As a student at Parkland College I walk the halls and find myself wondering; why is she wearing that? And on occasion I even wonder if the individual looked in the mirror that day. Though it sounds harsh, I know I am not the only person who ponders these kinds of questions. Every day, multiple times a day, we pass judgment on others. Before they have even opened their mouth to speak we have often decided if they are intelligent, if they are nice and what kind of moral values they uphold. The purpose of our ethnography is to discover how others judge women at Parkland College based on what they are wearing. In order to find our answer, I called in four Parkland students to answer questions in a single session interview using a focus group format. Hayley and I compiled photos of a woman of an age closely to ours dressed in styles ranging from overtly sexual to incredibly conservative and presented them to the panel of students. The woman was not identifiable in any way from these photos. During the interview we presented these photos to the students and analyzed their responses.

We asked questions that were broad and general at first, hoping not to sabotage the interviewees initial impression of the women depicted in the composite photos. However we rapidly discovered that instead of confidently and honestly sharing what they think of the women, the interviewees complimented the hair style, the shoes, even the fitness of the body. Once one person responded a certain way, it was a chain reaction and the interview quickly curtailed into a fashion and health conversation. At this point, the responses had stopped being relevant and I had to stop the
interview and reiterate the purpose of the ethnography. I also began asking more pointed questions. For example, “Is she (the woman in the composite photo) intelligent? What makes you think that?” Then I would ask if they liked her, if they would hang out with her outside of class, and if she was nice... After asking more pointed questions like this we began to get the kind of answers we had been looking for.

One problem that I have become aware of in the process of conducting the interviews is that each person’s response to a prompt was affected by another student’s previous response. I believe I would have gotten more potent and honest answers to the questions if I had interviewed the students one at a time and this is a method that might be useful to keep in mind for future research on this topic. As I asked the more pointed questions, asking the panel members to honestly put into words what they thought of someone they had never met before, I observed a heightened level of anxiety in the student's faces, body language and voice. They seemed afraid that the other students being interviewed would pass negative judgment on them after voicing their opinion. It seemed to be a perpetual cycle. It also became a “Social Performance”; certain students responding with a joke or simply saying the respectful thing instead of saying what they honestly felt; all out of fear of judgment from others or motivated to make others laugh.

Regardless of the momentary digression, we did manage to procure the reactions we had been looking for as well as answers we hadn't expected. Pleasantly surprised, instead of coming to the conclusion that people judge harshly and don't change their minds about the person, we found that students at Parkland College prefer to give everyone the benefit of the doubt that beneath their chosen garb of the day is a person they can identify with, understand at some level, and even be friends with. Although, for some composite photos it was admitted that respecting this individual would be difficult, there was never any question of whether or not the students I interviewed would treat girls who dress like our examples with anything but respect.

Our ethnography focused on answering the question; how do both women and men view or
classify women and their self-worth based on how they dress? We set out to understand what clothing or appearance choices would prompt negative responses or judgments from others because we were interested in knowing more about how body image, gender roles, and self-worth play a part in our society given how women’s bodies are constantly sexualized and marginalized in the media (Urla and Swedlund, 1995). Throughout this ethnography I learned not only about my fellow students at Parkland College but I also gained a new respect for them. Through reflexivity I learned about myself, and discovered that I judge others when it is not my place. I learned the importance of keeping an open mind from the students that I interviewed. This ethnography has proven that Parkland College students show respect to most of their fellow students, despite their appearance, and is a topic worth pursuing in future as it might provide a glimpse into questions of self-worth and appearance in our society more broadly.
WORK CITED