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# Sustained Dialogue and Civic Life: Post-College Impacts

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*This study examined the civic outcomes of the Sustained Dialogue model. Qualitative interviews investigated the perceived impacts of dialogue experience on post-graduate civic life, generating an inventory of 29 dialogue civic outcomes across five domains: 1) cognitions, 2) behaviors, 3) attitudes 4) skills, and 5) hopes and plans for the future. Results extend past research by finding that perceived dialogue impacts lasted into the post-college years and affected future hopes and plans. Additional impacts were identified: (1) across various civic arenas of society, and (2) a transformative "restringing" effect, in which participants reported they were changed or transformed in subtle, complex, and pervasive ways.*

Many educators have sought experiences to help young people become part of an engaged local and global citizenry, both prepared for and motivated to participate in a democratic society. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) wrote:

Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience...It is the name of a way of life of free and enriching communion in which free social inquiry is wedded to the art of full and moving communication. (p. 81)

The current research study reinforces the bridge between two movements in higher education — civic engagement and intergroup dialogue. The study draws on two concepts embedded in the above quote: first, the notion of living in association with others, the essence of what we term a broad "civic life;" and second, the idea of a shared communication or dialogue with others. These two ideas — that a civic life is a broader way of living in association with others and dialogue is a unique process fostering individual community engagement — undergird this study.

Other researchers have made this connection as well. Educational policy makers and university administrators want college graduates to be competent in the "arts of democracy," i.e., capable of and effective at engaging in a participatory democracy (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Ehrlich, 2000; Guaraci, Cornwell, & Associates, 1997). These arts include "inclusive and respectful dialogue, thoughtful reasoning, conflict transformation, collective decision-making and policy-making, and social action" (Thomas & Mallory, 2007, p. 2) across all differences in social identity, values, experiences, and perspectives.

Over the last 50 years, despite some setbacks and with a few exceptions, American universities have made efforts to increase both racial and economic diversity in their student bodies. Greater diversity on campuses creates opportunities for greater conflict and learning. However, diversity by itself does not create the conditions for people to engage with one another (Gurin, 1999). There are a number of initiatives on college campuses to proactively create conditions for intergroup dialogues across difference (Diaz, 2009). Recent research suggests that such initiatives yield outcomes encouraging college graduates to become engaged and participatory citizens (Nagda, 2007).

## Three Bodies of Literature

The present study draws upon three sources of literature to investigate the relationship between dialogue and civic life: student learning and development, intergroup dialogue, and civic engagement. This study is located at the nexus of all three.

### *Student Learning and Development*

Studies of student development have concluded that college causes changes in four areas: learning and cognitive changes, psychosocial changes, attitudes and values, and moral development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Such changes seem integrated in that "change in any one area appeared part of a reinforcing network" (p. 572). In addition, scholars have flagged interactions with peers as antecedents to deep learning and have sought ways to "harness peer influence to further the educational aims of the institution" (Kuh, 1995, p. 149).

Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) posited that intergroup contact could reduce prejudice if four conditions were met: (a) equal group status, (b) common goals, (c) intergroup cooperation, and (d) the support of authorities, laws, or customs. Building on Allport's work, Pettigrew (1998) refined Intergroup Contact Theory to explain how contact with members of a different group decreases prejudice and increases perspectives and tolerance. Ultimately, learning across difference requires interpersonal contact, whether in a formal classroom, dining hall over a meal, or residential hall educational program. It is the engagement with the other (listening, conversing, and reflecting) that yields learning across difference.

Transformative Learning Theory explains encounters with another different from oneself as a critical location for significant change (Dalo, 1986; Mezirow, 2000; Parks Dalo, Keen, Keen, & Dalo Parks, 1996). These theorists maintain that encountering a different other can trigger disorientation. This disorientation forces deeper reflection resulting in a change of perspective and a fundamental reordering of assumptions, and that such perspective changes can motivate civic engagement. Proponents of this theory make the case that transformative learning changes the learner. They explain some of the internal changes, such as an integration of new and sometimes even disorienting information that an individual may undergo as he or she increases engagement in a complex social world (Cranton, 2006).

Popular education scholars maintain that ordinary people engage in dialogue as a means to understand and engage in a complex social world. Paolo Freire (1973) advocated for spaces in which people could discuss their lives and social contexts, and that the actions born of those discussions were fundamental to democracy and society. Myles Horton used group learning to help activists launch the citizenship schools and train civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. Horton (1990) called the group space that engaged in dialogue "a circle of learners" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 151) while Freire called the dialogue space "circles of culture" (Horton & Freire, p. 84). While Horton's (1990) language differed from Freire's, his educational philosophy did not. Both linked social change outcomes to dialogue practices (Horton & Freire).

### *Intergroup Dialogue*

Scholars of popular education (Horton & Freire, 1990) and transformative learning (Dalo, 1986; Mezirow & Associates, 1990, 2000) have identified *dialogue* as a way to promote civic engagement — an engaged civic life. Numerous colleges and universities have mission statements declaring goals of

preparing the global citizen of tomorrow. Not surprisingly, universities have begun to institute facilitated dialogue — dialogue within groups intentionally formed to include people from a range of backgrounds (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). Researchers have shown that a diverse student body, coupled with opportunities for engagement with the other, produce greater learning (Gurin, 1999) than homogeneous student bodies. Other scholars of civic engagement argue that college is an appropriate setting for dialogic learning because "student interaction with diversity promotes the development of complex thinking and social-cognitive and democratic skills" (Hurtado, 2005, p. 6).

This study uses the term "dialogue" to signify group communication processes in which peer moderators actively facilitate a conversation among members with different social identities (i.e., race, class, gender, religion, ideology, etc.) for the purpose of a deeper understanding of different viewpoints and experiences. The three prominent models for ongoing dialogue across difference on college campuses are Study Circles, Intergroup Dialogue, and Sustained Dialogue.

*Study Circles.* Study Circles are based on principles of inclusion, diversity, sharing of knowledge, and decision-making. They combine dialogue with public deliberation to create "ways for all kinds of people to think, talk, and walk together to solve problems" (Everyday-Democracy, n.d.). Research on Study Circles in community settings suggests that social capital outcomes, such as increased participation on volunteer boards and a greater capacity to solve public problems, are associated with Study Circles (Scully & McCoy, 2005). Although less studied to date, 25 campuses have used Study Circles with a focus on race relations (Scully & McCoy).

*Intergroup dialogue.* Intergroup Dialogue originated as a curricular model, and is now used on campuses across the U.S. Intergroup Dialogues bring together people from two or more social identity groups for facilitated discussion (Zuñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). Research on this model has found that students with experience in intergroup dialogue: (a) think about racial and ethnic inequalities (Lopez, Gurin, & Nagda, 1998); (b) have an increase in consciousness-raising, building bridges across differences, and capacity for social change (Nagda, Kim, Moise-Swanson, & Kim, 2006); and (c) show greater "communicative competence" (Yeakley, 1998). Collectively, these studies on Intergroup Dialogue show promising outcomes in terms of intercultural understanding, group communication processes, and psychosocial development of attitudes among students.

*Sustained dialogue.* Sustained Dialogue is a multi-

stage conflict resolution process in which small diverse groups of people meet over time and dialogue across differences. The Sustained Dialogue process stems from the field of international relations and as such is designed to change conflictual relationships (Saunders, 1999). Sustained Dialogue groups meet over a number of weeks with peer moderators who help the group move through five stages: (a) deciding to engage in a dialogue process, (b) mapping and naming problems and relationships, (c) probing problems and relationships to choose a direction, (d) scenario building — experiencing a changing relationship, and (e) acting together to make change happen (Saunders, 1999). Existing research on Sustained Dialogue is limited to the motivations leading students to join a dialogue group and the importance of a safe space to discuss race and diversity issues (Wagner, Ross, & Miller, 2006).

The essential shared characteristics of these campus practices are that the dialogue is both ongoing and continues for at least a number of weeks, and that the dialogue is “intergroup” in that it includes a small but diverse group of people. All of the aforementioned campus dialogue models, in part, are intended to cultivate participatory civic skills (Nagda, 2007; Nagda, McCoy, & Holme Barrett, 2006; Saunders, 1999). However, the lack of methodologically, rigorous research on outcomes for the Sustained Dialogue model, in part led to this study’s focus. In addition, the connection between the college-based dialogue movement and the civic engagement movement is implied in much of the prior research on higher education. However, this study makes that connection explicit.

### *Civic Engagement*

Adler and Goggin (2005) organized civic engagement into four broad categories: a) civic engagement as community service, b) civic engagement as collective action, c) civic engagement as political involvement, and d) civic engagement as social change. Scholars have linked these areas of service, action, and political engagement to a combination of knowledge, skills and values as well as the motivation to make a difference (Ehrlich, 2000). Ehrlich went on to consider “civic” as including “the range over all social spheres beyond the family, from neighborhoods and local communities to state, national and cross-national arenas” (p. xxv).

These notions of service, action, and political engagement necessitate interaction and even collaboration with another person or groups of people. As previously mentioned, the transformational nature of engagement with the other, as well as college dialogue’s outcome of helping participants think about structural inequalities in society and think about their own capacity for social change, suggest connections

between dialogue and civic engagement. This deep engagement with those who are different increases one’s capacity for social change (Eyler & Giles, 1999). There is also a history of this connection, this deep engagement across differences, although only in the last decade have scholars made this connection in the context of higher education. More than four decades ago, Horton facilitated dialogue among poor people to launch the citizenship schools to increase voter registration and prepare civil rights leaders to strategize their social actions such as civil disobedience (Horton & Freire, 1990). More than three decades ago Freire used dialogue to liberate the poor and illiterate to empower them to create social change (Freire, 1973). More than two decades ago West (1993) wrote that “reflection should...take us to a higher moral ground where serious discussions about democracy and justice determine how we define ourselves and our politics...” (p. 75) and he urged us to focus “our attention on the public square — the common good” (p. 6). Over a decade ago service - learning pedagogies defined inter- and intra-personal learning such as understanding social identities, developing problem-solving skills, and learning an ethic of care as civic learning objectives (Howard, 2001). Less than five years ago, Nagda Kim, Moise-Swanson, & Kim (2006) found similar knowledge, attitudes, and skills — the same building blocks for the engagement with the others in society — to be affected by dialogue across differences.

The above examples illustrate the history of connecting communication and dialogue with other individuals with civic engagement in society. This connection is also evident in the notion of citizen’s learning the “arts of democracy”(Guaraci et al., 1997) in which individuals can understand, weigh multiple options, and make informed decisions, all of which are skills developed through dialogue across differences. Once individuals learn, they are capable of “acting in concert” (Saunders, 1999). Dialogue is the glue allowing individuals to first understand another’s experience and then acquire the civic skills to serve, act, and develop a “political voice” (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002).

This study explores the idea that dialogue across differences prepares citizens to participate in society. To focus on the connection between dialogue and civic engagement this study examines one sustained intergroup dialogue model.

### **Research Question**

In summary, unlike the researchers studying the dialogic educational practices previously discussed, this study examined the perceived *post-graduate* effects of a college dialogue group experience. Also, unlike many of the researchers previously cited, this

study focused on the Sustained Dialogue model. We analyzed the perspectives of those who participated in college dialogues in the past as they reflected on their lives in the present. By exploring graduates' own understanding of Sustained Dialogue's lasting impacts, this study focused on the relationship between dialogue participation and a broadly conceptualized civic life.

To examine this interest, the following research question was posed: "How do recent college graduates understand the influence of their college dialogue experience on their post-graduate civic life?" In this study, the term "dialogue" was used to mean a facilitated communication process and the more specific term "ongoing intergroup dialogue" was used to describe small diverse groups of students who met regularly over time during college to build trust and discuss social issues. In contrast, we use the capitalized terms "Intergroup Dialogue" and "Sustained Dialogue" to refer only to those specific models discussed in the literature section above.

## Method

### *Instruments*

This study was conducted in 2008 with participants who had been out of college for approximately three to four years. The study collected data through the use of two instruments. First, a questionnaire was administered electronically to assist in the selection of interview participants. The questionnaire provided basic descriptive information through both closed- and open-ended questions. The second instrument was an interview protocol administered by telephone. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview used open-ended questions in three sections: (a) Your Experience during College, (b) Your Experience Today, and (c) Your Future Plans or Intentions. The in-depth interview, using open-ended questions, was designed to (a) elicit information about participants' understanding of any influence their college dialogue experience had on their post-graduate life, and (b) allow unanticipated concepts to emerge from the data through inductive data analysis. This approach also allowed the researchers to obtain insights only people themselves know because they have lived the experience. Pilot studies were conducted to test data collection and interview protocols.

### *Participants*

The sample was drawn from an initial list of college graduates obtained from the International Institute of Sustained Dialogue (IISD) identifying a total of 103 graduates from the classes of 2002 through 2006. Of those, 35 were excluded because they were pilot study participants, current or former employees of the IISD,

or college graduates known to the researchers. This reduced the pool to 68. Of those, 25 individuals replied to an invitational email and were sent a link to the electronic survey. The one individual who graduated from college in 2006 was excluded because he participated in Sustained Dialogue during his graduate rather than undergraduate years. From the information gathered, researchers confirmed that the remaining 24 individuals participated in dialogue during their undergraduate years. In addition, these individuals met the criteria of having had an "intact dialogue experience" (meaning Sustained Dialogue group participation over time for a minimum of one academic term). This minimum was important to ensure that study participants had not signed up for a dialogue group in college and then neglected to attend. Approximately 90% of study participants met with their Sustained Dialogue group more than twice a month. The study secured both IRB approval as well as permission to use the IISD database for the purpose of identifying the sample.

The 24 participants were recent graduates from the University of Virginia ( $n = 17$ ), Princeton University ( $n = 4$ ), and University of Notre Dame ( $n = 3$ ). The disequilibrium mirrors the IISD's alumni lists, of which the majority of alumni were U.Va graduates. Seventy five percent ( $n = 18$ ) of the participants graduated in 2004 and 2005. Graduates from 2002 and 2003 comprised the remaining twenty five percent ( $n = 6$ ) of the sample. Given that the stereotypical profile of a college dialogue participant is a white female majoring in the social sciences, the social identities of study participants are worth noting. A quarter of the sample majored in either science or engineering, half were male, and more than a third were people of color with the following racial and ethnic self-identification: 63% ( $n = 15$ ) White; 4% ( $n = 1$ ) Korean; 8% ( $n = 2$ ) Hispanic; 4% ( $n = 1$ ) Middle Eastern; 4% ( $n = 1$ ) Multicultural/Multiracial; and 17% ( $n = 4$ ) Black/African American.

### *Procedure*

The principal investigator conducted a content analysis (Babbie, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) of the interview transcriptions. Content analysis was chosen because "suspending one's theoretical presuppositions prior to engagement with the phenomenon under investigation" has well recognized advantages (Cope, 2005, p.177). Given the lack of prior research on the Sustained Dialogue model's effects on post-graduate civic life, this analytic approach offered the benefits of identifying and categorizing the kinds of impacts lasting beyond college.

The data was reviewed and a preliminary list of impacts expressed by the participants was created and then grouped by theme. Open coding was used to analyze participants' articulation of the influence of

their dialogue experience. NVivo software, a computer program designed to analyze qualitative data, was used to sort through the data and assist in refining the coding scheme. Transcript analysis continued and broad domains of dialogue impacts emerged. The coding scheme was tested by the authors as well as an additional researcher and had an inter-rater reliability of 85%.

## Results

The researchers analyzed how dialogue experience influenced participants, with a special focus on civic impacts perceived to last after college graduation. From the data, a total of 131 individual examples were identified. These examples were clustered into themes through an iterative analysis process. This yielded an inventory of 29 possible themes (see Table 1). Further examination of these impact themes resulted in five domains: (a) *cognitions*, (b) *behaviors*, (c) *attitudes*, (d) *skills*, and (e) *hopes and plans*

*for the future*. While personal impacts were observed in the data as well, they were not the focus of this study. Together the list of the domains, themes, and 131 dimensions of civic impacts resulted in a full Inventory of Dialogue Civic Outcomes (available from lead author upon request).

### *Inventory of Dialogue Civic Outcomes*

*Cognitions.* Numerous participants mentioned cognitive outcomes as a result of their college dialogue experiences. Five cognitive themes emerged from the data: effects on academic pursuits; gains in conceptual frameworks; gains in knowledge about how diversity intersects with the workplace; gains in knowledge about intergroup relations grew; and learning to think critically about topics such as power and privilege. For example, one participant who identified himself as white drew on his experience with Sustained Dialogue to analyze his racial identity and how that helped him in the context of a trip to South Africa:

Table 1  
*Inventory of Dialogue Civic Outcomes*

Domains	Themes
Cognitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affected academic pursuits</li> <li>• Learned to think critically</li> <li>• Gained conceptual frameworks about cultural diversity</li> <li>• Gained knowledge about or understanding of intergroup relations</li> <li>• Gained knowledge about how diversity intersects with the workplace</li> </ul>
Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involved in diversity activities at workplace</li> <li>• Helped start dialogue or diversity initiative outside of existing workplace</li> <li>• Impacted interpersonal relations</li> <li>• Developed political or public voice</li> <li>• Engaged in electoral or political activities</li> <li>• Engaged in advocacy</li> <li>• Engaged in volunteerism or service</li> <li>• Affected major life decisions</li> </ul>
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased motivation and interest in diversity issues</li> <li>• Became more open, comfortable with, and/or empathic regarding cultural differences</li> <li>• Changed one's values or experience in relation to social issues</li> </ul>
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For relating to others</li> <li>• For self-reflection</li> </ul>
Hopes and Plans for the Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plans to study or attend graduate school</li> <li>• Intention to use dialogue to lead conversations</li> <li>• Plans to travel or live in another country</li> <li>• Imagines different significant other and/or family relationships</li> <li>• Intends to raise one's children to be open</li> <li>• Plans to engage in community activities or volunteer</li> <li>• Plans to join a civic association</li> <li>• Plans to start a dialogue program with K-12 children</li> <li>• Intends to engage in philanthropy</li> <li>• Plans to "embrace unfamiliarity"</li> <li>• Affects plans for professional work in an organization at the intersection of faith and politics</li> </ul>

Note: This table includes the five domains and 29 impacts. It does not include the 131 dimensions constituting the third level of analysis.

...A place like South Africa is a great example of where...Sustained Dialogue [was] more relevant and valuable. Because I couldn't walk around in that country without being aware of my whiteness, and thinking about my whiteness and thinking about how other people perceive me, and in return, respond to me, and what are the assumptions being made about me? What am I assuming about these other folks? And being very aware of the social baggage and barriers that need to be stripped down before one can even begin to have an honest dialogue with a person...

Other cognitive outcomes focused entirely on the workplace after college and suggested that dialogue impacts have the potential to remain after graduation.

*Behaviors.* Eight behavioral outcomes emerged from the data: involved in diversity activities at work; helped start dialogue or diversity initiatives outside of the workplace; impacts on interpersonal relations; developed political or public voice; engaged in electoral or political activities; engaged in advocacy; engaged in volunteerism or service; and affected major life decisions. Of note is that several of these behaviors involved diversity and interpersonal relations both within and outside of the workplace and that participants felt that Sustained Dialogue taught them how to listen deeply or ask questions. This helped in their relationships with co-workers or classmates. One participant discussed how he thought Sustained Dialogue resulted in his efforts to create cross-functional teams in his workplace. Another participant believed that Sustained Dialogue influenced his practice of promoting dialogue among co-workers and others involved in his workplace. Another participant spoke about her dialogue experience and how it helped her probe conflicting viewpoints on affirmative action policies and prepared her to engage in advocacy work. She believed that Sustained Dialogue helped her to:

...talk to...people from an opposite view, to sort of work through [issues] and recognize that we can't just go out there and advocate. [because]... advocacy without close examination first can be dangerous, and as a person who wants to go into justice and advocacy work, I am better equipped to have those hard conversations with people, and push to create spaces for them...I think Sustained Dialogue was the first experience that kind of planted the seed.

When participants were asked if they could recall any choices or decisions they had made since college that might have been affected by Sustained Dialogue, major life decisions emerged as a theme. For example, one participant explained his decision to quit his job and relocate to a more diverse geographic loca-

tion. He attributed this need for diversity to his Sustained Dialogue experience.

*Attitudes.* Three types of attitudinal outcomes emerged from the data. These included: increased motivation and interest in diversity issues, comfort with cultural differences, and changes in values related to social issues. The impact of this latter theme of changes was summed up by one participant's belief that Sustained Dialogue "changed his worldview." One dimension of this same theme was resistance to majority pressure to assimilate into mainstream culture. For example, a participant described how Sustained Dialogue prepared him as an African American man to manage in predominantly white corporate organizations. In discussing his job after college at a management consulting firm, he spoke of how Sustained Dialogue played a role in his resilience and ability to navigate where other African Americans could not:

...but because I had 2 years of Sustained Dialogue and sort of exploring...my own personal identity and how that identity...relates to other people's identities I was able to get myself through it and just talk through, okay, here's what's going on...

Another participant, now a graduate student at an elite business school, wanted to understand the experiences of his classmates on the topic of ethics in corporations. He stated:

So I get very frustrated...I want to hear my classmate's personal experiences who have been in those international business situations...I want to have a Sustained Dialogue in the classroom...And a lot of times the professors aren't comfortable having that conversation...They want to keep it at a very safe institutional level...I'm hungry to go deeper...

*Skills.* Two skill themes — relating to others and self-reflection — comprised this domain. Together these two themes contained many different examples of acquired or developed skills. Examples of skills relating to others included a number of communication and consensus-building skills, skills to see multiple viewpoints, and public speaking skills. Examples of skills related to self and self-reflection included an ability to reflect on one's own beliefs. For example, one participant currently enrolled in a medical school saw Sustained Dialogue as contributing to her skill of reflecting on her own beliefs:

It opened me up to a little bit more introspection. I think going into Sustained Dialogue, it was easy to have kind of like a holier-than-thou you know perspective on myself, and you know ... How could people be so close-minded, but being in Sustained Dialogue, everyone

was kind of laying themselves open and made themselves subject to criticism and to analysis. And I think at the time, one of the things that I got the most out of it was to be able to look at myself and look at, well, what are the prejudices that I do hold myself.

Participants also developed listening skills, which appeared in many of the interviews. For example, one participant described the skills perceived developing from Sustained Dialogue and how she now had a “more refined sense of listening.”

*Hopes and plans for the future.* While the impacts that participants reported as past or current actions comprised the aforementioned Behavioral Domain, planned actions as well as hopes and other future intentions comprised this final domain. The interview protocol specifically asked participants if their dialogue experience would affect their future plans. Eleven impact themes emerged: including plans to study or attend graduate school; intending to use dialogue to lead conversations; plans to travel or live in another country; imagining different significant other and/or family relationships; intending to raise one’s children to be open; planning to engage in community activities or volunteer; planning to join a civic association; planning to start a dialogue program with K-12 children; intending to engage in philanthropy; planning for professional work in an organization at the intersection of faith and politics; and planning to embrace unfamiliarity. An example of the later includes a participant who grew up eating traditional southern food and described an incident with members of her dialogue group as influencing how she intends to live her life — open to things that are unfamiliar to her:

I think it [Sustained Dialogue] just opened me up...we brought food from our culture [to the pot-luck supper]. And one of the people had brought, he was Jewish so he brought Gefilte fish, and it was just the grossest thing I’ve ever tasted. But...I tried it because that was the point. So now I’m just more open to trying different things...trying to be open to different people in different cultures because...to me it was gross, but to him, it was like his favorite food.

Perhaps a more important finding, and one particularly promising, was that participants believed that Sustained Dialogue affected their plans for how they would raise their children — an ultimate act of hope.

In addition to the Inventory of Dialogue Civic Outcomes, two other patterns were observed: (1) perceived civic impacts occurred across a range of settings or arenas and (2) the nature of the perceived changes may involve a process of transformation of the whole person.

## *Perceived Impacts across a Range of Civic Arenas*

The participants’ discussion of Sustained Dialogue and how it impacted their postgraduate lives appeared to be distributed across a range of settings (See Table 2).

*Educational arenas.* Impacts of dialogue were especially felt in the educational arena. Participants spoke of such impacts at the undergraduate level. As one example, one participant spoke of pursuing and advocating for a Latino studies programs. One participant felt that Sustained Dialogue was a significant factor in her choice to study social work in graduate school. When asked if her academic life would be different in any way if she had not had a Sustained Dialogue experience, she replied:

...I don’t know if I would have still taken that one-credit psychology class and become intrigued with it and wanted to go to social work school...it’s hard to say. But I will say that Sustained Dialogue definitely had a critical role in getting me there, and maybe something else might have gotten me there, but in my life, Sustained Dialogue was it.

*Social arenas.* Impacts of Sustained Dialogue in the social arena included participants’ relationships to social justice, faith, and media. For example, one participant discussed the power structures within the criminal justice system and how she now looks for community activities focused on social justice. She stated that Sustained Dialogue “incubated” her interests and helped her have relationships with others who shared the same focus on social issues. Another area concerning social justice had participants discussing advocating on behalf of social identity groups of which they were not a part. For example, one participant who identified as “straight” talked about his work on justice issues for the gay community:

So that was one community that I probably wouldn’t have otherwise been necessarily that close to, namely the gay community and again because I really believe in dialogue and learning more about other people’s situations and doing what little I can to try and help correct injustice...I’d say Sustained Dialogue has helped me become a more productive member of that community.

*Workplace arenas.* Participants also believed that Sustained Dialogue influenced their engagement within the workplace. One young woman with a self-described previous inclination to work with nonprofits thought her Sustained Dialogue experience “pushed that [inclination] much more to the top of my list.” Another participant spent her first few years



out of college teaching first grade children. She described how she applied the lessons she learned in Sustained Dialogue during college to mediating cray-on disputes with six year olds:

...little kids, their first reaction is not to talk about things... their first reaction is gunna be to either hit someone or to do something back when they have a disagreement. But I really worked on trying to take that dialogue aspect, that I have learned from Sustained Dialogue and bring that to the kids... and talking out the problem... Why did you, why did you bite whoever? [And asking]... why they did that? Okay. And how are you feeling right now? And then get everything out... And it [Sustained Dialogue] works with little kids if you just do it simplified.

Perceived Impacts of Personal Transformation

Aside from the perceived civic impacts of Sustained

Dialogue, participants used a number of phrases suggesting impacts of personal transformation. Examples of this effect included one participant who believed that Sustained Dialogue “affected my personality” and another who believed that Sustained Dialogue affects “all we do” in her contact with other people. Additional phrases suggesting this transformation included statements such as “I can’t quite put my finger on it” or “I can’t really put it into words” or “I can’t point to any one thing...” One participant summed up this repeated refrain in his statement, “It’s just part of me and it just changes how I look at things.”

Overall this study resulted in an Inventory of Dialogue Civic Outcomes — a catalogue of 29 impacts across the five domains of cognitions, behaviors attitudes, skills, and hopes and plans for the future. Additional observations included that civic impacts occurred across several social contexts such as work, and that the impacts suggested a personal

Table 2  
Suggested Framework of Dialogue Civic Outcomes with Examples Drawn from this Study

Domains					
Civic Arenas	Cognitive	Behavioral	Attitudes	Skills	Hopes and Plans
Educational Institutions:	Sunita <sup>2</sup> took a psychology class which led to graduate school.	Emile advocated for the creation of Latino Studies program at his undergraduate school.			
	Julian recognized his business professor’s discomfort talking about personal ethics.				
Workplace:		Emile proposed a Sustained Dialogue (SD) program at his company to increase communication with co-workers and create cross-functional teams to share best practices.	Julian felt that exploring his personal identity in SD helped him resist pressure to assimilate at a management consulting firm and made him able to talk to managers more openly.	Emma-Mae sees herself as a “peace-maker” and believes SD gave her skills to explain to people how others viewed something. She now uses her facilitation skills at work.	Salma plans a career in public interest law. She believes SD will help her understand the concerns on both sides, advocate well, and “impact her ability to be a good lawyer.”
Social:	Jerry learned to think critically about his Whiteness and went to S. Africa with a greater “awareness of social baggage and barriers.”	Emma-Mae, who spent energy being “on alert” for racist or offensive comments, credits SD with making her “less touchy about race” issues and realize that “not everyone was out to get you.”	Sun-Cho learned value of “safe space” to let his down guard and increased motivation/interest in diversity such as “achieving something better in problems of race relations.)	Jocelyn believes SD gave her a “much more refined sense of listening to what people are saying.”	

transformation permeating how participants see themselves and the world around them.

## Discussion

This study set out to explore the question, “*How do college graduates understand the influence of their college dialogue experience on their post-graduate civic life?*” In doing so it extended prior research by studying both the specific model of Sustained Dialogue and the perceived impacts of college dialogue after college. Neither of these two aspects of dialogue previously had examined civic-related outcomes.

### *Dialogue Impacts — an Inventory of Civic Outcomes*

29 themes of perceived impacts of dialogue experience were identified in this study. These themes clustered into cognitions, behaviors, attitudes, skills, and intentions. For example, participants reported increases in critical thinking, knowledge about intergroup relations, interest in diversity issues, empathy regarding cultural differences, voicing their opinions in public, advocacy behaviors, and skills in facilitation and consensus building. Through these themes one sees a curiosity about and a welcoming of difference. Many of the themes of dialogue outcomes suggested by this study with Sustained Dialogue participants confirm findings from prior research with Intergroup Dialogue participants (Nagda, 2006, 2007; Nagda, Kim, et al., 2006; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001; Vasques-Scalera, 1999; Zuñiga et al., 2007). In particular, the inventory extends prior research by identifying potential impacts that 1) last after graduation and 2) extend into a place of employment — both topics warranting future empirical study.

The Inventory of Dialogue Civic Outcomes captures a range of impacts of how dialogue participants perceive their post-graduate life influenced by their college dialogue experience. This approach allowed for two observations or patterns in the data: (1) that the perceived civic impacts occurred across a range of arenas across society and (2) that the nature of the perceived changes can involve a process of transformation that permeates the whole person.

### *Dialogue Impacts of Personal Transformation — “Restraining” Effects*

Dialogue participants told stories of how participating in Sustained Dialogue changed their experience of another person or group — which we term a “restringing effect.” Just as when a violin is re-strung and the instrument’s characteristics, such as tone and timbre make a slightly different sound, so, too, study participants spoke of being subtly changed and hav-

ing a slightly different voice. Some of the restraining may result from what scholars have called transformative learning in which a disorientating experience forces a person to re-examine and make new sense of her world (Mezirow & Associates, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have credited the deep engagement with someone whose experience is very different from one’s own as contributing to personal transformation and to living a “life of commitment” (Parks Daloz et al., 1996). When a participant is “restrung” by her engagement with those who are different and have different life experiences, she may undergo profound change. This restrung individual looks the same as before the transformation but this “human instrument,” just like the violin, emits a slightly different sound. This different voice may join other voices, each unique and trying to locate their parts in a larger social context.

### *Limitations*

There are five limitations to this study. First, the study sample was relatively small — only 24 participants, precluding broad generalization with confidence. Second, since the Sustained Dialogue model is relatively new to campuses, graduates have been out of college only for a few years, precluding a long-term perspective. Third, because the sample was drawn from elite private and public universities, we do not know if the findings apply to graduates of other categories of educational institutions, such as community colleges or minority-serving institutions. Fourth, this study examined the dialogue model of Sustained Dialogue; it is unknown if the reported impacts are generalizable to participants of Intergroup Dialogue, Study Circles, or other dialogue models. Fifth, we did not account for participants’ predispositions. For example, participants’ cognitions, behaviors, etc. could have been pre-existing or attributable to other college or post-college experiences. In addition to the limitations of the design of this research study, there is also an obstacle affecting this research: not knowing about “the quality” of the student-run dialogues during college. While the frequency of dialogues were controlled for this study, the quality of dialogue necessarily was not within the control nor knowledge of the researcher. Future researchers may wish to address this.

### *Implications and Framework for Future Research*

This study demonstrates the impacts that college dialogue participants perceive as having some lasting effect, including civic outcomes in post-graduate life. These outcomes include a wide array of thinking, behaving, and planning for the future. They may also impact how one engages with others in multiple arenas in one’s life. Any civic engagement or undertak-

ing (e.g. community service, neighborhood problem-solving, mediating a condominium board dispute, or writing a letter to a supervisor) all rest on relations and communications with other people.

The Inventory of Dialogue Civic Outcomes may be helpful in developing replication studies and designing survey research, taking into consideration some of the above mentioned limitations. So what are the implications of an inventory of dialogue outcomes that encompassed multiple civic domains? Collectively, they provide the building blocks of a framework of dialogue civic outcomes. The intersections of the domains and civic arenas and sub-arenas suggest a rich framework for understanding the nature of dialogue outcomes. Table 2 outlines a Framework of Dialogue Civic Outcomes by situating examples from the data within a matrix of civic domains and arenas.

Future efforts to fully flesh out this framework hold promise for the “scholarship for the public good” (Saltmarsh, 2009; West, 1993, 2004) as well as education for the public good, defined as “preparation for responsible and effective participation in politics and civil society” (Levine, 2007, p. 99). These are important because they improve our understanding of the relationships between the thoughts and actions of individuals and the impacts of those individuals on our broader society. Lasting impacts may extend into a variety of civic arenas in one’s post graduate life and invite future research.

The Framework of Dialogue Civic Outcomes also provides us with a collective way of seeing how dialogue participants perceive the lasting influences of dialogue on their lives after college. It is the collection or aggregate of these impacts that have implications for a civil society. Given that scholars have argued that a civil society must be made of a pluralism of associations and institutions collectively (Edwards, 2004), any educational intervention designed to have a societal impact must demonstrate effects across such civic arenas. This study suggests that as dialogue participants compose their individual civic lives, they may collectively influence multiple arenas of civil society. Future research, using the specific dimensions found in this study or examples drawn from future Sustained Dialogue studies, may elaborate and enrich this initial framework and its application to civic life.

This study paves the way for future controlled studies of dialogue civic impacts as well as comparison studies of different curricular and co-curricular dialogue models. The Inventory of Dialogue Civic Outcomes may be used to study larger samples. If dialogue is empirically found to spread into many aspects of an individual’s way of thinking and acting, what would that mean for the community in which

that individual resides? What would such spread of civic ideas and behaviors mean to a polis? When impacts such as thoughts, behaviors, and skills are civic in nature, then the society holds the promise of becoming not just civil but civically renewed, with thoughtful, respectful, and participatory citizens (Sirianni & Friedland, 2005). Such citizens are more likely to participate in the shared communication and associated living that is the essence of democracy (Dewey, 1916).

## Conclusion

The last decade has witnessed a spread of the campus dialogue models and more research is needed to study these practices that contribute to civic outcomes. This study offers promising results regarding sustained intergroup dialogue. The study generated an Inventory of Dialogue Civic Outcomes yielding 29 themes of perceived impacts of dialogue experience. Many of the outcomes suggested by this study with Sustained Dialogue participants confirm findings from prior research with Intergroup Dialogue participants (Nagda, 2006, 2007; Nagda, Kim, et al., 2006; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001; Vasques-Scalera, 1999; Zuñiga et al., 2007). This study also extends prior research by identifying potential lasting impacts both (1) after graduation and (2) into the post graduate employment workplace — two topics warranting future research. In addition, patterns emerged from the data suggest that (1) impacts occurred across a range of civic arenas and (2) dialogue experience may be transformative and related to other aspects of our lives “in all that we do” — two phenomena also inviting future study.

If sustained intergroup dialogue contributes to individuals becoming more intellectually curious (as in learning about other cultures and histories), cognitively sophisticated (as in media literacy), more emotionally empathic toward others (as in respecting multiple truths), and more skilled in communicating across differences, would not those individuals be better citizens and contribute more to a global society? Would they not be more equipped to engage with public issues such as neighborhood crime prevention or global climate solutions? Colleges and universities have an imperative before them — the study and implementation of the best educational practices to graduate prepared and participatory citizens. The stakes are high and there is no better time than now.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The interview protocol is available from Ande Diaz (adiaz@rwu.edu).

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this table.

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