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RING BY SPRING: THE IMPACT OF MARRIAGE ON
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business
Department of Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Jessica Clark

May 2014

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Jessica Clark

entitled

Ring by Spring: The Impact of Marriage on Undergraduate Student Engagement

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
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Abstract

Responding to a gap in literature regarding married students and undergraduate student engagement, this study explored the experiences of eight married undergraduate students at a faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. In an effort to answer the question, “What is the impact of marriage on undergraduate student engagement?,” students shared their adjustments to married life in college; their interactions with peers, family, and university personnel; and their attitudes and behaviors in academic and social activities. In this qualitative study with a grounded theory approach, an original theory and a visual paradigm of the theory was derived from the data in order to represent the themes of marital adjustment and student engagement, which emerged from the findings of the study and connected with the literature. The results of this study suggested that marriage causes a number of factors, such as added responsibilities beyond academic studies; limited time; shifted priorities; and altered interactions with friends, family, and the campus environment. Students connected all of the factors with their student engagement, most often referring to limitation on available time and energy and/or a change of interest from which they invested in their coursework and social interactions.

Acknowledgements

“Truth is between us, in relationship, to be found in the dialogue of knowers and the knowns who are as independent but accountable selves.” –Parker Palmer, To Know As We Are Known

More important than increasing my own knowledge, fulfilling a requirement for a degree, or contributing to my professional field, is the act of seeking wisdom for the purpose of serving others. This act of worship was not meant to do alone. Rather, it is the challenge and support of a community that helps me learn and develop in my quest for knowledge and service. To those who have given me courage to reach beyond what I thought possible; “I thank my God every time I remember you” (Philippians 1:3, NIV).

My family: You have nurtured my growth more than anyone else. You had enough faith in me to stand behind every one of my endeavors, even when you did not understand my draw to certain paths. Your encouragement and unceasing support have carried me through every obstacle life has thrown my way. You never fail to meet me at the finish line to celebrate each victory. There are not enough words to share my gratitude for your presence and guidance in my life.

My dearest friends: So many memories flood my mind when I think of each of you. We have walked through seasons of trial, discouragement, triumph, peace, joy, and celebration. I can truly say I have flourished because of you. You make me a better person as you speak words of wisdom, encouragement, and tough love. Without you, my learning would be incomplete and my desire for education would be minute. You bring richness to life that cannot be replaced. Thank you.

My professors: I once heard it said that learning comes not as a result of lectures; rather, true learning occurs when a student is changed by her teachings. You have demonstrated a care beyond curriculum, and you have modeled true mentorship. Most importantly, you created a safe environment for me to strive for greatness, learn from my failed attempts, and walk in the truth that my value is in Christ. Thank you for the numerous ways you have spoken into my life and contributed to the development, as a whole-person.

My God: The scriptures remind us, “He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure” (Isaiah 33:6, NIV). You are the center of my desire for wisdom and life. Without you, my every thought and action would be in vain; lest I never value anything above you. You are the creator and the essence of everything that is good and worthwhile. Thank you for your unrelenting truth and love. May I always be humbled by your greatness, and may you always be glorified.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Marriage requires commitment, collaboration, communication, intentional planning, and creativity—especially when one or both spouses are in college (Krish, 2011; Nielsen, Pinsof, Rampage, Solomon, & Goldstein, 2004). The investment of time, energy, and emotions in marriage can influence students' academic priorities, as well as personal and social goals (Fincham & Ming, 2010). The time and effort students choose to invest into academic and extra-curricular activities and into their relationships with peers, staff, and faculty—or student engagement—contributes to learning and personal development (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1995). Moreover, Astin (1984) made the case that any influence on student engagement also impacts student development. Therefore, if marriage places demands on students' time, energy, and priorities, then the possible impact of marriage on student engagement must be studied in order to support the development and success of married students.

Married Undergraduate Students

Unless otherwise indicated, “married students” or any like term used in the present study referred to traditional-age students who were in a legal marriage during their undergraduate studies. This could include undergraduate students who were either married to another student or to a non-student. Students who were married prior to

enrollment and remained married throughout college, and students who got married during college qualified for the population discussed in the study.

Challenges for married undergraduate students. Students who decide to marry during college sometimes suffer from the common assumptions of peers, family, and faculty that they lack seriousness toward academic and career goals and that they have not thought through the realities of marriage (Alsaden, 2011; Brown, 2013; Hepker & Cloyd, 1966; Steinburg, 2011). While these notions may be true for some students, many married students demonstrate stronger motivation and focus toward academic, career, and family goals than their single counterparts (Chilman & Meyer, 1966). Several students have not only recognized that college can create strenuous conditions for marriage, but they have also explained that their spouse has been their primary source of academic, financial, and emotional support (Alsaden, 2011; Krish, 2011). Some students explain that as a result of marriage, they use their time more responsibly, view their coursework more seriously, and even achieve higher grades (Taviano, 2006). Similarly, Van Meter and Agronow (1982) and Hepker and Cloyd (1974) argued that spousal support, marital adjustment, and ability to recognize priorities are important factors in achievement of academic and personal goals among married college students.

Another presupposition that married students often encounter among their peers is that once married, students give up their social lives and grow distant from their single friends. In Alsaden's (2011) article, a married student recognized the effects of this stigma: "(Being married) does set you apart, like being a commuter student. It doesn't mean you can't be social and integrate, it just sets you apart a little." Campus Explorer (2014) – an informational website featuring a database on over 8,000 colleges and

resources to answer questions regarding decisions for college – recommended that married students stay connected with fellow students by participating in campus activities, organizations, sports, or other activities. However, engaging in campus and student activities can be easier for some married students than for others, depending on their individual schedules, priorities, and situations.

Meehan and Negy (2003) discovered in a comparative study of married and single students that married students experienced more stress than unmarried students in relation to academic and social adjustment. Regnerus, author of *Premarital Sex in America*, explained that married undergraduate students were forced to adjust to new responsibilities and roles as well as balance their investment in their coursework and marriage (as cited in Steinberg, 2011). Research indicates that the addition of marriage related responsibilities and roles to those already present in student life places limitations on students' available time and energy, leading to reprioritization of goals and involvement (Meehan & Negy, 2003; Van Meter & Agronow, 1982). In order to reduce strain from multiple roles and to achieve personal and familial goals, Van Meter and Agronow (1982) suggested that students develop the ability to recognize their priorities and organize activities accordingly.

Validation for Research Problem

Meehan and Negy (2003) noted a continual increase in college student matriculation. Referring to calculations by the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), the researchers pointed out that overall enrollment at colleges in the United States rose by 55% between 1973 and 1993. Throughout the increase, married college student enrollment maintained a steady 7% of college admission (Meehan & Negy, 2003). The

fixed percentage of married student enrollment amidst significantly growing numbers in overall college admission denotes a rise in the matriculation of married college students.

In spite of steady rising numbers of married college students, gaps exist in current research on traditional-aged married students. Researchers have given little attention to married students for the past several decades. Early studies explored adjustment, added role responsibilities, and marital and academic satisfaction in undergraduate and graduate married students. Though it is evident that married students still experience adjustment issues as they attempt to successfully balance marriage, college, and changing social relationships, specific circumstances have certainly changed in recent decades (Meehan & Negy, 2003).

Adding to the gap in current research on married undergraduate students is the absence of research on the relationship between married students and student engagement. Research shows that student engagement and sense of community correlate with a better overall college experience, including the attainment of learning outcomes (Tieu et al., 2010). Tinto's (1988) Theory of Student Departure speculated that students enter college with predetermined attitudes regarding their expected level of engagement and their personal goals. However, these expectations are continually transformed as a result of the student's interactions with members of the campus community and institutional academic and social structures (Tieu et al., 2010).

Research Question

Colleges and universities have the power to create formative environments and constructive experiences for students as they adjust to new roles and responsibilities during the college years (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). While higher education

institutions can neither mandate the level of effort students invest nor control the pre-existing factors that influence student development, campus environments and structures can encourage student engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Since student engagement is considered a contributing factor in student learning and personal development (Astin, 1984, 1999; Axelson & Flick, 2011; Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler, 2005; Kuh, 1995), it is important for institutions to seek to understand factors that influence students' engagement. To that end, the research question guiding the current investigation was, "How is undergraduate student engagement impacted by marriage?"

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Researchers and scholars recognize student engagement as a key component of student learning (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Handelsman et al., 2005). Though substantial research exists on student engagement, few studies focus on undergraduate married students (Meehan & Negy, 2003). This chapter highlights key adjustment issues and needs of married students as well as the importance of studying the impact of marriage on undergraduate student engagement.

Research Practices

The researcher worked with a research librarian to locate literature on married students and student engagement. Research journal databases used for the literature review included Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC) and JSTOR. Search engines used for locating academic publications were Google Scholar and Google Books. Library research tools and databases used were Taylor University Zondervan Library's Primo Research Station and WorldCat. In order to maximize search results, the researcher and librarian used commands around key words that were specific to each database and research tool. For example, one search command entered in WorldCat was su:college student* ti:(married* OR marriage) kw:"student engagement" yr:2000..2013. This command signified a search for articles published between the years 2000 to 2013, that contained "marriage" or "married" in the title of the article, and college student in the

subject heading, and student engagement in the text. Additionally, simpler commands, such as ““marriage” AROUND “undergraduate student”” were used in various research tools listed above. While the search produced some resources, it revealed a significant gap in the literature pertaining to married undergraduate students and their engagement.

Limitations in Literature

A limitation placed on the current study was that most of the research on married undergraduate students dates prior to the 1980s. Many of the early studies on married students focused on male veterans who were returning to college after serving in a war (Hepker & Cloyd, 1974). The characteristics of those students and some of the adjustments they experienced during college may differ slightly from those of current married college students. However, research suggests that married students still face challenges adjusting to new responsibilities and altered social roles (Meehan & Negy, 2003; Pittman, Kerpelman, & Solheim, 2001; Van Meter and Agronow, 1982). Though various research articles informed the current project, Meehan and Negy’s (2003) “Undergraduate Students’ Adaptation to College” served as a prominent resource for the literature review, given its status as the most significant, current, scholarly article that concentrated specifically on married undergraduate students.

Married Students

Academic success. While acknowledging the additional challenges posed by being married while in college, 99% of student husbands and 96% of student wives in Chilman and Meyer’s (1966) study completed their degree after marriage without taking a break from enrollment at any time. Chilman and Meyer (1966) argued that married students exemplified personality traits that indicated higher levels of academic

motivation. In addition, Chilman and Meyer (1966) noted that they place greater emphasis on a need for intellectual achievement than single students.

In a study conducted by Chambliss (1961), 61% of married students reported favorable grades as compared to their performance prior to marriage. In the same study, 33% of the students identified no effect on their grades due to marriage, 4% claimed uncertainty toward any impact, and only 2% reported negative consequences on their academic performance due to marriage (Chambliss, 1961). A comparative study also revealed that married students may achieve higher grades than unmarried students (Ma & Wooster, 1979). However, there was no conclusive evidence that marriage was directly related to academic success (Cohen, King, & Nelson, 1963; Chilman & Meyer, 1966).

Adjustments of marriage and college. Adjusting to the demands of higher education can be difficult for all students (Lasode & Awote, 2014). Students are subject to stressors—such as time-management, social activities, sleep deprivation, and financial concerns—which can affect academic performance (Womble, 2010). In connection with such factors, Chickering (1993) proposed seven areas in which college students commonly experience adjustment and development. Academic responsibilities, emotional management, integrity and identity development, newfound autonomy, and new social experiences cause students to adjust in different ways (Chickering, 1993).

Roles and responsibilities. Marriage places extra challenges on students as they balance academic and familial responsibilities and adjust to changing living situations and social roles (Meehan & Negy, 2003). However, institutions and researchers devote little attention to recognizing adjustment issues specific to married students, who are

often presented with additional responsibilities and roles (Meehan & Negy, 2003).

Furthermore, research rarely points to the ways in which married students might need added support in order to achieve academic success and continued personal development (Marshall & King, 1966; Meehan & Negy, 2003).

Meehan and Negy (2003) noted that married college students experienced “moderate difficulties adjusting to the demands of higher education relative to unmarried students” (p. 670). Such complications for married students could be attributed to role orientation and added adult responsibilities, which traditional college students do not typically encounter to the same degree (Busselen & Busselen, 1975). Married college women sometimes combine the responsibilities of educational training and career preparation with high expectations for family and household roles (Van Meter & Agronow, 1982). Married students could also experience strain from conflict between spouses, feelings of exhaustion from balancing roles, and bitterness toward unequally shared household work (Pittman et al., 2001). Without spousal support and shared responsibilities at home, married students and their families are more likely to experience stress and tension. These added responsibilities and roles cause married students to reprioritize the effort they put toward academic, social, personal, and family responsibilities and activities.

The challenge of balancing responsibilities at home as well as academic responsibilities and personal and social needs is consistent with McCubbin and Patterson’s (1984) Family Stress Model. The model stated that a stressful situation, for example adjusting to college, placed limitations on a student’s resources, such as time and energy, as well as his or her ascribed value and investment into the event (college).

Applied to married students, the model implies that the demands of college and marriage would interfere with the time, energy, and motivation with which married students could invest in academic and extracurricular experiences. Additional responsibilities, new priorities, and less available time cause married students to limit or restrict their engagement in activities that are unrelated to their academic and personal goals (Busselen & Busselen, 1975).

Social separation. Because of their increased responsibilities, married students tend to devote more of their resources to academic achievement and personal wellbeing and fewer to social involvement and institutional commitment (Meehan & Negy, 2003). Chambliss (1961) explained that married students expressed decreased interest and access to social activities on campus. Although married students in the study exhibited a decreased desire to participate in social activities on campus, the findings also indicated a feeling that married students needed some type of community (Chambliss, 1961).

Another challenge to married students' on-campus involvement is that they typically commute due to a lack of university housing accommodations for married students and families. Astin's (1984) research indicated that place of residence impacts student engagement and learning. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) explained that residential students exhibited higher levels of student engagement than commuter students. Students who lived on campus also benefitted from easier access to university resources as well as more frequent opportunities to interact with peers, staff, and faculty. These factors, along with others such as off-campus work and familial responsibilities, further separate commuting students from the campus community and limit married students' time and ability to invest in educational activities, such as

coursework, study tours, or academic committees (Kuh et al., 2006). Altman and McFarlane (1960) explained that many college deans were concerned that married students did not receive the intangible benefits of on-campus living, as they were isolated from—and less able than residential students to contribute to—the campus community (as cited in Ma & Wooster, 1979, p. 106).

In addition to detachment from social life *on* campus, married students reported experiencing detachment from social life *off* campus. Married students are often viewed differently by peers. Additionally, differing stages of life between married and single students can create difficulty for the two students groups to relate with one another. This is because their single peers view married students differently. These alienations can result in a sense of loss of social identity (Chambliss, 1961). Such changes in social interactions should be considered, because students' interpersonal relationships—particularly with peers, staff, faculty, family, and mentors—both on and off campus effect student satisfaction, persistence, success, and development (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 2006).

Supportive factors in adjustments. Married students generally demonstrate lower levels of social adjustment and institutional attachment as compared to unmarried students (Meehan and Negy, 2003). Yet research shows that married students with more perceived social support exhibited higher levels of adjustment to college than married students with lower levels of social support (Meehan and Negy, 2003). Kuh et al. (2006) recognized the role of social networks and a sense of belonging in student adjustment, satisfaction, and success in college. In a similar way, college student learning and personal development benefit from higher levels of student engagement in university

academic and social activities (Yin & Lei, 2007). Because of this positive relationship, the current study aimed to understand the changes marriage causes on undergraduate student engagement.

Busselen and Busselen (1975) urged colleges to recognize the unique adjustments and challenges married students experience and to adapt some university services to meet those needs. Meehan and Negy (2003) underscored the importance of the preparedness of university counselors to help married students adjust to new roles and to find constructive ways to manage and decrease stress related to college. Student-faculty interaction, and support services from the university—such as counseling, childcare, and classes or workshops on family finance and study skills—could be helpful tools of adjustment for married undergraduate students (Womble, 2010). Meehan and Negy (2003) suggested that higher education faculty and staff should be equipped to respond to the unique needs and challenges that married students encounter. Thus, higher education professionals need to obtain an understanding of married student needs and how they impact married student engagement and learning, in order to best support married students and their unique adjustment needs.

Student Engagement

Some scholars claim that the terms “student involvement” and “student engagement” are essentially synonymous (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Others argue that the definition of student involvement relates directly to student interest in and dedication to studying. Those who make this argument also claim that student engagement encompasses student contribution to educationally beneficial activities beyond studying, as well as the student’s interaction with peers and faculty. For the purpose of the current

study, “student engagement” will refer to the level of participation and interest students exhibit toward learning and their connection to their classes, institution, and peers (Axelson & Flick, 2011).

Elements of student engagement. The quality of students’ experiences with engagement in academic and campus life is a significant predictor of university adjustment (Tieu et al., 2010). Astin (1984) recognized a link between the quality and quantity of effort and student learning. Specifically, the physical and psychological energy students invest into their academic activities influences their learning outcomes (Axelson & Flick, 2011). The I+E=O model is Astin’s (1993) conceptual framework for studying college student development. In I+E=O:

Inputs refer to the characteristics of a student at the times of initial entry; *environment* refers to the various programs policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed; and *outcomes* refers to the student’s characteristics *after* interacting with the environment. (Astin, 1993, p. 7)

The I+E=O model often serves as a theoretical basis for research on student experience. Among other factors, Astin (1984) acknowledged student-faculty interactions, place of residence, and academic involvement, including time and energy invested in the learning experience, as strong predictors of student learning.

Although a conclusively causal relationship between student engagement, academic achievement, and personal development has not yet been demonstrated, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2013) assessed student behaviors, which were positively correlated with desired learning outcomes. The behaviors measured

included faculty-student contact, involvement in collective learning experiences, and high-impact learning experiences. In addition to student behaviors, the NSSE also gauged institutional factors, such as a “supportive campus environment,” that affect student engagement and learning (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). When defining student engagement, Axelson and Flick (2011) also emphasized the responsibility of higher education institutions to provide environments suitable for the facilitation of student learning.

Research associates high levels of student engagement with student achievement (Carini et al., 2006). Handelsman et al. (2005) and Astin (1984) argued that effective teaching encourages students to invest their interest, time, and energy in learning.

Additionally, it is helpful for teachers to understand the importance of student engagement when working with individual students and when planning coursework and activities. As cited in Handselman et al. (2005), Chism (2002) reported challenges in accurately assessing levels of engagement solely based on behavioral indicators.

Therefore, one might consider ways to evaluate not only behavioral engagement, but also the extent of students’ cognitive and emotional commitment to learning (Axelson & Flick, 2011).

In addition to student behaviors, Archer and Lamnin (1985) and Frazier and Schauben (2010) highlighted the need to explore other sources of stress on college campuses, including lack of social support. Recent updates to the NSSE included assessment of the quality of student-peer and student-faculty interactions, effective teaching practices, enriching learning opportunities, and factors of academic challenge, such as higher-level thinking and reasoning (NSSE, 2013). The present study drew from

the key elements of student engagement identified in the NSSE and in other research mentioned.

Summary

As discussed in previous sections, married students encounter a number of factors that affect their ability to invest time and energy into social and educational activities (Busselen & Busselen, 1975; Meehan & Negy, 2003, Tieu et al., 2010). The perceptions students build regarding institutional support for their academic goals and social needs influence their satisfaction with the university and their willingness to engage in these activities (Kuh et al., 2006; Meehan & Negy, 2003). Furthermore, student engagement plays a key role in student learning and personal development (Carini et al., 2006; Handelsman et al., 2005; Kuh et al., 2006; Yin & Lei, 2007).

Though institutions may not have control over some influences on student engagement and learning, such as predisposed attitudes or students' choices to pursue romantic relationships, universities have the opportunity to create environments, activities, and communities that cultivate learning (Axelson and Flick, 2011; Busselen & Busselen, 1975). More specifically, educators are better able to foster student development when they are aware of individual student needs (Astin, 1984; Handelsman et al., 2005). Thus, factors that influence student engagement must be considered in order to understand and provide for married students' priorities and needs, and to encourage student engagement among married undergraduates.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Design

The current qualitative study employed a grounded theory approach with a systematic interview design in order to gain an in-depth understanding of student experiences and perspectives with marriage during undergraduate studies (Turner, 2010). Grounded theory is used when no existing theory explains a specific phenomenon or people group (Creswell, 2008). Though many theories describe student engagement and adaptation to college, no existing theories were specifically relevant to married undergraduate students and student engagement. Interviews were used in the study to gather detailed information related to students' levels of engagement in college prior to and during undergraduate marriage. The ultimate goal in implementing grounded theory design was to derive a theoretical understanding through the process of data collection and analysis.

The researcher used qualitative research with a grounded theory design to explain elements of events, activities, interactions, and experiences. As connections were formed between elements, the researcher interpreted the data and attained an understanding of how a particular group of people in a specific setting was affected by such experiences (Creswell, 2008; Moustakas, 1994). The anticipated result in the inquiry was that the

discoveries would reveal common threads by which a theory of factors related to both marriage and student engagement could be fashioned.

Many of the studies focused on student engagement used the NSSE as an instrument of assessing student engagement and applied its longitudinal data to the comparison of various student sub-populations. The population included in the present research was not large enough to obtain a meaningfully-sized sample to use NSSE as a tool. However, the researcher implemented Kuh's (2003) delineation of student engagement to explore levels of married student participation in academic, social, and campus interactions, as well as their perceptions of institutional factors such as environmental support for student learning. The NSSE benchmarks included the level of academic achievement fostered by the institution, the institution's efforts of enrichment of educational experiences, a supportive campus environment, active and collaborative learning behaviors, and student-faculty interaction (Kuh, 2003). These identifiers guided interview questions, which were aimed specifically at discerning student engagement prior to and after marriage. The questions were explorative in nature, rather than focused on supporting existing theories and research findings.

Participants

Eight undergraduate students at a four-year, faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest participated in the study. The institution consisted of approximately 3,000 undergraduate students on the main campus (U.S. News, 2014). The college is a residential community, including the option of on-campus apartment housing for married students.

Participants were determined by convenience-based quota sampling. Students were between 18 and 23 years of age, which is traditional college age. Gender balance was somewhat maintained, with five female and three male participants, which was representative of the student body at the university, with 64% female and 36% male student enrollment (U.S. News, 2014). Additionally, participants in the study maintained a full course load both prior to marriage and during marriage, and they were making progress in a bachelor-degree program. Full-time students were included in the study to ensure that they had adequate experience with undergraduate studies before and after marriage from which they could compare their perceived levels of student engagement.

Context. In order to create an environment conducive for reflection, individual interviews took place in a quiet space on campus. The interviews were conducted separately in order to allow students to share their experiences without the influence of peers. Similarly, interviewing *individuals* who were married, rather than married couples, helped to create a safe situation for participants to accurately disclose their experiences without risk of causing marital disagreement.

Procedures

Students were recruited through email contact. The email included a general description of the study, the purpose of research on the topic, and the expected benefits of the study. Students participated as volunteers and did not receive direct prompting or compensation for their contribution. However, in recognition of the time commitment involved and in an effort to raise interest in participation, an incentive was offered. Students who participated in an interview were entered into a drawing for a gift card to a

general merchandise store. The winner was determined and announced after the data was analyzed and the project was completed and approved for publication.

Once selected, participants signed a letter of informed consent. Participants were reminded of the purpose and anticipated benefits of the study and were offered a chance to ask questions before the interview began. Participants were also informed that the interview would be audio-recorded to enable transcription for data analysis.

Data Analysis

The audio recording of each interview was transcribed by a volunteer and was coded by the researcher. Grounded theory includes three stages of coding, called open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, all of which the researcher employed. During the open coding process, the researcher read through the transcripts and identified key themes as categories and subsequent details as subcategories. The researcher then used the axial coding process, by labeling a core category as the centerpiece to the other categories. In this process, the researcher also classified other categories as causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, and strategies/consequences. Causal conditions are circumstances that influence the core category, while context includes specific situations that impact strategies. Intervening conditions include general contextual conditions that influence strategies, and strategies are specific actions or interactions caused by the core phenomenon. Finally, consequences are the outcomes of employing the strategies (Creswell, 2008). These items are displayed in a paradigm in chapter four. Lastly, in the selective coding phase, the researcher comprised a written theory regarding the interrelationship between categories.

Chapter 4

Results

Citing a variety of experiences from marriage and college and the interaction between the two, eight students offered insight into the ways in which marriage impacted their student engagement. Four themes emerged from the data. Subcategories were placed under each theme according to related content within each concept. The results provided a deeper understanding of students' experiences with marriage during college and the ways they have been impacted through these experiences.

Theory Development

Student engagement in the current study was defined by each student's description of personal input, campus environment, learning experiences, and social interactions, which were derived from the NSSE (NSSE, 2013). Any element identified in the open coding process either connected to one of these areas of student engagement or was consistent among participants. During selective coding, each category was assigned to a role in the paradigm, which helped the researcher arrive to an understanding of how the themes interacted (see Figure 1). Themes that emerged from the research were analyzed in order to determine the possible impact of undergraduate marriage on student engagement. A theory was ultimately created to describe the themes and how they relate to one another. The subcategories provided a deeper understanding of each theme and the specific ways in which participants described changes they experienced after marriage.

Figure 1 displays a diagram including all themes and subcategories that emerged from the data. Titles and arrows are used to indicate connections between themes.

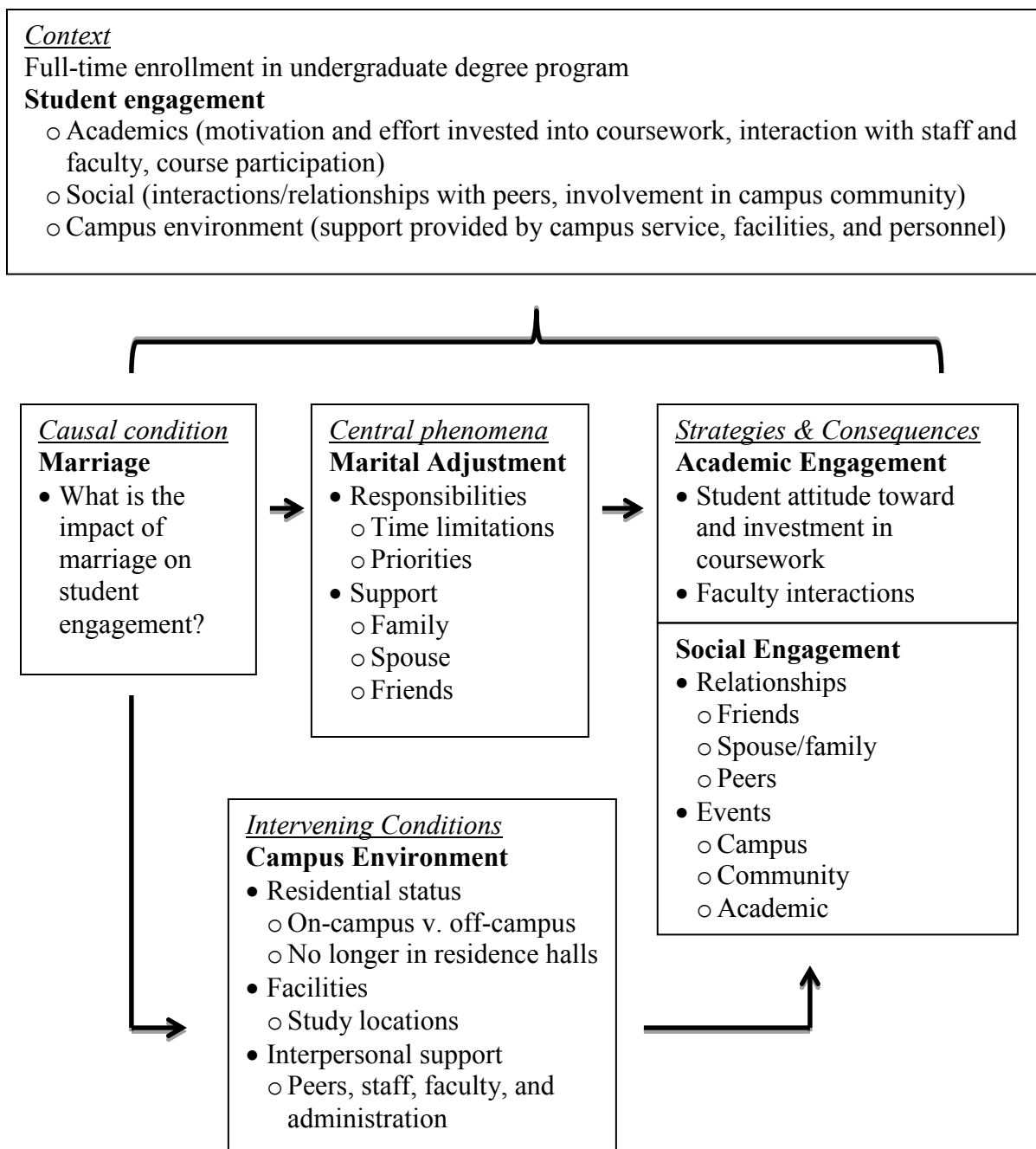


Figure 1. Axial coding: Paradigm model of marriage and undergraduate student engagement (SE).

Theory. Married students underwent an array of changes in relationships, responsibilities, goals, and demands on time, which were caused by college and marriage. Meanwhile, students constantly interacted with the social and academic structures within a campus environment. All of these factors played challenging or supportive roles in the students' abilities to adapt to altering priorities, responsibilities, and relationships. Thus, the culmination of undergraduate studies, marriage, and interactions with the campus environment influenced a student's approach to academic and social engagement, which affected student development.

Marital Adjustments

Occurring a total of 69 times within the eight interviews, marital adjustment materialized as a key theme in the study. Five of eight students identified marriage during college as a "positive experience overall" and "good transition from college to the real world." However, all participants recognized that marriage in itself required adjustment and added a unique twist to the college experience. Participants alluded to marital adjustment as an influencer of other themes that arose, such as social and academic engagement. Due to the number of themes arising from the subject, marital adjustment played the role of "central phenomena."

Responsibilities. Within the marital adjustment theme, all eight participants discussed responsibilities as a product of marriage and as an influence on student engagement. Responsibilities relating to finances, household, and family were mentioned a total of 29 times throughout the interviews; hence, responsibility surfaced as a significant subcategory. One student described the experience in simple terms: "Being a married student, I realized I got busier—just because of work and household things."

Almost every student explained that he or she had to get a job—or additional jobs—due to increased financial responsibility, in terms of combined debt, school bills, and living expenses. Two students compared the time commitments of a full academic load, work, and other “real life” responsibilities to a full-time work schedule of at least 40 hours per week.

Time limitations. All eight participants spoke of time as a limited resource to apply to studies, relationships, and work. The subcategory was specifically mentioned 19 times. One student named a number of constraints on time and the respective implications:

[Marriage] definitely had an impact on my schoolwork and my engagement with friends because as a full-time student you have minimum time with your friends to begin with. But when you get married you pretty much have to scratch all your friends to spend time with your spouse. Then there is work on top of that; you have to have some kind of income for expenses for food and stuff.

Similar to this statement, almost half of the occurrences of the subcategory “time limitations” were described in direct connection to reduced time with friends, family, and schoolwork. In addition, this challenging experience was presented often with an expressed need for the student to reevaluate his or her priorities, then to plan accordingly.

Priorities. All but two participants explained the need to reprioritize their commitments. Several students spoke of their spouses becoming their first priorities and responsibilities. One explained, “[My spouse’s] needs come before everyone else’s.” A couple students shared that they changed their sleeping and homework habits in order to align with their spouses’ schedules. However, this theme was articulated most often by

students as a general need to prioritize the ways in which they spent their time and efforts, in order to reflect that which they valued most, including academics, friends, and family.

Support from family and friends. Six of the eight participants expressed the importance of the support they received from family members. One student shared, “[we have a] really good relationship, and I enjoy the support of being able to ask for prayer requests and just keep in touch.” Students spoke often of their spouse as a key supporter through marriage and college. One student explained the personal support system between the two spouses:

I think we have been able to support each other through it. Like, we have had a really busy week with classes and tests and such. [...] I know [my spouse] has got my back and is praying for me with all the different tests I have, and vice versa. We really have a good support system, I think.

Other participants spoke of the academic support given to them by their spouse.

Describing spousal encouragement for academic motivation and discipline, one student said, “[My spouse] is a really good support in that academic sense.”

In addition to emotional and academic support from family members, a few participants also noted personal support from their friends. One student said, “Our friends have been very accepting of our marriage.” Other students found support in other married students, rather than their single friends. Describing a support system among married couples in the married housing community one student explained, “We are going over to each other’s houses and doing dinner together and praying for each other and encouraging each other and spurring each other.” Referring to both friends and family,

one student explained, “I would say it’s been nice to have a support system, because [marriage has] been a huge transition, obviously.” Overall, students cited social and spousal support as an important role in helping them adjust to marriage and college.

Academic Engagement

Whether talking about classes, homework, interactions with faculty, or academic performance, each student noted a change in his or her academic engagement following marriage. The theme occurred a total of 34 times throughout the student interviews. Though limited time and additional responsibilities posed a challenge for married students, many of them expressed that the reality of marriage and life after college also spurred motivation for academic work. Students explained that such a newfound motivation resulted from an increased awareness of the value and brevity of their college experience and their new ability to better realize connections between their coursework and “real life” situations. One student reflected this understanding in the following statement, “Now that I’m married and it’s pretty much senior year, the reality that I’m not going to be here much longer is settling in. I have definitely become more engaged with my classes and interested in my learning.” This account captured the overall experience most students articulated. However, participants also provided more in-depth descriptions of both the challenges and benefits they have experienced in their academic engagement since marriage.

Coursework. Two students demonstrated a decrease in motivation and engagement in coursework. Explaining how maintaining multiple jobs and time with spouse and friends influenced her academic approach, one of the two students shared, “I don’t study as much. I don’t spend as much time on homework as in the past, because I

have more responsibility now.” In spite of decreased effort, that student maintained “good grades.” When discussing the challenge in balancing a job, school, other responsibilities, and a marriage, the other student said, “So, just prioritizing these things, I guess. And so, it comes down to sacrificing your education to spend time with your spouse, or vice versa.” Consequently, that student experienced a decrease in grade point average (GPA) and had to delay graduation by a semester in order to retake several classes. Though only two students experienced negative effects on academic engagement as a result of marriage, those students spoke of that change as a significant part their experience as a married student.

In contrast, many students explained that they put *more* value and energy into their classes. In other words, they were “more serious” about their education and it became “more real” to them. Several students said they finished their homework while on campus, so they could utilize their time at home for relationships and household responsibilities. One student said, “With this routine set, I have a lot of time to do homework and study. It’s increased substantially. So, there’s also a substantial increase [in performance] academically.” Similarly, other students explained that they were able to either maintain or increase their GPA after marriage. Some students explained that their spouse played a significant role as supporter and motivator for them to invest time and energy into their learning experience. In addition to attributing their improved academic engagement and success to marriage, several participants—since they were upperclassmen—speculated that these occurrences might also connect with their progression in their academic program.

Faculty interactions. Along with approaches toward coursework, six of the eight participants expressed changes in their interactions with staff and faculty members since marriage. Overall, students summarized their interactions with faculty since marriage as either “about the same as before” or “improved,” “better,” and “more trusting.” No participant identified any negative faculty interactions since marriage. These changes appeared in relation to the quality of the student-faculty interactions, rather than frequency of interactions.

For instance, several students said they were speaking in class discussions more, as their professors encouraged them to share their perspectives. One student explained,

They are aware of my personal life and I’m married. So they play off that in class [...] that I might have experience that would support what they are trying to say, and will often ask me what I think based on my personal experience.

In addition to in-class interactions, students interpreted their recent interactions with faculty as being more “equals.” One student explained, “There is a different level of respect,” and “I can relate with them more, because most of them are married.” Similarly, another student explained a new friendship with a professor and family, which would not have happened if the young couple was not married.

Social Engagement

Emerging as another significant theme, students spoke of changes in their social engagement a total of 67 times. One student said, “Definitely socially, I don’t spend as much time with other people. I really have to make an effort to spend time with others.” That statement was also made in the context of limited time, added responsibilities, and altered priorities, which were identified as byproducts of marriage. Many students

suggested similar connections between their marital adjustment and their engagement in their relationships and events.

Relationships. The subcategory of “relationships” emerged as a key aspect of the married students’ experiences, as it was discussed a total of 48 times throughout the student interviews. One student explained, “It’s just a whole new level of relationship. And the older I get, the more I get that relationships matter more than anything.”

Family. Students’ relationships and interactions with their family, including parents, siblings, and spouse, appeared in comments 17 times. Most students said that even though they stayed connected with their parents, it was harder to find time to spend with them. While a few students attributed this to geographical distance, others connected the limited time with family to responsibilities. One student said, “It’s not like they live far away, but with school and work and all that stuff, you have to block out time.” Speaking about the limited time with family, one student said, “Our relationships have thinned, but they have deepened, because the time we do spend is more intentional.”

Friends. The same student said, “The same is with our friends, too. We only spend time with close friends—we spend time with less friends—but that is more intentional.” All eight participants spoke of their friendships, adding together for a total of 17 occurrences. Many of the students noted challenges, such as limited time, “different priorities” and “different stages of life,” and a separation in residential locations, in maintaining their friendships from before marriage. Encompassing all of these changes, one student said, “Now it’s become a little more intentional. Now we have to seek each other out, and just the different stages and changes in the way you look at things, different priorities.”

While many students noted challenges, such as limited time, they also noted the value of intentionality in the friendships they maintained. Mentioning this 11 times in the interviews, students used phrases such as “more intentional,” “intentionally plan,” “more selective,” and “more effort” to convey the extra intentionality required to maintain friendships during marriage and school. One student summed up the idea well:

The intentionality is the biggest thing. The actual effort you have to make to interact with others: that was just totally natural and effortless before I was married. But now, it’s something I have to put effort into to keep friendships alive.

Events. With regard to social engagement, seven participants spoke of campus community and academic events a total of 19 times. One student simply stated, “It’s been hard to find time to do things socially.” Three students claimed that their involvement in the community had not been significantly altered by marriage; they attributed that to their minimal engagement prior to marriage. One student said, “Not being involved with [events] has impacted me more, because you don’t have opportunities to meet a lot more people.” Another student, who demonstrated minimal social engagement, discussed reasoning for attending any events: “Sometimes, I use those activities as ways of spending time with friends.”

Likewise, other students named time with friends, academic commitments, and personal interests as reasons for their involvement in campus programs and activities. These students experienced various differences in their social engagement after marriage. One student described a shift from “extreme involvement” and “being aware of campus events” to very little awareness of campus events. Several students noticed a gradual shift

from involvement in residential community events, all-campus initiatives, and academic committees as a “participant” to being involved as a “leader” and a “mentor.”

Though they recognized fluctuations in their participation in the campus community, two students expressed that they have remained overall “somewhat involved,” which is comparable to their level of engagement prior to marriage. One student said, “That’s been the exact same. I’m the exact same person. I still like to play soccer and volleyball. I still sign up for those, involvement with other people and campus events.” Participants often connected changes in their social engagement with changing roles and interactions within the campus environment.

Campus Environment

Students identified factors such as residential status, campus facilities, and support from university personnel as influences in their marital adjustment and student engagement. Thus, campus environment emerged as a significant theme, tallying a total of 48 mentions in student interviews. Several students said the campus environment provided a generally positive experience. One student stated, “It’s nice to be in a Christian environment, definitely,” and “The environment is good.” Students also provided more detailed descriptions of the campus environment in terms of support provided through residential communities, facilities, services, and interactions with college community members.

Residential status. Seven participants discussed how they were affected by their residential status, oftentimes in comparison to living in a residence hall or other campus housing prior to marriage. With a frequency of 24 times throughout the interviews, this subcategory emerged as the most significant within the campus environment theme.

On-campus married housing community. Students spoke of the relational implications of living in the on-campus married housing community. Several participants mentioned a small-group Bible study within the married housing community as a venue of moral support and personal growth. Explaining the benefit of such support and community, one student said, “There are different things you can learn from each other and the other couples in the area.” Though students found the community in married housing as helpful, they also demonstrated a desire for residence life staff member(s) to more proactively foster community development.

Disappointed with the lack of fellowship in the beginning of the year, one student shared, “I felt like our participation has been disappointing to the RD [resident director] over there; we just haven’t been involved, but it’s hard to want to find the motivation when nothing really started ‘til the spring semester.” Overall, students described the residential area as a “wonderful community,” they just “wished [community events] would have started earlier [in the year].”

Living outside of the residence halls. Both students who lived in campus-owned housing and students who commuted experienced changes in relationships and involvement as a result of no longer living in traditional residence halls. Five students shared that simply “not living in a dorm” anymore impacted their academic and social engagement. A few students revealed that they benefitted academically from living in a separate apartment or house. One student completed homework assignments while on campus and therefore was able to “leave work and school at school, and when I’m home, I’m home.” Several students created intentional routines to allow themselves to complete their homework and create space and time to rest at home with their family and friends.

Connecting to the limited time and increased intentionality with friends, participants spoke of the challenges of a new living arrangement. One aspect of no longer living in a residence hall was that married students usually did not dine on campus. One student said, “So, that’s another separation, where you’re not eating in here with everybody. So you have less chance of seeing everyone.” One student talked about making efforts to eat on campus from time to time only for the purpose of spending time with friends. One student said, “especially if you used to be dorm friends. But now, you don’t have things together; you’re not in the same building. To counteract that, you have to be more intentional to hang out.” To that end, one student disclosed, “I feel kind of distant from the dorm life and from some of the university events.” Students living off campus shared similar experiences due to “only com[ing] to campus for class and work.”

Facilities. Students also discussed the impact of campus facilities and services. Some students explained the significance of their use of facilities to complete their academic responsibilities. One student said, “There is always a place I can find on campus to study.” Another student, who frequented the library for studying, said, “At least it’s a quiet environment where I can focus.” Other students mentioned that they stayed on campus to finish their homework before heading home. These students found the campus facilities to be particularly conducive to completing academic responsibilities.

Interpersonal support. All participants spoke of the role that interpersonal interactions with and perceived support from peers, staff, faculty, and administration played in marital adjustment and student engagement. The subcategory occurred 13 times

throughout conversation. Overall, students shared a positive view toward their interactions with members of the college community.

Peers. Six students delineated the perceptions their peers seemed to have toward marriage. One student addressed certain assumptions regarding motivations for marriage in college. That student explained that, when preparing for marriage, peers asked, “Why are you rushing it?” However, another student said, “There are not any negative feelings about married people.” Overall, students said their peers’ perceptions of them were “very positive.” One student said, “They think of you as more mature, older.” Many of the students recognized and appreciated the acceptance they receive from members of the college campus.

Staff, faculty, and administration. Six participants described their perceived support and acceptance from staff, faculty, and administration. Acknowledging a continual repurposing of the apartment buildings in the married housing community for uses other than housing married students, one participant shared, “Well, one thing I think has been kind of negative: I feel like the administration and other students alike [...] do not promote marriage.” In addition to the administrative changes in on-campus housing, that student continued, “It’s like, you get married for the wrong reasons when you get married in college, that’s what a lot of people believe. So, once you’re married, it’s like, ‘Oh, it’s cool!’ but when you’re talking about getting married, it’s a lot more negative.”

However, other students articulated different experiences with faculty. Describing faculty interactions with married students, one student said, “some professors are pro-people getting married in college; others are not. When they see a married couple or persons in their classroom, they try to adapt to that. They try to understand how people

are different.” Another student noted that faculty members recognize the additional responsibilities experienced by married students. That student said, “[Faculty] give you a little leeway on the deadlines and stuff. And even if they don’t give you that, they understand.” Speaking to a level of personal care exhibited by faculty members, another student said, “They’ll stop and ask, ‘How’s marriage going? How is your family?’” A few other students described similar interactions and support from faculty.

Conclusion

Capturing the relationship between marital adjustment and factors of student engagement, one student said, “Just like that, a new layer of responsibility permeates through all areas of life, may they be financial, academic, or social.” The Paradigm Model of Marriage and Undergraduate Student Engagement shown in Figure 1 represents major themes related to factors of marriage and students engagement, which arose in the student interviews. As students were already responding to the demands of full-time studies in college, marriage during college acted as an event that brought about additional demands on responsibilities, time, and priorities. Those factors affected how students approached their coursework and academic activities and how they interacted with their peers, family, and others. Another element that was changed by marriage and influenced student engagement was campus environment, including residential status, access to and use of facilities, and support from persons within the institution. In other words, as students responded to changing situations, which resulted from marriage, those students experience altered time, energy, and motivations for investing in academic and social endeavors in college.

Though students communicated connections between the factors within the themes of marital adjustment, social engagement, academic engagement, and campus environment, the results of the study were not comprehensive enough to derive significant conclusions regarding the impact of marriage on student engagement. The next chapter explores parallel and contrasting concepts within the results from the present study and the existing literature on married undergraduate students and undergraduate student engagement. These insights help to define the ways in which marriage impacts undergraduate student engagement.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Four overarching themes related to influence on undergraduate student engagement emerged from the analysis of the student interview data—identified as marital adjustments, academic engagement, social engagement, and campus environment. Though these themes align with arguments made in the literature on undergraduate marriage and undergraduate student engagement, each theme surfaced solely as a result of common language expressed by students in response to open-ended interview questions. Participants' responses also pointed to a number of subcategories belonging to the main themes.

Marital Adjustments

Students' responses revealed that marriage caused a number of differences in responsibility load, time, priorities, and interactions with their environments, and those changes interfered with how they approached relationships and academics. This finding supported the suggestion in the literature review that McCubbin and Patterson's (1984) Family Stress Model could be applied to the marriage and college experience, indicating that a stressful experience—such as marriage during college—placed limitations on a student's resources (i.e., time and energy) in which that person could invest into the event, college. In short, marriage seemed to impact student engagement.

In keeping with Meehan and Negy's (2003) findings, every student explained that marriage placed more responsibilities on them, in addition to the duties they already had as a traditional student. These obligations included the necessity to work, budgeting, grocery shopping, cooking, sharing a vehicle for transportation to school and work, and creating space to care for and spend time with one's spouse and family. Students also identified these responsibilities as causes of time constraints and reprioritization for allocating their time toward the things that mattered most to them. These discoveries were also consistent with Van Meter and Agronow's (1982) argument that, in order to complete academic tasks and spend time with friends and family, married students must prioritize and organize their time and responsibilities.

Support. Receiving support from family and friends seemed to be valuable to married students in terms of adjusting well to marriage and college. This paralleled the research findings that a primary source of financial, academic, and emotional support for married students tended to be spouse and family members (Alsaden, 2011; Krish, 2011). Aligning with Meehan and Negy's (2003) findings, students in the present study who received personal support from family and friends were also the ones who demonstrated more positive transitions and overall experiences with marriage during college.

Student Engagement

Academic engagement. Similar to the research findings of Chilman and Meyer (1966), most of the participants demonstrated increased motivation for academic, career, and family goals. Some students linked this inextricably with marriage, while a couple noted that age and progression in their academic program might have also contributed to the change. Supporting the evidence found by Taviano (2006), many students in the

current study also viewed their coursework more seriously after marriage. Those students were also more likely than they were before marriage to engage in their course discussions and responsibly use their time. As a result, those students seemed to exhibit a greater sense of satisfaction with work-life balance as they completed their work and remained involved with friends, family, and the community.

Social engagement. Each student emphasized that marriage affected their friendships and involvement in social events. Two main ideas accompanied this change. The first idea that emerged was the acknowledgement that marriage caused the students to progress to a “different stage of life” than their single counterparts. Married students often said they felt they were more “mature” and had become more “independent” as a result of marriage. This could be connected with Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory, which recognized that academic responsibilities and new social experiences during college cause students to develop in areas, including emotional maturity, competency, integrity and identity, and autonomy. Similar to Chambliss’ (1961) findings, some students shared that the new stage of life made it difficult to relate with their single friends and peers. However, the varying stages of life were more often credited with creating opportunities to offer perspective and advice to single friends.

The second key change identified in friendships as a result of marriage, was the need for intentionality. Some students explained that they had limited time to spend on campus, which affected their ability to connect with current events and peers in the campus community. Others realized that much of their time spent with friends and peers prior to marriage was unplanned since the participants interacted with them often in residence halls and in the student center. Contradicting Chambliss’ (1961) finding, most

of the students in the present study responded to these changes by more intentionally investing in relationships and choosing which campus events to attend, rather than exhibiting a decreased desire to remain socially involved. In order to counteract those factors, the majority of the students made deliberate efforts to maintain their closest friendships. More importantly, students expressed that, though they spent less time with friends, the time they did spend together was more intentional than it was prior to marriage. In other words, the students said their friendships grew deeper.

Campus Environment

Residential status. The range of student responses resembled Astin's (1984) claim that residential status impacted student engagement. Furthermore, most students' stories supported the argument by Kuh et al. (2006) that students who live on-campus receive benefits not as accessible to commuting students, such as ease of access to campus facilities, social events, peer interaction, and more time since they do not have to travel to get to campus. Several students said they felt safer living on campus than they would in off-campus properties. Many students noted the financial benefits of billing their rent and utilities to their student account under the category of school expenses. On the other hand, other than limited time spent on campus, commuters did not acknowledge a lack of such benefits from living in off-campus housing. Among both of these, students most often spoke of the difference they felt from no longer living in the residence hall. Simply moving out of the hall seemed to create a separation between the married students, their friends, and their peers, because it significantly decreased the amount of time in which students would see each other.

Facilities. Axelson and Flick (2011) and Kuh et al. (2005) said that institutions could create a campus environment and structures that encourage student development and learning. This statement seems to be true, as many of the students talked about the role buildings on campus played in their study and social lives. A few students commented on the amount of time they spent in their respective academic buildings, while claiming that most of the people they saw were other students in the study area. Other participants spoke of how meaningful and helpful it was for them to be able to use the library and other academic study rooms, along with areas in the student center, to focus on and complete their schoolwork. Moreover, whether or not a student spent time in the student center seemed to determine students' awareness of campus activities, along with the frequency in which those students interacted with peers.

Interpersonal interactions and support. Students were affected by the perceptions of and interactions they had with members of the campus community, including peers, staff, and faculty. Overall, students shared a positive experience with peers, as they were often met with curiosity and encouragement. In contrast, students articulated receiving negative reactions from people outside their college community. Students also referred to their interactions with faculty as either affirming or discouraging toward marriage during college. Many shared that their professors showed an interest in and ability to relate to their responsibilities and family goals. These accounts were consistent with arguments made by Astin (1993) and Kuh et al. (2006) that students were affected by their interpersonal relationships—particularly with peers, staff, faculty, family, and mentors—both on and off campus.

Another facet students perceived as support, or lack there-of, from the campus community included the actions of administration and staff. One student interpreted decisions made by administration to use married housing apartments for other purposes as a lack of support and care for the married student population. Another student desired the university to sponsor events and opportunities for all married students to connect with one another. Several students appreciated the connection with and support from other married couples in the university-owned married residential area but expressed disappointment in the residential staff's lack of initiative to foster community through events early in the year.

Aligning with arguments made by others (Astin, 1993; Axelson & Flick, 2011; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh et al., 2006; Meehan & Negy, 2003), students connected social and spousal support, along with social engagement, with positive experiences in adjusting to and balancing marriage and college. One student said, "Having a community and having the support can make all the difference in a successful transition into married life or a rocky one." Identifying a sense of substantial maturation, students who were more engaged with the college community, including academic class and faculty, social events, peer interactions, and friendships, seemed to exhibit satisfaction with their experiences and development.

Limitations

Although the findings were helpful and provided impetus for further work regarding married student engagement, there were several notable limitations. Though the gap in the literature presented an opportunity for original research, it also made it difficult to provide a specific theoretical groundwork and depth of historical knowledge for

understanding the impact of marriage on student engagement. Another limitation of the present study was the use of non-random, convenience-based sampling. Due to the small population of students fitting the study, all eligible students received recruitment emails and an incentive for participation, which could have created a selection bias. One interview was conducted over the phone, rather than in person. As a result, the opportunity to observe non-verbal cues was absent from that particular interview. While the phone interview progressed in a similar manner to the others, its medium could have limited the researcher's ability to fully understand the student's experiences. Finally, the sample size of only eight students and the lack of longitudinal data placed limitations on the possibility of drawing significant conclusions regarding the studied topic of marriage and student engagement.

Implications for Practice

Despite the limitations of the current study, the students' responses—both explicit and implicit—revealed an undeniable impact of marriage on student engagement. Perhaps the most noticeable implication of the study was that students experienced additional responsibilities and changes in interpersonal relationships as a result of marriage and that students inextricably linked these factors with changes in their engagement. Though marriage seemed to place limitations on academic and social engagement, many students noted those as valuable experiences to their academic learning and personal growth. Thus, students “intentionally” sought ways to remain academically and socially involved, and they also desired supportive efforts in these areas from their spouse, family, friends, peers, staff, and faculty.

Validating Taviano's (2006) theory, married students experienced a decrease in peers interactions and connection to the campus community as a result of limited time, changing priorities, and new residential locations. As such, campus environment and community events might be considered in institutional efforts to support married student needs. Perhaps, providing a reason for married students to utilize the student center (i.e., to pick up mail, visit an office, or come to an event specifically targeted to upperclassmen) might lessen the difference felt by students in peer interactions and connection to the campus community.

Some students mentioned that the key reason for decreased desire to participate in social events was a lack of compatibility between the focus of social events on campus and their personal goals. Yet, Kuh et al. (2005, 2006) and Tieu et al. (2010) emphasized the significance students' connections with peers, staff, and faculty in student success and satisfaction. As it may not be lucrative to host an event specifically aimed at married students on a general part of campus, student responses demonstrated that it would be helpful for staff members in a university-owned married housing community to create opportunities for residents to interact with one another through community events. Along with providing events for the married housing community, staff members could support further networking for students by extending invitations to non-residential, married students to participate in married housing community events.

Students often cited small group and Bible study meetings with other married students as helpful outlets for processing, understanding, and growing through marital adjustment and balance with academic pressures. Though students did not specifically suggest courses or practical training workshops as a necessary resource, they often

discussed marital adjustment in terms of financial responsibilities, time limitations, necessity to prioritize goals, and the need to process changes with others. Similar to suggestions made by Meehan and Negy (2003) and Womble (2010), universities could promote already existing services to married students, including counseling services, financial assistance, academic tutoring, and any courses aimed at preparing students for finance, study skills, or marriage and family. For example, practical skills training workshops could be incorporated into married housing community events, or married students could be invited into workshops or small groups.

The above examples highlight opportunities for any university department, including campus ministries, counseling center, residence life, and academic advising, which may have natural avenues in place for incorporating small group sessions dealing with marriage, academic skills, spiritual formation, or interpersonal communication. Small support groups would not need to be hosted exclusively for married students. Rather, university personnel could promote such activities to married students who may be seeking social events that would align with their personal, academic, and family goals.

Implications for Research

Including only eight interviews of married students at the same time from one institution, the present study did not completely bridge the gap that existed in research exploring connections between marital adjustments and student engagement. However, the results of the study indicated that student engagement was influenced by marriage, and that students desired support in adjusting to the demands of marriage and college. With improvements, the study could be replicated across a number of years and

institutions, providing clarity and validity for factors such as marital adjustments, social engagement, age, gender, and residential status.

Future research could obtain more statistically significant and transferrable results, if both qualitative and quantitative research on these topics could be conducted. Future researchers might consider utilizing quantitative research tools, such as the NSSE, the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) (Meehan and Negy 2003), or an original scale developed by the researcher(s). In the case of an original scale, the researcher(s) would need to administer and compare pre- and post-tests among the married students. Quantitative studies could also be used to determine differences in adaptation and student engagement between single and married students. Furthermore, employing quantitative studies, such as these, would provide a more comprehensive and formalized understanding of how marriage impacts student engagement.

Research extended by time, repetition, and various methods could potentially reveal additional variables, such as personality traits, age, relationship status, and gender roles, and factors of identity. Many students in the study cited marriage as a catalyst for their interpersonal and emotional maturity and preparedness to handle “real world” situations. Several students spoke of healthier relationships in marriage as compared to the insecurities, distractions, and social pressures that were present in their dating relationships. Such insights could contribute to the understanding of emerging adults, including shifting views toward romantic relationships and marriage, as well as attitudes toward the “college experience,” expectations for adulthood, and identity development. All of these factors would likely influence student engagement, as they might alter students’ priorities and investment into academic and social activities (Fincham & Ming,

2010; Taviano, 2006). Additionally, factors that influence identity, independence, and competency, as well as student engagement also impact student development; therefore, they merit attention from researchers and practitioners (Astin, 1993; Axelson & Flick, 2011; Chickering & Reisser, 1984; Kuh, 1995; Kuh et al., 2005; Meehan & Negy, 2003).

Conclusion

Research had already explored student engagement and adjustments to marriage during college separately. The purpose of the current study was to gain an understanding of how undergraduate student engagement was altered by marriage. Such insights could be helpful to higher education professionals who work with married students. Affirming the literature, results of the study continually reflected the adjustments of marriage in college and factors that influence of student engagement. Through marriage during college, students experienced changes in social roles, time, academic, and personal priorities, all of which altered the students' interactions with elements of student engagement, such as interpersonal relations, academic responsibilities, and institutional processes. As a result, students were able to articulate how their personal development and academic performance was affected. When students received support for balancing responsibilities, time management, and relating with peers and faculty they expressed positive experiences and substantial growth in personal development, responsibility, and independence. The literature and results alike urge university personnel to understand the unique needs of married students and to provide supportive resources through community and environment in order to help married students achieve their academic and personal goals.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Marriage Experience

- How do you feel about your experience as a married student thus far?
- How are you impacted by your relationships with your spouse, family, and friends?
- How are you impacted by (university name)'s campus environment?

Follow Up Questions for Student Engagement During Marriage

- How has your involvement in the campus community changed since marriage?
- How has your approach to academic responsibilities changed since marriage?
- How have your out-of-class interactions with faculty and staff members changed since marriage?
- How have your relationships with your peers changed since you have been married?
- How has your college experience changed since you have been married?
 - Why do you think these changes have occurred?

