belonging through their participation in organizations. For students of color attending predominantly white institutions (PWI), the campus climate can feel unwelcoming, and students can become less interested in getting involved in traditional student organization experiences (Rosa et al., 2020). This is also true for students considered commuters who do not reside on campus. For commuter students, campus activities like student organizations might appear less accessible, with only 59% of them indicating participation in co-curricular activities, in contrast to the 75% participation rate among residential students (Sasso & Paladini, 2021).

Persistence

Student involvement has long been associated with student success. Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984) focused on the time and effort students invested and the relation to positive outcomes. Since this theory, a large body of research has emerged suggesting that involvement and student success were connected (Kulp et al., 2021). Tinto's Theory of Integration (1993) suggested such a connection, claiming that students who "successfully integrate into the social and academic aspects of college are more likely to persist and graduate" (Kulp et al., 2021, p. 748). Moreover, drawing upon Kuh's (2001) Student Engagement Theory, scholars speculated that early encounters with high-impact initiatives, such as engaging in research alongside faculty, participating in

service-learning projects, being part of learning communities, and assuming leadership roles in student organizations, could serve as pathways through which elements of belonging were nurtured among students (Ribera, 2017).

Providing an environment that promotes the following concepts supports persistence and degree completion; students feel that the institution professionals care about them and their well-being, establish peer relationships, and regularly attend campus activities (Komives, 2019). However, these are most successful when the institution is able to provide an inclusive campus where racial discrimination and prejudice are less frequent (Mayhew et al., 2016). The white cultural norms that dominated many predominantly white institutions (PWI) may not have created an environment where students of color feel supported. Research supports that involvement in cultural organizations can bridge the cultural gap that students of color face, helping them find deeper connections to the institution and positively influencing the persistence rate (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010).

A campus culture that promotes inclusivity helps students feel like they belong and motivates them to become more deeply engaged in campus programs (Jones & Morrow, 2022). However, despite the motivations to become involved in student organizations, Tinto (2017, p. 4) suggested that persistence was most affected when the student perceived a sense of belonging. "Students who perceive themselves as belonging to a specific group or the institution generally are more likely to persist".

Student Development

Astin (1984, p. 297) defined involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to experiences. A study to determine the impact of involvement developed two modifiers to help delineate the nature of involvement, using the terms active and passive involvement (Kulp et al., 2021). Using these modifiers, an example of active involvement describes active engagement in a student organization or leadership role (Vetter et al., 2019). In active participation roles, students may be required to apply for entry, meet eligibility criteria, attend trainings and meetings, or have specific responsibilities in a structured environment (Vetter et al., 2019). This level of commitment to the organization and institution differs from passive involvement in which students attend campus-sponsored events to experience the social benefits, requiring no long-term commitments (Vetter et al., 2019).

For most students, participation in organizations like student government, fraternity and sorority life, affinity groups, cultural and political organizations, and community service organizations expects more active participation from their members. Active participation can provide opportunities for the institution to influence student learning intentionally. Many of the experience's students have through student organizations "complement the classroom activities and provide students with essential real-world training and skill development" (Rosa et al., 2020, p. 46). In addition to the academic connection, students who become more deeply involved as active

participants increase their cognitive development and interpersonal skills through involvement (Foltz et al., 2021).

However, quality involvement must be sustained for students to benefit the most. Students with a multi-year commitment to student organization and leadership experience more post-graduate success than students with only short-term involvement (Vetter et al., 2019). An example of this may be providing different experiences for first-year students than graduating seniors. The Bonner Student Development Model guides how institutional practices and tiers of student involvement could match with each year of the undergraduate experience (Hoy & Johsnon, 2013).

The benefits of students deeply investing their time and energy into a student organization can expose them to many development opportunities. However, for the result of this involvement to foster student leadership, build community, and encourage individual meaning-making, institutions must ensure that the experiences provide opportunities for students to gain skills, values, and knowledge as a result of participating.

Leadership

Through campus involvement, students are likely to gain leadership skills. However, it is through development in these positions that one can also gain the ability to recognize how to successfully employ these skills (Correia-Harker & Dugan, 2020). It is also a presumption that students who become actively involved as student leaders will, with time, "possess the potential to practice or reflect on the learning that occurs" (Rosch

& Stephens, 2017, p. 1107). In one study, students found that after their experience leading their peers in a student organization, their leadership identity shifted from a leader-centered view to a more collaborative relationship with their peers (Komives et al., 2005).

Three theoretical leadership development models describe the student leadership experience: leadership capacity, self-efficacy, and motivation (Correia-Harker & Dugan, 2020). Leadership capacity encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitude of student leaders. Self-efficacy pertains to a student's internal belief in their leadership capabilities, and motivation represents the personal drive of the student to excel in their leadership role (Correia-Harker & Dugan, 2020). However, each of these theories focuses primarily on how students could learn these concepts through short-term experiences instead of how they developed a deeper understanding over time and through involvement experiences that spanned their college tenure. A benefit of student involvement is that students can practice leadership while learning and improving their skills. (Komives, 2019). In academic leadership development programs, students may not be able to connect what they were learning in leadership roles with what they see in leadership literature, which is more often written for corporate executives (Peck et al., 2022).

Astin (1984) theorized that the amount a "student develops from their involvement is proportional to the extent of their involvement" (Grace et al., 2022, p. 19). As students enter their first year of college, they are likely seeking social support and a desire to grow their sense of belonging (Tinto, 1993). However, as students persevere

toward graduation, they may experience developmental influences that foster their leadership identity. Adult and peer influences, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning can contribute to a student leader's identity (Komives et al., 2005). For example, the definition of meaningful involvement may adjust with time. Involvement may have begun with a student joining a few student organizations. However, throughout their college experience, they may have limited that involvement to one or two experiences to which they devote more of their time and energy.

Leadership positions allow students to develop a deeper connection with their participation, in which they can gain essential skills to help transition from college to career. Student involvement can provide skills such as teamwork, collaboration, and leadership, all of which are skills and attributes employers look for in recent college graduates (Dungy & Peck, 2019). Students may not initially connect their co-curricular involvement to their professional success. However, with institutional support, students can be encouraged to reflect on career-related skills they have gained through their leadership roles and how they can apply those to their future career goals (Trolian, 2019).

Mental Well-Being

Eubank and DeVita (2020) described a 22-year-old Generation Z undergraduate named Angelica Wilson, who attended Northwestern University, who actively participated in a sorority and engaged in various campus student organizations. Her peers regarded her as a kind, supportive, and considerate individual. Tragically, Angelica took her own life in 2018. The prevalence of mental well-being challenges such as stress,

anxiety, and depression have reached unprecedented levels among college students (American College Health Association, 2022). In light of this concerning trend, professionals in the field of higher education, including college counselors, student affairs officials, wellness coordinators, and administrators, began searching for strategies to enhance outreach and educational initiatives, aiming to mitigate the impact of mental well-being issues on college campuses (Kalkbrenner & Flinn, 2020).

Although not all mental well-being issues result in tragic outcomes like Angelica's suicide, there are various other difficulties that college students may encounter, which can significantly affect their mental well-being. College Counseling Center Directors have reported a continued trend in serving students with more severe mental well-being needs that need to be treated "for students to remain in, and be successful at, college" (Schwitzer & Brunt, 2015, p. 333). Mental well-being challenges for college students are not new. In 1918 the dean of students at Harvard University reported that student mental well-being problems were the number one health challenge (Benton & Benton, 2006).

Biological predispositions also impact mental well-being statistics. These include disorders such as Schizophrenia or Bipolar Disorder, which often present at the age of a traditional college student (Rosenberg & Kosslyn, 2014). However, psychological disorders such as autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may stem from a student's social and developmental experiences before college (Schwitzer & Brunt, 2015). While other students' mental well-being challenges may not present until

well into their college career. However, some students arrive at campus having already received medication to help them achieve and achieve academic success. These students may need “continued support while enrolled in college to get access to medication and consultation to avoid any gaps in their medical care” (Benton & Benton, 2006, p. 9).

Within the student population, mental well-being issues are predominantly linked to stressful circumstances. The pressures stemming from rigorous academic demands, feelings of homesickness, and challenges in adapting to college life could all have adverse effects on a student’s mental well-being. Furthermore, social and interpersonal challenges arising from an individual’s ethnicity, culture, or sexual identity could also contribute to diminished mental well-being (Schwitzer & Brunt, 2015). Individuals who have been victims of crimes, sexual trauma; or relationship abuse can also have poor mental well-being (Schwitzer & Brunt, 2015). Often, if left untreated, mental well-being problems could result in poor academic performance leading to higher attrition rates (Kalkbrenner & Flinn, 2020).

According to a report from the National Survey of College Counseling Center Directors, feelings related to anxiety and depression were the most reported by their clients (Association of University and College Counseling Center Directors, 2020). In addition, students who self-reported feelings of anxiety and depression also reported increases in substance use (Hurlocker et al., 2022). These data align with the reports from the American College Health Association (ACHA) reports from “Spring 2022, that listed stress (43.7%), anxiety (37.3%), depression (27.5%), and sleep difficulties (25.9%)” as

the most significant factors negatively impacting student academic performance (American College Health Association, 2022, p. 6).

Students face many emotional changes during college. The pressure to meet academic demands, manage relationships with roommates and manage social networks, and the looming concerns about future career and financial responsibilities, can be overwhelming for individuals (Wyatt et al., 2017). These experiences can also be stressors for some students, which manifest themselves as mental well-being conditions. Some students can enter college with previously diagnosed conditions, while others may first experience the onset of symptoms while in college (Wyatt et al., 2017).

Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the United States and are the most prevalent mental well-being challenge for college students (American College Health Association, 2022; Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, 2020; Michael, 2014). Anxiety disorders occur when the "student experiences: excessive fear, which is an "emotional response to real or perceived imminent threat;" anxiety, which is excessive worry about a future threat; and possible panic, avoidance, and physical problems" (Schwitzer & Brunt, 2015, p. 335). Due to persistence and severity, these feelings differ from feelings of anxiety or a sense of worry that many people may have from day to day (Schwitzer & Brunt, 2015).

Anxiety can also present in various other forms; there are six types of anxiety disorders, according to the National Institute of Mental Well-Being (2009): generalized

anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social anxiety disorder, and specific phobias. According to the Anxiety Disorders Association (ADAA), the generalized anxiety order (GAD) is the most common type of anxiety and affects 6.8 million adults (ADAA, 2012). Examples of GAD in a college student may present as a debilitating sense of worry, problems with falling and staying asleep, and irritability (Michael, 2014). Test anxiety is also a general type of anxiety that college students often report. Although not a formal diagnosis, some students may claim to suffer from test anxiety which produces an emotional response that can result in lower performance (Michael, 2014).

Treatment and coping interventions used to reduce the impact of anxiety include cognitive behavioral therapy, cognitive restructuring, relaxation therapy, breath training, and mindfulness-based stress reduction (Michael, 2014). Students may also use medications to regulate their mood while a counselor implements one of these intervention strategies to learn to control their anxiety levels.

Depression

More than a third of college students were diagnosed with at least one mental well-being symptom, and depression was one of the most frequently diagnosed (Lee et al., 2021). This is particularly true for college-aged women, who self-reported symptoms of depression twice more than male students (American College Health Association, 2022). Depression is when the "student experiences very low, empty, or irritable moods, accompanied by physical symptoms (trouble with sleep, appetite, and energy). In

addition, cognitive changes (hopeless thoughts) have a very negative effect on his or her ability to function" (Schwitzer & Brunt, 2015, p. 335). Some students may have feelings of sadness or grief, but it is not characterized as a disorder until the symptoms are severe and long-lasting that cause emotional and cognitive suffering (Schwitzer & Brunt, 2015). Students diagnosed with depression in both male and female students were higher during the first year of college, as their emotional state has been impacted by "new social networks, academic stress, and living arrangements" (Wyatt et al., 2017).

Symptoms of depression may be reported as low energy, lack of feelings, social withdrawal, or loss of interest in hobbies or sports (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Despite the prevalence of depressive symptoms reported by college students, two-thirds of students who experienced symptoms did not use mental services on or off campus (Lee et al., 2021). Furthermore, college counselors could have encouraged students to report changes such as significant appetite changes, issues with staying awake such as insomnia or hypersomnia, and noticeable weight gain or loss (Bell et al., 2014). Depression disorders in college students can manifest itself as a lack of motivation to attend class, missing co-curricular activities, and disconnecting from family and friends (Bell et al., 2014). Missing class or failing to complete assignments can lead to poor academic performance, compounded by potential parental or social expectations that exacerbate a student's depression. Feelings of depression can result in more serious consequences, such as suicide. The rate of suicide among college students has tripled since the 1950s, and more than 10% of students reported having serious thoughts of suicide in the last year and 5%

have planned or attempted suicide (Substance Abuse and Mental Well-Being Services Administration, 2019). These statistics are higher than older demographics, in which 5% of individuals aged 26 to 40 years reported having serious thoughts of suicide and 1.5% had planned or attempted suicide (Substance Abuse and Mental Well-Being Services Administration, 2019).

Although worries such as financial, social, romantic, and family disconnect have led to depressive symptoms, poor academic performance could also trigger depression in college students, and college counselors have seen reports reflecting academic calendar workloads (Bell et al., 2014).

Various screening techniques and assessment tools are available for counseling staff to detect depression and determine appropriate treatment and follow-up care. When conducting an initial intake, counselors consider the following areas for a diagnosis. General mood, social behavior, academic behavior, sleeping behavior, and appetite (Bell et al., 2014).

Treatment plans for depression disorder include talk therapy and identifying short- and long-term goals (Bell et al., 2014). Coping skills included practicing replacement thoughts and behaviors and relapse prevention measures, such as joining a student organization or removing negative people or environments from the individual.

Substance Misuse

Substance abuse includes the use of alcohol, illicit drugs, and tobacco use and is more common among college-aged students than any other age group (Substance Abuse

and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2019). The most prominent abuse was excessive drinking. In 2018, an estimated 35% participated in binge drinking (four or more drinks for women consumed during a single occasion, five or more drinks for men (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). Furthermore, SAMHSA (2019) reported that 24% of students have used illicit drugs in the past month, citing the substance most commonly misused as marijuana. The misuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs has also increased (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019).

For many students, the social subculture of undergraduates on campus may also have led to increased substance misuse, featuring a long-standing culture of excessive drinking (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). Student organizations within fraternity and sorority life reportedly have led to increased drinking practices, although some scholars argue the numbers have been overestimated due to a misconception of the frequency and quantity of alcohol use compared to others (Metzger et al., 2017). These types of social experiences were more likely to support drinking norms and reinforce and contribute to an increase in heavy drinking (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). Other social influences on substance abuse related to the recreational use of marijuana, which has been considered a rite of passage through pop culture, as well as the misuse of prescription drugs which has largely been blamed on the pressures of college life (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019).

However, the misuse of substances could lead to more problematic use and could progress to a substance use disorder. Substance abuse and addiction disorders have varying levels of usage and are defined as substance use, abuse, and dependence. These levels are most easily understood if they are viewed as a continuum with abstinence and dependence as the two poles (Wolff et al., 2014). In addition, the term abuse commonly refers to usage that progresses to the extent that negative consequences, such as social, legal, behavioral, or interpersonal, are experienced (Wolff et al., 2014). A large percentage of consequences related to substance misuse is focused on alcohol, resulting in unintentional injuries, assault, and death (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). Excess alcohol use has also been associated with sexual abuse, health problems, alcohol-impaired driving, suicide attempts, and behavior-related problems (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019).

In addition to affecting health and safety, marijuana use has effects on learning, and chronic use has been linked to short-term memory loss and adverse effects on academics and behavior (Blavos et al., 2018). However, the misuse of prescription drugs could lead to more severe negative consequences that are "violent and sometimes fatal" (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019, p. 3). However, students believe that negative consequences are more likely to occur when alcohol or other illicit drugs are used than when marijuana was only involved (Blavos et al., 2018). However, the effects of marijuana use have been associated with poor physical and

mental well-being and negative effects on learning ability (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019).

Institutional responses have changed from punitive responses to more of a "use-prevention and substance education program strategy" focused on harm reduction, which may have more realistic results than traditional zero tolerance strategies (Wolff et al., 2014, p. 192). The efforts to prevent and reduce substance misuse are primarily focused on environmental measures that restrict availability and access and attempt to shape the social norms on campus (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). Implementation of campus campaigns that attempt to address prevention include marketing health decision making, promotion of campus resources such as counseling centers, and the encouragement of alternative activities such as participating in student organizations and campus events (Blavos et al., 2018).

Stress

Stress is a prevalent challenge for college students, and 58.7% report tremendous stress (Hoyt et al., 2021). In 2022, stress was the leading impediment to academic performance reported by students (American College Health Association, 2022). However, participation in "structured, formal activities have been supported as effective strategies to minimize stress," helping provide the student with a better sense of control (Eubank & DeVita, 2020, p. 562).

Students may have experienced stress from factors such as living away from their parents for the first time, social changes, and academic challenges. Although low stress

levels can motivate some students, “extreme stress levels can have negative psychological, social, and academic impacts” (American College Health Association, 2022; Bamber & Schneider, 2016, p. 2). In addition, the impact on academic performance can affect the timeliness of turning in assignments, increase absences, and increase the risk of attrition (Bamber & Schneider, 2016).

Stress can lead to anxiety if not managed effectively, so students must find ways to manage it. Interventions to manage stress can include mindfulness meditation activities like yoga, adequate sleep cycles, and creating time management plans (Bamber & Schneider, 2016). The foundation of mindfulness training is helping people pay attention and "deliberately focus their mind on passing thoughts, feelings, emotions, and actions" (Bamber & Schneider, 2016, p. 3).

The current generation of college students often referred to as Generation Z may be better described as "Gen Ztressed," considering that they were 27% more likely to report their mental well-being as poor compared to previous generations (Dennington, 2021). Furthermore, despite Generation Z reporting high stress levels from various sources, only "50% feel they do enough to manage their stress" (American Psychological Association, 2018, p. 6).

Student Transition

First-year students who experienced a transition phase during college were more at risk of suffering depression, as their emotional state is most impacted by the pressure to create new social networks, manage academic stress, and adjust to new living

arrangements (Wyatt et al., 2017). According to Tinto's Theory of Departure (1993), social integration was a crucial component of student retention, and failure to build relationships may lead to a higher probability of departure (Tinto, 1993). As "friendships and relationships are the strongest predictors of students feeling as if they matter in both their own lives and to their friends," it is crucial that students find social networks early in college (Eubank & DeVita, 2020, p. 562).

The transition between high school and college can cause mental health challenges as students navigate changes in their routine and social network (Wyatt et al., 2017). Students may experience separation anxiety or/homesickness making adjusting to life away from their family challenging. Some students may adjust to their new environment after a specific time, but 53.6% of the students rated being lonely as harming their mental well-being and well-being on the American College Health Association (2022) assessment. Homesick students reported increased stress, anxiety, and depression, and prolonged feelings that led to "performance ability and cognitive failures" (Claborn & Kane, 2012, p. 9). Due to the close nature of Millennial and Generation Z students to their parents, they can be especially prone to feelings of homesickness, resulting in increased levels of anxiety. "Separation anxiety can occur when one experiences developmentally inappropriate and excessive anxiety concerning a separation from home or an attachment figure such as a parent or guardian" (Claborn & Kane, 2012, p. 7).

Transition stress is particularly sensitive for students of color and those of marginalized populations where loss of cultural and family connections could impact a sense of identity and belonging (Guiffrida, 2006). The adjustment and transition to college can also be affected by students' perception of campus climate. For students of color, perceptions can have a significant impact on their college experience, especially if they experience any forms of discrimination or other psychological distress (Koo, 2021).

Connections to the Current Study

This review of the literature identified a research gap, namely that participation in university-sponsored organizations and development as a student leader may reduce the impact on mental well-being. The connection to the institution, the exposure to campus resources, and the social network student leaders have through their participation can serve as a coping strategy. College counselors have encouraged participation in recreation and other university-sponsored programs as intervention coping strategies for individuals to manage their stress and anxiety (Eubank & DeVita, 2020). Furthermore, studies have shown that participation in co-curricular programs in the early years of a student's college career was among the most effective protective factors against the risk of attrition (Thomas et al., 2021).

As Generation Z fully participates on college campuses, higher education professionals are scrambling to provide the resources and support that best meet the needs of a generation that approached the college experience differently than the previous cohort. A generation cohort reliant on technology and may be eager to justify the rising

costs of higher education requires institutions to change or be left behind. Generation Z students also report the highest number of challenges with their mental well-being and sense of well-being. The causation behind the increase may be the exposure to large-scale, high-stress events throughout their lifetime, leading to unhealthy beliefs and anxiety about themselves and the world around them, forcing campuses to reevaluate well-being and counseling services on campus (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

The cost and access to campus services were only some of the changes Generation Z demanded. The expectation that the institution provides a safe and supportive environment was also at the top of the list. The most diverse generation in American history (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Rickes, 2016) will also include "more first-generation and low-income undergraduates than any previously served" generation (Dungy & Peck, 2019). The changing demographics of the cohort will change how institutions engage with students.

Helping students transition from involved to engaged students is the key to helping this newest generation succeed. The cost of attending college and living on campus is more of a concern than ever before, and institutions must find ways to show students the benefit of spending the time and trying to get involved on campus (Thomas et al., 2021). College administrators cannot expect students to navigate complex campus systems to reap the benefits. Instead, they must develop initiatives that encourage participation and emphasize their need for student success (Dungy & Peck, 2019).

Providing opportunities to hone leadership skills through campus involvement has been a growing area of engagement and can help provide students with the skills to navigate more than just their future careers. Involvement in student organizations is not only about leadership development but also about personal growth and a sense of belonging. The relationships built through these experiences with their peers serve as sources of "affirmation and support" (Komives et al., 2005, p. 6). Experiencing a sense of belonging within a group can offer a dee sense of connection, yet the campus atmosphere must also be perceived as nurturing and secure. Feeling safe is a fundamental need for many college students, especially those who enter college already contending with mental well-being issues like anxiety and depression.

Incidents of stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies have demonstrated a steady and persistent rise on college campuses over the last decade as reflected in the College Health Assessments from 2009 to 2022 (American College Health Association, 2009, 2022). In 2020, one out of every ten college students indicated experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety attributed to the pressures of college life (including academics, employment, and social interactions) coupled with other concerns (such as family relationships, and financial matters) (Eubank & DeVita, 2020). Recognizing the interconnectedness between a student's mental well-being and their academic and social performance is imperative for college administrators (Benton & Benton, 2006). The influence of mental well-being on academic persistence is striking and students look to various resources to cope with these feelings. Understanding campus resources, feeling

safe and supported, and building a community of peers lead to developing healthy strategies to manage mental well-being issues and persist to graduation.

The present student will inform the research and fill the research gap by gaining a better understanding of how student involvement in university-sponsored organizations relates to student mental well-being. Through prolonged involvement in these institutionally supported programs, students were exposed to campus resources more often and built relationships with faculty and staff through their co-curricular experiences. These opportunities aligned with coping strategies encouraged by college counselors for students who were feeling anxious, stressed, and depressed. The study considered whether students involved in student organizations consider their involvement as a strategy to manage their own mental well-being.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Chapter Three presents the methods and research design used for the study. It begins by presenting the design of the study and introducing the qualitative research design used. This is followed by a position statement of the researcher. The next sections provide information on the participant criteria and sampling procedure. A description of the research setting is followed by a description of the data collection instrument, which is the interview guide. Next, is a review of the process in which the data was collected. The data analysis section provides information on the coding process used in data analysis. The final section provides information regarding the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the study findings.

The epistemology of narrative research lies within the narratives that each participant shares. Their perceptions of their experiences are their truth, their understanding of the world, and their role in it. Epistemology is the understanding of what knowledge is and how it has been acquired, "we know what we know" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 29). The philosophical worldview that influences narrative epistemology is the constructivist worldview. The constructivist worldview is defined as an understanding that there is no one truth or master narrative, but multiple truths that are influenced by those that are in positions of power and their own bias (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). In this worldview, the participants' view of the world is influenced by the

lens of their lived experiences. Participants ultimately make sense of their lives "based on their historical and social perspectives" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8).

Design of Study

The design of this study was a single institution qualitative narrative study informed by a theoretical framework. Qualitative research involves the use of empirical materials, such as interviews to describe the moments and meaning of individual lives to better understand the subject mater at hand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This qualitative study sought to explore the perspectives of Generation Z student leaders in university-sponsored student organizations regarding their participation and lived experiences with coping strategies amid mental well-being challenges. The intent was to determine the extent to which participation in these organizations influences the mental well-being and coping strategies of Generation Z student leaders. Traditional qualitative research criteria is often presented in a form of a checklist, such as the evaluative criteria posited by Lincoln and Guba (1985), who describe a series of techniques that address establishing trustworthiness. However, the intention of a qualitative narrative is to "capture a glimpsed understanding of the lived experiences" and a strict, universal criteria does not afford the flexibility to accommodate diverse approaches and interpretive practices that are often represented in qualitative studies (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Johnson et al., 2020). Narrative inquiry, the study of the ways humans experience the world is often used in educational research is based on the view that "education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and

characters in their own stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. 2). The unique stories of each student participant through semi-structured interviews provided data that could be analyzed for patterns within the participants shared stories. What emerged from this inquiry on Generation Z student leaders was a better understanding of how involvement in university-sponsored activities provides Generation Z undergraduates with a more in-depth sense of self and an expanded repertoire of resources to cope with stress and anxiety.

Strauss and Howe's Generational Theory (1991) defined the boundaries of student generations for the participant inclusion criteria and was used to identify the characteristic of Generation-Z. Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984) was used to conceptualize coping strategies and response to stressors. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984, 2011) was used to conceptualize the process of adjustment that defines the undergraduate experience and the positionality of students within the experiences of stress and coping.

The study used qualitative narrative research as the research method to collect data from potential Generation-Z student leader participants. Narrative inquiry is defined by the way in which it captures lived experiences through the stories of the participants (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Narrative inquiry is appropriate to many social science fields as it focuses on human experiences, and characterizes the phenomena of human experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). This qualitative method was selected because it is focused on collecting shared stories with an "overall objective of capturing a

glimpsed understanding of lived experiences" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Through semi-structured interviews, the participants provided insight into their own storied lives. Narrative inquiry unduly focuses on the individual over the social context, and therefore was elected as the method allowing the unique participants to explore their own perspectives and how their identities and experiences shape their responses and stories that emerge from their conversations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Given the diversity of Generation Z as noted by Seemiller and Grace (2016), narrative inquiry also allowed the researcher to "center discussions of race, gender, class, and sexuality" as part of the inquiry giving voice to every participant, including those historically marginalized (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 68). Dyson and Genishi (1994) describe culture as a “shared way of interpreting the world” and not a static concept that sorts people by beliefs or behaviors.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

(1) What conflicts or pressures arise for Generation Z student leaders in sponsored student organizations?

(2) What are ways in which involvement in sponsored student organizations influence Generation Z students leaders’ well-being?

(3) What coping strategies or support systems do Generation Z student leaders utilize to navigate and prioritize their well-being while actively participating in sponsored student organizations?

Positionality

A positionality statement is defined by Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) as the way in which the researchers' own beliefs and experiences shape the research topic. Exploring the researcher's positionality in qualitative narrative research is understanding that participants and the researcher lead storied lives. A narrative inquiry intends to capture other stories, and researchers cannot separate their own experiences when trying to make meaning of others' stories. In examining the positionality of researcher, in relation to their prior experiences and subjectivities, the researcher identifies as a white middle-aged cisgender heterosexual woman. As an administrator at the institution, the researcher supervises staff who advise the student organizations in which the student leaders are members of. Although there is no direct oversight of individual participants, there is a possibility that they might hesitate to take part in a research study facilitated by a campus administrator. To address this concern, the researcher refrained from actively approaching any student leader to participate. Instead, each student will have the autonomy to decide on their own whether to engage in the research. During each interview, the researcher presented an opening statement clarifying the research's purpose and expressing the commitment to creating a secure environment. This encouraged students to feel comfortable sharing their experiences without fear of any potential repercussions.

The researcher has participated in university-sponsored student organizations at the host institution of the study as an undergraduate and currently serves in a mid-level

student affairs professional supervising student involvement programs for more than 10 years. Throughout this career, the researcher has provided support as a mentor to college students and participated in mental well-being trainings to better understand how to guide students in healthy coping strategies. This mentoring relationship with student leaders could influence the power dynamics of the researcher-to-participant relationship, and was considered throughout the study. In intersectional research, Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) stated that research sometimes includes research on people who are part of an organization in which the researcher belongs, but they do not know the perspectives and experiences of each student as it relates to the topic. In qualitative research, the researcher's role is typically to be "involved in sustained and intensive experiences with participants" that ties their own experiences to those of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 184). Due to the researchers knowledge and understanding of the student leadership and involvement in student organizations, a Glaserian approach to coding was utilized. The approach included being sensitivte to how the codes and categories related to each other. This sensitivity is referred to as theoretical sensitivity and was practiced as the researcher discovered the relatioships between the data and theories. Theoretical sensitivity is based on the ability to generate concepts and relate them to patterns based on indicators in the data (Thistoll et al, 2015). To ensure that the interviews yielded genuine responses, the researcher focused on the participant, being careful not to phrase questions that lead the participant to respond in a certain way.

Students who participate in student organizations build a network of support that includes peers and organization advisors. Engaging more meaningfully in a community can lead to a greater sense of belonging. Involvement in student organizations can also result in stronger connections to the institution due to increased knowledge of university resources and access to more regular interaction with members of faculty and staff. Involvement in student organizations can also provide training and experiences that result in the development of critical skills that have personal and professional benefits. For marginalized groups like first-generation or students of color, involvement in student organizations can also enhance sense of belonging, which they may not feel from the larger campus community. However, for some marginalized students, involvement in culturally based organizations may be preferred, as it could reduce the pressure to assimilate to more dominant campus cultures.

Participants

Sampling Procedure

The study employed an intentional purposeful participant recruitment strategy procedure using criterion sampling (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). The sampling method "selects participants based on specific criteria instead of random selection" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 77). The study used a purposeful convenience sample, selecting participants to whom they had access to that met the participation criteria. This purposeful sampling method was selected because qualitative research has a more in-depth analysis and convenience sampling, allowing the researcher to "select

participants because they are ready and available to be studied" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The inclusion criteria for the study required participants fall within the Generation Z cohort, be currently enrolled undergraduate students, and have served in a leadership position within a student organization. There were no limitations based on race, gender or amy identifiying demographics.

In intersectional research such as this study, the researcher's potential relationship with the participants could change the power dynamics of the interview, and therefore it was vital that the researcher continuously reflect on how they potentially could influence the responses of the participants (Esposito & Evans-Winter, 2022). Because the researcher holds a position as an administrator within the institution, participants might feel reluctant to provide genuine responses. To address this issue, the researcher must clearly communicate their role and the purpose behind the questions they ask.

The researcher intentionally invited participants from marginalized populations to increase the representation of voices and identities in the study, as it is necessary for qualitative research to consider the complexities of individual identities and reduce forms of discrimination within the study (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Participants identified the organization with which they are involved to ensure that no single organization is represented more than once.

Participants had the opportunity to select their own identities and pseudonyms to facilitate confidentiality. Participation also consisted of inclusion and exclusion criteria. To meet the participation criteria, students must (1) be part of Generation Z, born

between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016); (2) matriculate as an undergraduate student at the university, seeking a bachelor's degree from a degree-granting public institution (Powers & Schloss, 2017); and (3) hold a leadership position in a university-sponsored student organization at the university.

Individuals who did not meet the criteria included anyone, not within the age range defined as Generation Z, or who were not currently considered an undergraduate at the university. Other excluded individuals included any individuals who were members of university-sponsored organizations but have not previously held a leadership role.

Research Setting

This study took place at a single institution which is a midsized public university of more than 10,000 undergraduate students, in the southwest United States. Throughout the study, the research site will be known as the Southwestern Public University (SPU) to maintain the institutional confidentiality of the participants and the confidentiality of the participants.

The institution has approximately 200 student organizations, ten considered university sponsored. University sponsored is defined as an organization that receives funding from designated tuition or student fees. All university-sponsored student organizations require students to apply for membership and are selected by their peers through individual and group interview and selection processes.

The mental well-being services offered to students at the institution are individual and group counseling facilitated by licensed counselors. These services are included in

the student's tuition and require the student to sign up for sessions up to two weeks prior. Emergency services are provided based on need and are determined by the counseling staff. Additionally, a counseling clinic is located on the campus property. Master-level counseling students provide sessions for a nominal fee. The Division of Student Affairs facilitates additional programs and initiatives, including de-stress festivals and mental well-being awareness weeks.

Interview Guide

The researcher-designed semi-structured interview guide that served as the data collection instrument in the study (see Appendix A). The design of the interview guide was informed by previous research (Scribner et al., 2020) and aligned with the theoretical framework of the potential study. The three theories represented in the interview guide are Strauss and Howe's Generational Theory (1991), Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984), and Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984, 2011).

All participants in the study belonged to the Generation Z cohort, so each question was asked in a way that better understood how they feel their generational experiences may be unique to them as individuals. According to Strauss and Howe's Generational Theory (1991), each generation tends to fit stereotypes that align with their placement within the various turnings within a century. These stereotypes are called archetypes, and the Generation Z cohort is known as artists (Strauss & Howe, 1991). As an archetype, Strauss and Howe (1991) claimed that the generation is more sensitive during their

college years. This stereotype is explored in questions that asked participants perspectives and feelings.

Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984) focused on the two different coping strategies that individuals use to manage their emotional responses to situations. The theory suggested that participants will complete a self-assessment of the issue causing them distress and determine if it is either problem or emotion focused. Participants were asked to identify stresses to their mental well-being and why they are significant. This assessment of the issues they consider as the cause of their mental well-being distress will help determine whether the participant is able to identify the different types of stress and the appropriate types of coping strategies to resolve it.

In Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984, 2011) it is posed that all students experience transition throughout the various phases of their college experience. These transitions are notably characterized as when they enter college, transition throughout the various years, and then as they prepare for graduation and out of college. The final questions of the interview guide specifically represent this theory, asking participants if they feel their coping has changed over the course of their college career and how they would have changed their responses if they had been able to return to their first year.

The interview guide is organized into two sections by study research questions. The initial portion of the interview was to better understand the student's perspective on involvement and its impact on their mental well-being. Co-curricular involvement can

have a considerable impact on the well-being of post-graduation life (Kane, 2019), so gathering information about how students view their experiences' overall impact was a critical factor for the study.

Students were asked to describe how their involvement has helped them grow and mature to better understand the role of involvement in personal development. Becoming involved is often encouraged by campus administrators and college counselors, so understanding how and why it can also cause stress is vital for higher education professionals to consider. This question also helps the student process the benefits and challenges of the type or amount of involvement. Finally, to better understand how positive experiences may be linked to traditional coping methods, the students were asked questions regarding their involvement's effect on their mental well-being.

Considering that reports of students experiencing feelings of depression and anxiety have seen consistent growth in both self-reported and diagnosed illnesses (American College Health Association, 2022) additional questions were included to understand what causal factors Generation Z students feel are at the root of the increased concern. The students were also asked about managing their stress. Many of the students may not have existing knowledge of coping strategies, so participants were asked to share any intentional coping strategies, as well as describe any solutions they implement to reduce stress and anxiety. Lastly, students were able to provide insight into what mental well-being awareness strategies may have been beneficial to other students through their own reflections on their lived experiences.

Data Collection

Students currently serving in a student leader position in a university-sponsored organization at SPU received an email invitation to participate in the study. Students were identified from a list provided by the Office of Student Life at the institution. The researcher emailed all students who met the participant criteria to their university student email addresses. The intended number of participants was 15-20 students. The researcher facilitated recorded one-on-one, in-person interviews in a reserved space at the institution using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A). The interviews were conducted as semi-structured, allowing the researcher flexibility to ask probing questions or to clarify the meaning of participation vernacular. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher uses a list of prepared questions to loosely guide the conversation but is able to veer off on other topics if necessary (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Participants were notified that the interviews will be recorded and transcribed to prepare for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry relies on interpretive approaches, such as interviewing in which the researcher and participant lived experiences are interconnected to who we are and explains how we come to understand ourselves, others, and our world (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). The dialogue from the interview transcripts were analyzed to understand participant experiences, multiple theoretical frameworks were used to support the assumptions made by the researcher and themes were identified that rationalize each research question. To contextualize the study, the following theories were used to analyze

the data: Strauss and Howe's Generational Theory (1991), Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984), and Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984, 2011).

The researcher used two cycles of coding using open and focused coding to analyze the data from the transcribed interviews in which "coding is the process of organizing data by bracketing chunks of text and writing a word representing a predetermined category in the margins" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 9). Themes were collapsed using code mapping (Saldana, 2021). Initial or open coding allowed for the exploration of commonalities within the conducted interviews (Nowell et al., 2017). The use of assigned labels or open codes broke data into manageable portions by grouping themes as determined by the researcher. To address the volume of potential codes as a result of this process, the researcher continued to reduce the number of codes by relating concepts to each other. Once the coding was complete, it was placed into larger categories that contained multiple codes. Then, using the research questions and theoretical framework as a guide, the coding schemas were transitioned to themes that were presented using narrative passages, figures, or tables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Taking into account the declared previous assumptions, the analysis required bracketing of the beliefs to remove individual memories related to the positionalities of the potential study participants (Nowell et al., 2017). In this case, the data was presented as opportunities for further research on the relationship between the involved students and their mental well-being.

Summary

The study design and the use of narrative methodology were intended to allow each participant to share their perspective. Through narrative inquiry, student leaders could fully express their experiences in a format that encourages honest reflection and conveyed their unique viewpoints without generalizing or placing them into categories.

The population of this study is Generation Z, the leaders of undergraduate students of a specific public Southwestern university. The researcher's decision to use a small group of participants based on their generational cohort and leadership position may not necessarily represent other college institutions, so the population would need to be increased. In addition, to avoid generalization of the findings, a more diverse group of institutions representing various regions and institution types could provide a more accurate profile of the selected demographic.

The qualitative nature of this study was intended to gain a better understanding of the perception of how involvement impacts student mental well-being. Current research on this cohort of college students shows that they report the highest instances of mental well-being issues than any previous generation. Therefore, the desire was to determine how those students involved in university-sponsored student organizations are processing and coping with any challenges in their mental well-being. Further questioning if the skill development, sense of belonging, and time commitment associated with their student leader role impacted how they process these challenges.

CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter presents the findings of a narrative inquiry study and contains a demographic overview of the 16 participants involved in the study as well as a thematic analysis derived from the interview transcripts. For the purpose of this investigation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 individuals. These interviews were designed to elicit the participants' personal experiences, utilizing a series of predetermined yet flexible questions to enhance the depth and accuracy of the insights and enable a more nuanced exploration of the participants' perceptions of their experiences.

Furthermore, this chapter explains the methodological approach employed in analyzing the data, specifically highlighting the implementation of both open and selective coding phases. This analytical process facilitated the identification of emergent themes within the dataset. To substantiate the thematic analysis, this chapter incorporates tables that effectively map out the relationship between the codes and the themes identified. Additionally, it presents selected excerpts from the interviews, which serve to demonstrate the significant themes uncovered through the analysis. This comprehensive approach ensures a thorough examination of the narrative data, offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of the participants.

Participants

The participant criteria required participants to be undergraduate students who held a leadership position within a student organization and whose age range was within the Generation Z cohort. Sixty-four participants were invited to respond, and twenty-six students responded to the request for participants. Sixteen participants scheduled and completed an interview resulting in a 59.25% response. The intended number of participants was 15-20 and it was determined that the 16 respondents was an adequate sample size when 22 of the 32 student organizations were not represented more than once.

Each of the participants met these requirements, and no participants were excluded based on criteria. However, some of the initial 26 respondents were not able to schedule an interview within the time frame provided. Each of the 16 participants were undergraduates with two (12.5%) freshmen, four (25%) sophomores, four (25%) juniors, and six (37.5%) senior students. All participants were part of Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010 (Strauss & Howe, 1991) with one participant born in 2001 (6.25%), three born in 2002 (18.75%), five born in 2003 (31.25%), and seven born in 2004 (43.75%). This participant demographic information is represented in Table 1. Additionally, Table 2 lists the student organization in which the participants identified holding a leadership position.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Classification (*Based on Attempted Hours*)	Academic Major	Birthdate	Gender
Alyssa	Senior (90+ hours)	Family Consumer Science	2002	Female
Braxton	Junior (60-89)	Social Work	2002	Male
Cameron	Senior (90+ hours)	Communication sciences and disorders	2002	Female
Cayla	Freshmen (1-29 hours)	Dietetics and Nutritional Science	2004	Female
Hannah	Senior (90+ hours)	Sociology	2004	Female
Jada	Senior (90+ hours)	Public Health	2003	Female
James	Junior (60-89)	Agriculture Engineering and Technology	2003	Male
Jessica	Junior (60-89)	Public Health	2004	Female
Jocelyn	Sophomore (30-59 hours)	Major Nursing Minor Human development and family studies	2003	Female
Joseph	Sophomore (30-59 hours)	Chemistry	2004	Male
Kayleigh	Sophomore (30-59 hours)	Kinesiology	2003	Female
Launa	Senior (90+ hours)	Political Science	2001	Female
Megan	Freshmen (1-29 hours)	Ag Development	2004	Female
Olivia	Senior (90+ hours)	Theatre	2004	Female
Thabian	Sophomore (30-59 hours)	elementary education	2004	Male
William	Junior (60-89)	Entrepreneurship	2003	Male

Table 2

Student Leader Participation in Student Organizations

Participant Name	Primary Student Organization	Secondary Student Organizations
Alyssa	AXEperience	
Braxton	Black Student Caucus	
Cameron	National Student Speech Language Hearing Association	
Cayla	African Student Organization	
Hannah	Student Activities Association	The Big Event
Jada	Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated	
James	Interfraternity Council	
Jessica	Axcel Mentor Program	
Jocelyn	Lambda Theta Alpha Sorority, Inc	Orientation Leader
Joseph	Omega Delta Phi Fraternity, Inc.	Resident Assistant
Kayleigh	Purple Haze	
Launa	League of United Latin American Citizens	Gen Jacks
Megan	Delta Zeta Sorority	
Olivia	Jack Walkers	Jack Camp
Thabian	Fashion N Motion	Lumberjack Cultural Ambassadors
William	Student Advisory Athletic Council	

Data and Analysis

All interviews were coded manually through an open coding process, which examined the dialogue from the interviews and relevant data was selected and given a code, or word that best captured the meaning based on the researchers first impression (Saldana, 2021). The inductive codes that emerged from the initial coding cycle were compared to the research questions, and additional codes were developed to ensure that each of the theories were included in the data. The coding process is cyclical, as each cycle "further

manages, filters, highlights and focuses the salient features of the qualitatitve data" (Saldana, 2021, p. 8). The various cycles of coding determined statements which were relative to the research questions, and eventually resulted in 14 codes emerging from the data based on frequency, similarity and differences, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Codes and Researcher Description

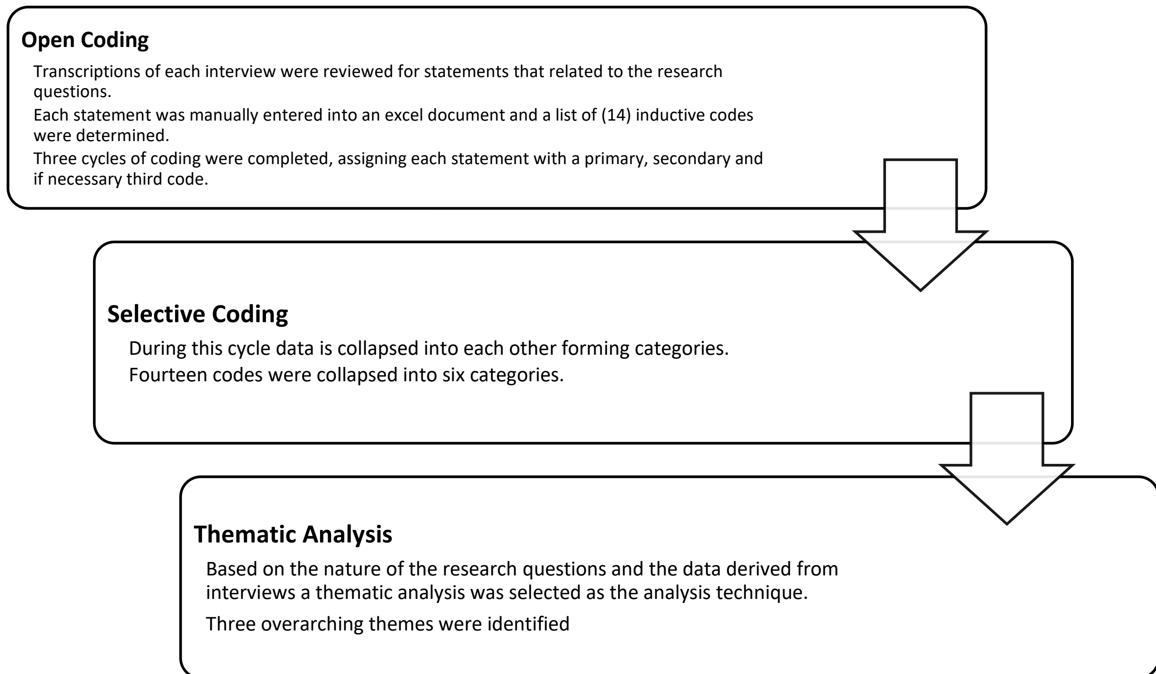
Inductive Codes	Researcher Description
Generation Z	Generational differences are mentioned or comments specifically tie to a generational characteristic
Involvement	The student's experience as it relates to their involvement in a student organization
Conflict	Refer to conflicted feelings, a sense of uneasiness or frustrations. Overall negative feelings.
Pressure	Refer to a sense of pressure from either themselves, others, or society.
Others	Statements pertain to interactions, influences, pressures, or engagements with others.
Influence	Reference to their desire to influence others through their actions or interactions.
Coping	Statements provide some type of solution or changed behavior.
Support	Reference feeling a sense of support or related positive feeling as an outcome.
Community	Lived experiences resulted in a sense of community or belonging.
Loneliness/Depression	References a form of loneliness or characteristics of depressive behaviors.
Anxiety/Stress	References feelings that relate to anxiety or stress.

Table 3 (continued)

Inductive Codes	Researcher Description
Growth/Maturity	Learned behavior resulted in a change or understanding that correlates with an understanding of change.
Balance/Time Management	Statements reference a desire to have more or to better balance their time.
Technology	Reference the use of technology

Each interview statement was reviewed three times, assigning a primary, secondary, and when necessary third code. In the next analysis phase, the researcher used selective coding. In this phase, the data is reviewed and the researcher determines if the codes can be collapsed into each other. For example, the responses from participants that were initially coded as conflict and pressure were collapsed into a selective code named challeges. The final categories used were (a) generational, (b) involvement, (c) technology, (d) challenges, (e) positive outcomes, and (f) engagement. Using a mapping process, codes were then placed into categories based on the assigned primary code. The secondary codes were then sorted and the occurrences of each were tallied to establish correlations within each category. Figure 1 includes the summary of the data and analysis process for the various coding cycles.

Figure 1*:*



Data and Analysis Process

The qualitative analysis of the data was guided by the relationships within and across the open and selective codes. The data analysis method used was thematic analysis, which analyzes and interprets patterns within the data using systematic code processes that result in themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Through the interviews, the participants shared their own experiences, views, and opinions regarding their participation in student organizations and individual coping strategies they employed to navigate the pressures and conflicts stemming from those experiences. From these shared stories, patterns were identified and used to guide the coding process.

The following categories were determined based on the clustering or patterns within the initial open coding process. The first categories (a) generational, (b) involvement, and (c) technology were independent categories that emerged from the data. The technology code provided perspective as both an ongoing pressure as well as a type of coping strategy. Whereas, the initial primary codes generational and involvement addressed the research questions directly, and the participant response patterns supported keeping each of these codes independent. However, the following categories were a result of collapsing open codes. These categories include (d) challenges, (e) positive outcomes, and (f) engagement as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Selective Coding Results

Category	Combined Open Codes
Generational	
Involvement	
Technology	
Challenges	*Anxiety/Stress* *Conflict* *Loneliness/Depression* *Pressure*
Positive Outcomes	*Balance/Time Management* *Coping* *Growth/Maturity*
Engagement	*Community* *Influence* *Others* *Support*

The following sections indicate the selective codes that emerged. There were six categories that emerged from the data. Each category relates to the research questions and ultimately to the final themes, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5

Codes and Themes by Research Question

Research Questions	Related Selective Codes	Themes
What conflicts or pressures arise for Generation Z student leaders in sponsored student organizations?	Generational Challenges	Challenges Related to Internal and Perceived External Pressures
What are ways in which involvement in sponsored student organizations influence Generation Z students leaders' well-being?	Involvement Engagement	Support and Enhanced Sense of Community
What coping strategies or support systems do Generation Z student leaders utilize to navigate and prioritize their well-being while actively participating in sponsored student organizations?	Technology Positive Outcomes	Implementation of Coping Strategies and Learned Behaviors

Thematic Coding Summary of Results

The following three emergent themes contribute to the well-being of Generation Z undergraduates involved in student organizations. The qualititative nature of the study and the utliziation of interviewing as a data collection technique supported the use of the emergent paradigm. The emergent paradigm encompasses the concept that "realities are

multiple, constructed, and holistic;" and the "knower and known are interactive, inseparable;" and that "all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). The analytical process included the use of a mapping process that identified the relationship of the quotes and excerpts of data. The themes that resulted from this process included: (a) Student engagement with student organizations results primarily in feelings of support and an enhanced sense of community, (b) Lived experiences result in change of behavior and the implementation of coping strategies and learned behaviors, (c) Challenges that negatively impact student well-being stem primarily from the internal pressure students place on themselves and the external pressure perceived from others.

The first theme relates to the support and enhanced sense of community participants felt as a result of the experiences they had in college and while being a leader in a student organization. The second theme derives from the ways in which participants shared their unique strategies for coping with challenges. Many of these strategies were behaviors learned as a result of negative experiences. The third theme relates to the pressure participants perceive on them, either by internal or external parties.

Support and Enhanced Sense of Community

All participants provided at least one interview response related to finding support and fostering a sense of community through their involvement experiences, indicating that participation in student organizations provides opportunities for students to connect with others. This theme emerged quickly from the selective coding process, where participants spoke of their personal connections and family-like relationships resulted specifically from

their involvement in student organizations. Many participants also shared how their choice to become involved helped them make friends and be more comfortable interacting with faculty and staff on campus.

For some participants, getting involved was out of character. “Launa” states that she chose to join groups because she knew the interactions with others would benefit her.

> I mean, I wouldn't have met some of the people that I've met through, like, if I would have kept staying in my dorm, I wouldn't be here doing something like this, you know, especially like with programs that are connected to the university specifically, I've been able to interact with a lot of faculty and staff who have provided me with different opportunities.

“Kayleigh” referenced learning more about her peers through becoming a student leader, describing how those experiences helped her learn to see the world differently.

> Yeah, I think there's such a, you know, diverse kind of people that I've gotten to work with over the past year. And I think that's helped me a lot to understand different perspectives and to kind of like learn how to help others that, you know, see the world differently than me and try to understand and work together.

For participants like “Braxton”, who is a student of color, being involved helped him feel more connected to the campus community.

> When I first got here, it was just me trying to find my place, just as a student first-hand and second just as a black student just trying to be, you know just trying to find where can I just connect with people? So just seeing the representation and

> seeing that other people are just being involved and being social and you know not holding back.

Many participants shared how becoming involved in student organizations takes time and energy that could be devoted to other areas of their lives. Although multiple participants spoke about finding balance and learning to say no to some opportunities, "Hannah" referred to her efforts as opportunities to engage with concepts they she was passionate about.

> To me it doesn't feel like a full workload because I'm with people that I enjoy, and we have the same ideas. My faculty advisor is my favorite professor, so it's a totally different ballpark because I'm around the people that like gave me the passion for my major.

In general, most of the participants including, "Launa" shared how participating increased stress levels, but the benefit of meeting others and learning more about their own leadership skills made the experience worthwhile.

> But it also came to support from different people, meeting new people, knowing, you know, making different friendships and connections and everything like that. So, while the stress levels, yes, were high, I also had like a ton of support.

Implementation of Coping Strategies and Learned Behavior

Many participants shared how as they faced challenges they gained knowledge through the experience, which assisted them in managing future issues. Over time,

participants developed alternative approaches or responses to future challenges based on those past experiences.

Although all college students face challenges, participants like "Joseph" saw how being an involved student leader connected how the stress he experienced helped him grow as a leader.

> Yeah, as weird as it seems it was, being stressed I guess was the most significant for me because I realized all the boundaries, I need to set for me as a person, but I also saw myself grow, like saw what kind of person I can be as like a leadership person.

"William" also shared that although the pressure of his leadership role was sometimes overwhelming, the opportunity to make decisions and have an impact on campus was rewarding.

> So, I think the pressures, especially holding a leadership role in those organizations can be very tough at times, but also like depending on who you deal with, you might feel like you have a lot of wins one week and a lot of like losses the other. So it just comes with a few ups and downs, but overall it is kind of exciting though to be able to make those decisions in those positions.

The issue of time management did emerge as a reoccurring challenge for most of the participants, although many discussed that over time they learned how to prioritize their academics and find time to dedicate to their leadership responsibilities. The participant "Alyssa" shared her primary struggle was with finding balance, sharing "Yeah, my first

semester was just trying to learn how to be good with classes and all my duties as an officer. Just making time and trying to learn how to balance things”.

A great number of participants shared that they have recently or are currently seeing a counselor. Furthermore, more than one participant emphasized the importance of taking breaks and seeking assistance, underscoring the importance of prioritizing one's own well-being before leading others. “Alyssa” also shared, “that sometimes it's okay to take a break and you got to take care of yourself before you can take care of others it's okay to step back for a little bit and it's okay to ask for help self-help.”

Substance misuse can often become a challenge for individuals, and “Kayleigh” shared how before finding more positive coping methods, she previously relied on substances to manage her stress.

> Well, I used to be into a lot of heavy drug use, alcohol, marijuana and other things. So, I stopped that about a year and a half ago, slash a year ago with alcohol. Now, while I am not very good at it, I love working out and doing that, you know, spending time in the world, meeting people, staying busy.

The responses of the participants to the final question, regarding what they would do differently if they could go back to their freshman year, were remarkably consistent with many participants expressing that they would not change anything. Participants such as “Jada” discussed the growth she felt from each of the experiences she has had, were both positive and negative.

> I know this is pretty cliche, but I really wouldn't change anything, honestly, because I'm very big on everything happens for a reason, like, and what's meant for me will find me, so I'm pretty sure, like, there's reasons why I went through what I went through my freshman year, whether they'll be friendships, roommate issues, this and the third, like, it all kind of helped build the person I am now, kind of feed into my character, so I wouldn't change anything, maybe, like, the food in the EC, but that's it.

Challenges Related to Internal and Perceived External Pressures

When exploring the concept of pressure, a recurring response among participants shared that they felt pressure by expectations placed on them by others. However, when analyzing the data, many responses revealed that the pressure was due to the participants' own expectations of themselves.

For example, a participant shared their desire for control and perfection. Despite acknowledging the inability to control every variable, the prevailing theme in such comments revolves around how their stress originates from their pursuit of perfectionism. "James" shared that although he wanted "everything to be perfect all the time, I can't because there's a lot of other things, there's people involved, there's other variables involved and not everything's in my complete control."

The participant "Jocelyn" remarked that she can be aware of her own stress, but still persists in sacrificing her own well-being to help others.

> And that's kind of like I want to say like the root of my cause of the always being stressed because like, I will sacrifice my time that I know I set aside for me to still help you because that's just the way I am.

Another participant, “Hannah”described feeling pressure from self-imposed expectations, as she believed her role represents the institution at higher levels. Although she expressed pride in her role, she also had concerns about the notoriety of her role increases the potential to disappoint others.

> I think so yes, I think there's an added element of pressure for me specifically I think seeing my face on the SFA website makes me want to throw up because there's times throughout this leadership experience for me where I felt like I've had the entirety of an organization on my back especially like with event planning like stuff. Like that carries with you and haunts you when it doesn't go right so there is a totally different element of like okay this is like the university's giving us money to do something and you have to do it and it honestly, it's very tough to manage because you're just like oh when something goes wrong, you're not just representing a tiny cluster of people you're representing the entire university.

Six of the participants noted the impact of how following others on social networks has impacted their well-being. Although they do not engage with these individuals in real life, the perceptions of their lives through social media caused participants distress as they compared their own experiences to who they considered peers. This concept is intriguing, given that this cohort of Generation Z student leaders is notably more active online than

previous generations. “Jada” commented on how she compared herself to online influencers who are similarly aged.

> Now, we see everything, so we have a lot to nitpick at and compare ourselves to, especially when it comes to, like, not even just mental health, but, like, physical things or, like, materialistic things, like, there's a lot of people my age. I'm 20. There's a lot of 20-year-olds that are making millions that are more successful than I am. I shouldn't be comparing myself to them, because they had a different route of life than I have.

Interestingly, many participant like, “Thabian” also highlighted the importance of prioritizing his own needs and putting themselves first, even as they acknowledged that they sacrificed this balance for the sake of others.

> I would say to remember to put yourself first, like, you're your most important person, so it makes sense for you to make sure you're doing okay before you worry about everybody else, because I feel like I did that a lot my freshman year. I made sure that my friends were okay and then when my mental health got shaky, I was like, okay, who will check on me or do I have to check on myself? So, I learned to check on myself first and then everybody else will worry about them later. I have to make sure I'm okay.

Additional Data Findings

Participants recounted their experiences on how being involved influenced their outlook and leadership approach. The following responses related to the research questions

and were significant in their contributions to the understanding of how multiple variables contribute to the overall experiences of involved student leaders.

Generational

Generational is a term that was used to categorize comments that are specifically related to or tied to a generational characteristic. Fifteen responses were assigned to the term Generational. Most participant responses coded this way were in the responses to the question if the participant thought their generation experienced more stress or mental well-being challenges than previous ones? Two participants notably captured the theme of increased stress and pressure that emerged from the majority of excerpts from this category. A participant "James," compared the inflated costs as a reason why Generation Z feels more stressed. "It's absolutely a different way of life. You know, the economy is not what it used to be. You know, they could, they could go to work and pay for college and kids today, we cannot do that. We actually have to get loans cause there's no way that you can make $5,300 in a semester to pay for college, you know, on top of everything else you're paying for. Not including housing and food plans and everything."

Another participant "Kayleigh," shared how technology has impacted generation and how members of Generation Z have not built community.

> Because of, you know, the media in the way that we kind of view life is very different, I think. And we're a much more isolated generation, even though you can see us together a lot, we're not really together and we're not really having

meaningful conversations. It is very rare for people to, you know, actually connect on a deeper level.

Participant “Launa” also shared how the pressures on generation are uniquely different for people of color (POC), despite increased access to resources. So, I will say, I think the level of pressure and challenges are a bit different, like there's a difference, but I think it might be slightly harder for us, especially like even though we have access to things like mental health resources, a lot of us, especially like in the POC community, don't always either know how to go ask, or it's kind of like taboo to like actually reach out for those resources.

Technology

Much of the literature on Generation Z mentioned how technology influences the generation more than previous generations. Although no codes were developed a priori, when technology emerged as a recurring theme in responses to generation-based questions, it was decided to categorize these responses under a single code.

The participant responses within the technology-based codes often referred to social networks specifically, and participants shared how social media has had negatively influenced their well-being. Participant “Jada” explained how social media can be used by young people as a way to compare themselves to others that results in negative feelings.

> Because we've, a lot of things have evolved as far as, like, technology being a problem, I feel like, I feel like everybody says this, but we grew up in a time where, like, Instagram got real popular, Snapchat, all these other social media platforms,

> and so we started to compare ourselves at a younger age, because I got Instagram in elementary school, and I would compare myself to, like, people that were in middle school, celebrities, and so, over time, it kind of eats at your mental health, because you're always trying to make yourself look better, even though the way you are is fine.

Another participant “Kayleigh,” commented that technology could also contribute to a sense of loneliness, describing how they see their peers using technology, specifically in the campus dining hall.

> And, gosh, our phones are just if you walk into a dining hall, it's like every person. There is all these people, and so many people eat alone. It's a really sad thing. And they just have their phone and their headphones on and they're just watching and consuming while they eat. Spaces that were community before are more isolation.

However, other participants like, “Joseph” mentioned technology as a form of coping. One participant shared how they use their phone as a tool to distract themselves from anxious feelings.

> I just kind of, when I do like the overwhelming anxious, you know, fidgety, I kind of just lay down and relax, get on my phone and kind of just allow myself to forget what I'm thinking about. And until I don't remember like why was I even mad, or upset or scared about or, you know, thinking about.

“Cayla” described how she uses her device as a way to listen to music or browse social media applications when feeling stressed or anxious.

If I am in a really stressful time I like to go sit in my room and put my headphones on and just listen to some soft music, not any music really with words or anything like that easy listening music or like piano music.

Participant "Cameron" also described technology as a means of feeling connected to broader social issues and motivated to advocate for them.

I think social media also like broadcasts so many of like the issues that's going on in the world that it's like hard to not feel like, you know, I have to participate in this or like, you know, like even though this doesn't directly affect me. Like I see it on such a wider platform than I think that it was seen before, that is, like you can't ignore it.

Involvement

The responses of the participants regarding how being a leader in a student organizations influenced their college experience varied. Twelve of the sixteen participants expressed that they were seeking involvement opportunities to establish friendships and other types of support.

Some participants described their involvement as an early strategy to avoid feelings of loneliness. "Hannah" shared how being involved would help avoid feelings of isolation.

I got involved because I knew when I came to SFA like I wanted to be involved because I just I had always heard like the feeling of isolation when you come to

college. So, I wanted to find a sense of community with people like me wherever I got involved.

Another student, “Olivia” shared how the friendships they made through the student organization were compared to family relationships, stating “having the community, for sure. You know, like any org you’re a part of, they’re going to say they’re a family, but it really is true for the ones I’ve been involved in”.

“Megan” explained how the relationships made through their involvement provided opportunities to grow their network of friends.

> So, I came to college not knowing anybody at all no one from my high school came to this college, so I kind of felt lonely. Of course, I knew my roommate but I didn't know her until like maybe like two months before we came here yeah, but once I started uh getting involved in all these groups and Greek life and stuff like that, I’ve found like I’ve met people and they've like connected me to other people, that's where I found my closest friends.

The participant “Joseph” shared that they chose to become involved because the experience would help them make friends and grow as a person.

> So, when I was encouraged to do it, I definitely took that to get involved, because I just knew it would make me a better person, make me have more friends, and get out my shell, and be that person that I always knew I was, but was scared to be.

When asked if they had to give advice to their first-year self, peers or new students, "Alyssa" shared that their advice would be to focus on the relationship building experience instead of the specific type of organization they joined.

> My advice always is go to you know an involvement fair go to the handle try to find one thing that interests you because there's got to be something here we have over 200 organizations and there's got to be something whether it's major based academic based well that's the same thing major based interest based hobby based there's got to be something and if you just try it for once you will like it for the most part if there's something that's not a match then try something else because if you don't I mean you got to have a support system here and involvement is that support system.

Other advice the participants shared was on how being involved encouraged them to have the confidence to ask for help. "Launa" commented on how in hindsight she wished she would have gotten involved with student organization leadership sooner.

> I mean, just getting involved sooner because I didn't really feel connected and I struggled academically to just being like alone by myself, not knowing how to ask for help. So I think if I could have gotten involved sooner, I would have been able to ask for help and the things that I struggled with a lot freshman year, because ultimately those things that I struggled with freshman year have like, unfortunately they follow you.

Multiple participants mentioned feeling comfortable and confident in interacting with faculty and staff. “Launa” also shared her advice on how becoming involved allows students to become more engaged with faculty and staff at the institution.

> I always tell people, it's always scary at first getting used to like faculty and staff members, especially like as a freshman, like, you don't even want to talk to your professors and ask them for help. But once you like get into these positions, you finally feel comfortable to ask for help. And is what that's also nice, too, because you think you have to do it all by yourself. And then you're like, well, there's so many different people of different levels who want to help you.

However, participants also shared how becoming involved could result in increased feelings of anxiety and stress. One particular participant, “Cameron” shared how her involvement in multiple student organizations early in college was overwhelming. But like for like a baby student leader like that it was a lot and I was like, oh wow like there is so much going on and people were like needing me to do this this and that and I was like I don't know how to handle this. I feel like I just was not handling it well at all.

Another student “Launa,” responded that the pressure of holding a leadership role was significantly more stressful than general membership.

> Oh, there's always stress with being involved, especially like, I think as a general member of an organization, there's not too much of that like stress because you show up to the events that you're told to show up to, but when it comes to like

> holding positions, it's a lot more of like, I need to make the time to plan the event to, you know, reserve the rooms, I need to talk with our advisors, our faculty and staff.

However, the same participant shared that although her leadership experience was stressful, she learned when she needed to prioritize herself and her well-being.

> But also like, I think if I wasn't involved in these organizations, I wouldn't know when my breaking point is and when I needed help. Like thankfully enough, though I've gone through some hard times, it has shown me that maybe I need to take a step back and give myself a break for a week or maybe I need to go talk to someone about this problem and ask for help.

Many of the participant responses also referred to moments of growth and maturity from their involvement experience. “Jada” compared her experience as an involved student leader as preparation for her future.

> I learned that it's kind of similar to how life will be in the future, as far as, like, working, having a family, like, having to tackle all these different challenges at the same time. Like, yeah, these are just college orgs, but if you flip it to real life, like, this is how busy some people actually are day in, day out.

Challenges

More than 50 responses to interview questions were clustered into the challenges category which included initial open codes anxiety/stress, conflict, loneliness/depression, and pressure.

Participants whose responses were coded anxiety or stress claimed to have feelings of being overwhelmed or overstimulated. One participant, "Jada" listed the number of tasks expected of them when she became a leader is what became the most stressful.

> I was the secretary, and I was, like, you know, just a secretary, whatever, but then, like, the president, Zana, she started, she was like, I need you to do this, I need you to do that, and I was like, oh, okay, this is, like, what I need to be doing, like, all the time, often, like, this is how it is structured, whatever, and then when you add on top of that, you take those positions seriously, it becomes, like, kind of stressful.

"Jada" also discussed how the amount of people she interacts with regularly can be what causes overstimulation and she has to navigate those feelings.

> It's helped me a lot with my interactions with people, for me to be a very quiet person, because even now, like, I still get overstimulated and I kind of, like, shut down a little, but being able to, like, fight the overstimulation and still talk to people or learning how to talk to people, like, you can't just not give enough information or, you know, like, you have to be broad.

Other participants like "Hannah" described similar experiences as having increased feelings of pressure. One participant described how they put pressure on themselves to be a leader while also helping their peers.

> There is so much pressure specifically within university sponsored organizations because of the fact like especially in my position being like the vice president of operations like you are in charge too like you are running an organization and I am

only I am only 20 years old and I don't even know what I am doing at times and so when these people are coming to you and you are taking on their emotional turmoil and you cannot balance yours like it just adds an extra layer of the already pressure of running the organization.

Similarly, participant “Jessica” described when she joined a group of student leaders as a new officer and felt pressure to socially integrate as well as balance her new responsibilities.

> The beginning is always the hardest part because you feel like you're fumbling and you're failing and you don't know whether or not it's okay to fumble and be struggling, and then especially when you're joining onto a team that's already established itself, it really feels kind of like you're the outlier because everybody knows what to do, they know how to function and how to move and how to work with each other, and then you're just in there like, I don't know anything and I don't know what to do and how to help.

Other challenges that the participants shared were feelings of loneliness and depression. When asked what negative mental well-being was, many participants described the negativity as a result of feeling depressed.

One response by participant “Braxton,” described negative well-being as not supporting your own needs and setting boundaries, commenting that “negative uh mental health is basically I would say just kind of just not taking care of yourself, not putting

yourself first in situations, not setting boundaries not um yeah just not really putting yourself first in many situations".

Another participant "Joseph" shared how, despite knowing what being depressed meant, he did not initially see himself as depressed.

> So obviously depression is real, but I never wanted to, I guess I face the fact that I may have been depressed or something like that. Cause for me I always felt like, and I am not saying that other people who do, who are depressed and who come out as depressed, are using it. But for me, I personally feel like it's a scapegoat in a way because I feel like I'm depressed.

"Joseph" also shared how he felt others used depression as an excuse not to seek help.

> Oh, I can't do this, I can't do that. When the reality is like I need to accept the fact and realize the fact that like, yes, you are depressed and it's not a bad thing, but you need to like help yourself in a way.

Another participant, "Jada" shared her own bout of depression and how she tried to manage college while navigating depression.

> So, that is probably one thing that I have dealt with in my college experience, is really, like, battling depression and trying to make sure, like, I am still on top of my P's and Q's, still making sure I am going to my classes, getting good grades, and then I suffer from anxiety as well.

When asked how they manage their mental well-being, many of the participants shared why they felt conflicted about seeking counseling or talk therapy solutions. Some

of the participants, such as“Cameron” shared how previous experiences with counseling influenced their decision when considering seeking out help.

> Um, I saw a therapist like once or twice and I was like 13 and I was like she is not my vibe. Like we didn't vibe together. She was a white woman, so I just felt like she didn't relate to me as like I was like a 13-year-old black girl and I was like, I am trying to understand the world.

For participants like, “Jocelyn” their family' reaction to them seeking services was the root of their hesitation. She shared how she feared telling her mother that she needed well-being services.

> And also too, um, I was scared to like, I don't want to say that I was scared. Like I don't want to think I was frightened, but I didn't know how to bring it up to my mom to be like, hey, like, it turns out I've been struggling for this long and I may actually need therapy.

“James” shared how seeking medical assistance is not widely supported in their family, especially as a male.

> And cause pride has always been such a big thing, like in my family, like on the men's side anyway. It's like you don't go to the doctor, you don't go see a shrink, you don't do this stuff. Mental health's not real.

Yet,”Jessica” described out how her pride and general fear that her problems were not significant enough stopped her from seeking help.

> The first was my pride. Something about it is just like, I can do it myself, I don't need help, I can figure it out, I got this. So, my pride definitely was there, and then the second part of me is the part of me that's just like, my problems aren't that big. There are other people in the world who don't have shelter and don't have food. My problems are not that big, they're very insignificant, and so really just downplaying myself.

On this particular campus, counseling is provided at no cost to students, yet some participants shared their hesitation in utilizing the service. For participant, “Jada” she heard campus counseling services were not helpful from a friend, but after becoming a leader and learning more about the service, she chose to both personally utilize the service and now suggests it to others.

> Um, no, because I had heard a lot of backlash, so I didn't want to even try. But then, like, being a mentor, we've heard so much about the hub and how helpful they've become since my freshman year. So now I tell people to go to the hub, but at first, I was hesitant to go to the hub.

“Jocelyn” did not know counseling was a free service on campus and worried about the financial cost of therapy-based solutions.

> Uh, so I think there was also like a payment barrier that I also had, I didn't know how much it would cost. I was also very confused on how the, I don't do therapy here, but I was also very confused on how the therapy worked here.

Positive Outcomes

Nearly 70 responses to the interview questions were clustered into the positive outcome category, which included the initial open codes balance and time management, coping and growth and maturity.

Participants whose responses were coded balance and time management primarily shared how experiences with poor time management taught them the importance of finding a sense of balance within their college experience. The participant "Jada," discussed how her poor time management taught her to become more organized.

> Um, it's definitely helped me with time management because when I got to college I had terrible time management, like, procrastination was really bad. Even now it's still a little bad, but I'm learning to make time for things, and so I've learned how to put everything in a calendar, go by the calendar.

Another participant "Alyssa," shared that the schedule of college was different from previous education experiences and that they had to allocate the appropriate amount of time to successfully manage their responsibilities.

> I am trying to learn how to balance things so time management for sure also like college is different it is not a Monday through Friday eight-to-five class it is every class is different some professors you might have three tests some you might have project base, so it is just having to learn that there is no cookie cutter college experience and lots of variances.

For other participants, learning the importance of balance and time management is a personal lesson in personal growth, as "Launa" described "I think, a big part of growth in all of this too, is realizing I literally don't have enough time in the day, or energy in my body".

Other participants shared in these feelings of self-discovery and are learning when balance is needed for their personal success. "Joseph" described "But at the same time, it was like not knowing when to like cut myself off or when to balance and give myself time and focus on me".Many of the participants discussed how moments of stress resulted in personal growth and maturity. One of those examples is from a "Braxton" who felt his college experiences taught him to better navigate having increased responsibility.

> So, I would say the stress level it's going to be there but it teaches you something. I feel like you know that it really teaches you something, it teaches you to stay grounded, it teaches you how to maneuver when you stress, how to maneuver when a lot of things are going on at the same time. So, I would definitely say somewhere in there it prepared you for some life.

Another participant, "Jada" claimed "So, I guess learning how to tackle all of those things is, like, a life skill I'm kind of advancing in compared to other students", describing their responsibility was the result of their leadership experience.

Participant "Alyssa" identified an area of growth from being a student leader, was helping her learn to better deal with her peers.

It's helped me grow by learning how to deal with real world situations I've learned how to work with people that don't exactly like me or that I don't exactly get along with. I've learned how to work with people that are not as motivated as me. I've learned how to do things that have really put me out of my comfort zone.

When asked how participants sought help to manage their mental well-being, many of the participants shared coping strategies that provide positive outcomes. Multiple participants mentioned journaling. However, "Cayla" shared how writing their thoughts helps them.

When something kind of gets bad, super help to journal. I stopped journaling for a while but I've just now recently gotten back into it, yeah honestly anytime something weighs on my mind that's heavy it can be something bad or even good if I write it down it just makes me feel more uplifted and free from those burdens or those thoughts just constantly running through my mind, so I like journaling.

In addition to journaling, the participants listed physical strategies such as walking or working out, as well as finding time to read or do something they enjoy, such as photography. "Braxton" described the importance of finding something that makes you happy when explaining what he felt having positive mental well-being was.

Positive mental health is just being intentional on what you feed yourself mentally spiritually and physically too as well as what you put in your body, what your um doing throughout the day and what you have been attentive to. Just being intentional about what you're giving yourself. Basically, um I would say that is positive mental

health, it is just being mindful of your thoughts, being mindful of you know what goes into your day because I just feel like what goes into your day can sort of have an effect on your mental health.

Whereas, “Jada” described positive mental well-being as the ability to balance, and negative was carrying the weight of responsibility without giving grace.

> Just being, like, levelheaded, being able to manage everything that is going on in your life, and not feeling, like, overwhelmed and stressed out, and having positive thoughts. I feel like negative mental health is carrying the load of everything, not really, like giving yourself grace.

Engagement

More than 60 responses were classified into the engagement category. This code incorporates codes such as community, influence, others, and support. Each of these responses focuses on how peers, family members, or campus advisors significantly influenced the perspectives of participants on their college experiences.

Participants shared how engaging people from varying backgrounds and experiences teaches them to engage with people in new ways. “James” shared how he felt his upbringing influences him differently than his peers.

> Coming into this, it's definitely taught me that people are very different, and I kind of learned how to manage different. Growing up differently, living in different areas of different states, really creates a different person. Back home, everybody grew up in this same small town, and all of our moms and dads went to high school, too,

> and we're all the same, and so when we get here, it's like there's new people, new experiences, new things you have to try and reroute around.

Similarly, another participant, “Cayla” discussed how sometimes engaging with others can be challenging but prepares you to manage conflict in future work scenarios.

> Being involved you're gonna meet many different people that you're going to get along with or you're gonna butt heads with. Obviously when you get a real job in the world, you are gonna be involved with those people depending on if you disagree with them or like them etc. and you are gonna have to learn how to put up with those people because I cannot just say someone nagged me at work and I blew up at them.

However, “Cameron” explained that in these moments of conflict, they have learned through their leadership experience how to communicate effectively.

> This is not you know working, you know, I feel like there's tension and being able to be like, hey y'all I think we need to sit down and have this conversation and it not like hurting anybody's feelings or getting my feelings hurt. I think when I was a freshman, I definitely would not have been able to do that.

For some participants, finding support from campus advisors was also a positive outcome of their leadership experience. Two participants shared how faculty and staff interaction has made them feel more supported. “Alyssa” commented on how mentors motivate her claiming that “being involved I've met some great mentors who pushed me to be a better person who get onto me when I'm getting when I'm falling behind. I've also met

some of my best friends through it people that I probably would have never met and some best friends that I definitely will have the rest of my life”.

And “Braxton,” shared a memory of when he and other student leaders were invited to the President of the institutions home, which made him feel supported as the President of his organization.

> So uh, just like how the school put on the leadership event at the president's house. Oh, it made the presidents feel seen. Yeah, so you know stuff like that and having just faculty stuff to come talk to us about leadership and just about different things that students are doing on campus allows us to feel supported and seen. So I would say just you know kind of just recognizing us a little bit I would say that's how we feel supported, um because it ain't nothing to just recognize and say hey I see what you're doing this is good.

The support from peer groups is also mentioned by various participants. “Jospeh” shared how being part of a fraternity provides him with the support he need in times of weakness.

> And just whenever something would happen where I just needed to like break down and cry, my fraternity was always there for me. Especially like that first week of school, is when they definitely helped me out a lot, supported me, allowed me to see things that I needed to see and everything like that.

Another student, “Jessica” shared how being part of a team within their student organization resulted in her peers reaching out and checking in on her.

> There are just moments where like, I'll be going through the day and I may be having a hard day and my team will notice that I'm not my usual self and they will reach out and be like, hey, what's going on, what's wrong? Do you wanna talk? And just having people that like know you enough to be like, something's off, what's going on? That was really, really supportive. And I appreciate it so deeply. They don't even know how much it literally, connecting with them on that level, it just feels like everything's gonna be okay.

For several of the participants, the ability to influence others and provide support to their peers is equally important to them. “Alyssa” shared how now as a senior she feels responsible for being a mentor to others.

> Like my freshman year I was the new kid I was the one being mentored and I feel like now you know I'm a senior I'm the one mentoring others and trying to get them and be the person that I had others be for me.

Another participant “Jocelyn,” had a similar feeling of influence discussing how they had realized that incoming students are now seeing them as the mentor.

> Like I guess that's what kind of made me feel like, oh, like this is for real. Because that's how I used to view other people so that now that I'm getting older and I'm realizing that that's how these freshmen that are coming in are viewing me. It's kind of scary, but it's kind of like, I'm like, oh wait, actually I am kind of doing a good job.

Summary

This chapter contains the results of the analysis and connects the analysis back to the research questions. The qualitiative study utilized interviews for data collection as a means to understand how their lived experiences as student leaders in student organizations influenced their lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Sixteen participants were interviewed for this qualitative narrative study on mental well-being and coping strategies in Generation Z. Interview questions were structured to understand the student's perspective on involvement and its impact on mental well-being and for the students to describe how their involvement has helped them grow and mature to better understand the role of involvement in personal development. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) describe this approach as a way to “capture a glimpsed understanding of participants lived experiences”. All participants were undergraduate students who were involved in a student organization and served as storytellers of their own personal stories (Clandidin, & Connelly, 2004).

Consistent with thematic analysis, three levels of analysis were conducted, open coding, selective coding, and thematic coding. Fourteen codes emerged from open coding. An analysis of these codes was performed, in which six categories were identified based on the relationships between codes. Further analysis was done to identify connections both among and within the open and selective codes, which resulted in the identification of three overarching themes. The three themes that culminated from this study summarize the factors that contribute to the well-being of Generation Z

undergraduates involved in student organizations: (a) Students engagement with student organizations primarily results in feelings of support and an enhanced sense of community, (b) Lived experiences result in change of behavior and the implementation of coping strategies and learned behaviors, and (c) Challenges that negatively impact student well-being primarily stem from the internal pressure students place on themselves and the external pressure perceived from others.

Data analysis revealed that involvement in student organizations provided networks that enhanced the student's sense of community and offered support. Students' strategies to cope with problems frequently originated from navigating challenges and adopting alternative behaviors to achieve different results. The pressures experienced by student leaders often stem from involvement and adjustments to a new environment and increased independence. Students are susceptible to letting the opinions of others influence their perception of success, thus shaping their personal judgment more based on external validation than on their own. Chapter V includes a summary of findings, discussion on the conclusions as organized by emerging themes, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of student participation and lived experiences with coping strategies from mental well-being challenges in Generation Z undergraduate student leaders in university-sponsored organizations. Investigate to what extent participation in student organizations influences their mental well-being and coping strategies. This chapter includes a discussion of major findings in relation to the existing literature on Generation Z undergraduate students, examining how campus programs like student organizations offer avenues for growth and development. It also explores how students employ coping mechanisms to minimize their impact on academic performance. The chapter concludes with an examination of the limitations of the study, potential areas for future research, and a brief summary.

This chapter includes discussion and future research possibilities to address the research questions:

(1) What conflicts or pressures arise for Generation Z student leaders in sponsored student organizations?

(2) What are ways in which involvement in sponsored student organizations influence Generation Z students leaders' well-being?

(3) What coping strategies or support systems do Generation Z student leaders utilize to navigate and prioritize their well-being while actively participating in sponsored student organizations?

The theoretical framework that informed the study utilized Strauss and Howe's generational theory (1991) that defined the inclusion criteria of undergraduate students identified as members of the Generation-Z cohort. Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984) to clarify coping strategies as responses to stressors. Schlossberg's transition theory (1981, 1984) which conceptualizes student positions within their undergraduate experiences over time.

The compilation of shared perspectives that emerged from the data captured the lived experiences of the participants and offered insight into how their perspectives and identities influenced their unique responses to the semistructured interview questions.

Interpretation of the Findings

Although their organizations, roles, and experiences differed between individuals, each of the three themes prominently affected how the well-being of the participants was shaped by their undergraduate experience as student leaders. The themes each illustrate aspects of assuming responsibilities as a student leader and delineate the outcomes of such endeavors. Each theme is described in detail in the following sections.

Support and Enhanced Sense of Community

The study's conclusion that involvement in student organization results in an increased feeling of support and enhanced sense of community is supported in the

literature. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) claimed that students who do more in college get more from it, and student leaders who devote their time and energy found that as a result they are building deep connections with those they interact with regularly. This is further supported by Student Involvement Theory (1984), where Astin described involvement using five postulates. Many of these postulates further support the concept that if an increased amount of time and energy is devoted, then a proportional amount of personal development results. The participant responses conveyed that, despite the significant time commitment, they have experienced personal growth through their leadership roles in student organizations.

Participation in student organizations can also result in a stronger sense of purpose, especially for those students who perceive themselves as an indispensable component of that system (Jones & Morrow, 2022). As leaders in student organizations, the participants were aware of the influence they have on their peers, and many shared how they use their experience to mentor younger peers.

Overall, the theme that resulted was that participants discovered that by joining student organizations they created friendships. They expressed in their responses how these relationships helped them integrate into the campus community. Participants discussed how their roles as student leaders increased their confidence in engaging with faculty and staff, while also fostering enjoyment in learning more about their peers. Additionally, these relationships collectively provided the essential support needed to maintain a more positive well-being throughout college.

In addition, participants highlighted the importance of community building for students of color, highlighting the importance of involvement experiences that foster connections with peers and multicultural experiences. This addresses concerns raised in the literature by Tillapaugh (2019), who posits that students of color may experience heightened feelings of isolation due to a potentially losing their sense of identity when separated from others who share their cultural background.

Implementation of Coping Strategies and Learned Behaviors

Participants shared various challenges they encountered during their college years, including loneliness, depression, anxiety, and struggles with substance misuse. However, in line with research findings, stress appeared to be a prevalent challenge for participants. According to the American College Health Association report in 2022, stress was identified as the primary obstacle to the success of college-aged students. However, research suggests that participation in structured activities may be an effective strategy for reducing stress (Eubank & DeVita, 2020). The responses of the participants generally supported this notion, indicating that, although their leadership roles may indeed cause stress, they have learned to better prioritize their time and seek help when they cannot manage the stress on their own.

Stress, however, is experienced by each student differently, and although the experience may have been ultimately developmentally positive, the student may struggle to find a coping strategy that adequately helps manage their stress. According to Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984, 2011) everyone assesses the impact of

stress on their lives differently and therefore the ways in which they identify coping strategies to combat it differ for each individual. Ultimately, the effectiveness of stress relief strategies can also vary depending on the experiences of the individuals and the understanding of the root causes of their stress.

Relatedly, Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984) suggests that once students identify the cause of their stress, they can employ the most effective coping strategy. This was evident in the diverse range of strategies shared by the participants. Some found quiet time away from others helpful, such as listening to music or reading, while others preferred physical activities, such as taking walks or working out. Another emotion-focused coping strategy mentioned by the participants is talk therapy, which they are currently using.

Talk therapy or counseling is readily available on college campuses as a result of the Campus Care Act, which required college campuses to offer counseling centers to students at no cost (Owen et al., 2006). Some participants mentioned that they are currently using these services on campus, while many others talked about finding counseling options through private off-campus clinicians. However, nearly all participants expressed support for talk therapy as a coping strategy and encourage their peers to consider counseling as a means to managing their mental well-being.

Challenges Related to Internal and Perceived External Pressures

As a cohort, Generation Z students report lower morale, with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and social anxiety (Twenge, 2017). This sentiment was reflected in

the responses of the participants that highlighted the struggle of the students to meet their own expectations for success. However, these expectations may be influenced by the comparison of their achievements with those of peers through online observation. Generation Z spends up to ten hours a day online, where they are exposed to social media posts from influencers or peers that highlight happy experiences and accomplishments (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). This constant comparison could lead to unrealistic perception of success, as seen in some participant responses, where they perceive themselves as failures or falling behind based on the achievements of similarly aged peers.

The academic environment, social pressures, workload, and financial concerns can be overwhelming (Helmbrecht & Ayars, 2021). Some participants mentioned that involvement in student organizations added to these pressures. Several participants noted that student leadership responsibilities were challenging, especially when balancing them with academic workloads. Furthermore, others mentioned the pressure of managing the expectations of their peers and the responsibility of serving the campus community as representatives of sponsored organizations.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study suggest some relationship between participation in university-sponsored student organizations and mental well-being and coping strategies of undergraduate student leaders. The experiences of student leaders within these organizations present both challenges and supportive measures that influence their college experience. Although the challenges faced by students involved in organizations

may not differ significantly from those of non-involved students, participants were able to articulate how their involvement specifically relates to the challenges they encounter as student leaders. Furthermore, increased support and community sense were identified as outcomes of student participation in these organizations. Participants attributed the development of relationships to their involvement in student organizations. However, there is no direct correlation between coping mechanisms and learned behaviors that students use to manage their mental well-being and their participation in student organizations. However, several participants noted that their ability to recognize the need for coping strategies was based on experiences they gained during their time as student leaders. They also expressed that their connection to the institution facilitated a better understanding of how to seek help from campus administrators.

The study highlighted a worrying trend in which students had to personally experience a challenge before recognizing it as an issue and realizing the need for correction. As a response, higher education institutions should implement programs that help student leaders recognize areas of concern and provide examples of healthy coping strategies. These initiatives will help students identify the triggers or underlying causes of health challenges, enabling them to evaluate their response and design solutions. This approach is consistent with Schlossberg's transition theory (1981, 1984, 2011). The result of such efforts may increase positive student well-being and promote retention and persistence.

The range of coping strategies used by student leaders was extensive, many of which involved temporarily stepping away from their daily routine and reengaging later. Institutions have the potential to improve students' awareness of effective coping strategies by providing resources such as online lists or downloadable workbooks. These resources could also be incorporated into campus activities such as walking groups or reading clubs, or designated physical spaces on campus such as low-sensory areas with calming music or videos playing.

Another aspect that could benefit from a deeper understanding of the relationships formed through the participation of students in student organizations is the first year programming. During their first year, students learn to navigate a new environment and develop a balance between their social interactions and academic responsibilities (Strayhorn, 2019). This acquired skill is a consequence of the newfound independence in the college setting. However, if the importance of relationship building is emphasized or facilitated through mandatory mentorship programs, the impact on retention could be significant.

Summary

The exploration of Generation-Z student perspectives on their participation and lived experiences with coping strategies and mental well-being challenges. This understanding was related to their participation in university-sponsored student organizations. Through this exploration, a deeper understanding emerged. It highlighted how their engagement experiences can present unique challenges that may not have been

encountered without their involvement in student organizations. Furthermore, it highlighted the significance of the relationships formed through these experiences, which participants deemed one of the most rewarding outcomes. Although participants were unable to definitively articulate whether the coping strategies, they use to manage their mental well-being are directly related to their involvement experiences, there is a possibility that their increased awareness of campus resources may have influenced their perception of these newly acquired coping mechanisms.

As reports of mental well-being concerns among college-aged students continue to rise, higher education institutions will be increasingly called upon to address and mitigate these impacts. According to the American College Health Association National College Assessment (ACHA-NCHA) in 2022, stress was identified as one of the most significant factors that affect students. Furthermore, 44% of college students reported that their mental well-being had adverse effects on their academic achievements (American College Health Association, 2022).

While this study does not provide data on the stress of students involved in student organizations with those not involved. However, the positive outcomes highlighted in this study, such as enhanced sense of community and the impact of meaningful relationships, offer opportunities for future researchers to explore ways to provide all students with similar outcomes that facilitate persistence.

The findings of this study suggested three emerging themes regarding the well-being of student leaders involved in student organizations; (a) Student engagement with

student organizations primarily results in feelings of support and an enhanced sense of community, (b) Lived experiences result in change of behavior and the implementation of coping strategies and learned behaviors, (c) Challenges that negatively impact student well-being are primarily due to the internal pressure students place on themselves and the external pressure perceived by others.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

What are the nuanced ways in which student involvement by Generation Z undergraduate student leaders provide coping strategies to better manage their mental well-being? (protective or not)

1. Tell me about why you got involved on campus.
2. What made you decide to become involved in a university sponsored organization?
    a. Do you find that involvement in university sponsored organizations is a different experience than if you joined a general registered student organization?
    b. Do you think the student leadership experiences you receive from participation in a university sponsored organization is different than other student leader experiences on campus? If so, how?
3. Describe how you feel your involvement has helped you grow or mature?
4. Tell me about a time your when your involvement may have caused you stress?
    a. Reflecting on that time, what do you think the cause of your stress was?
5. Tell me about a time when your involvement made you feel more supported?
    a. What did you learn from that experience?
6. How would you describe what it means to have positive or negative "mental well-being"?
7. Do you think your involvement in college has affected your mental well-being?
    a. What has the impact been on you?

Did the effect vary from year to year or remain constant? How do Generation Z undergraduate student leaders negotiate their mental well-being through student involvement? (navigating mental well-being)

8. Do you think your generation experiences more stress or mental well-being challenges than previous ones? If so, why?
9. What are some of the most significant stresses or mental well-being challenges you have faced during your college experience?
    a. Why do you consider these experiences significant?
10. Have you sought help to manage your stress or mental well-being?
    a. If so, was it someone who worked at the university or a peer?
    b. If no, what has stopped you from seeking support?
    c. Which methods have helped you feel less stressed or anxious?
11. Have your strategies for coping changed since you began college? If so, how?
12. If you could go back to your freshman year when you began college, what would you do differently?
    a. How would you give this advice to your peers or to new students?

VITA

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