Cultural anthropology teaches us that there are many places around the world where people use tattoos and piercings and where this practice is accepted. Today, our country is one of the most culturally diverse from around the globe; this increase in diversity has happened very rapidly in the past century. The Parkland College campus is no stranger to ethnic and therefore cultural differences. Because of this, my group members and I were interested in exploring how some members of our Parkland community view the once taboo idea of body art and whether they accepted visible body art or not. We thought that just as body art has become more accepted in our society due to an increase in cultural diversity, so would our campus community be more accepting of this practice.

Prior to our research, my group members and I believed that Parkland students would view body art in a positive way and that parents and teachers would be less accepting given that they belong to an older generation. In order to test our hypothesis, my group relied on three qualitative research methods. First, we handed out surveys to as diverse a segment as possible of Parkland students and teachers and were able to collect close to one hundred of these answers. We also used audio recording to interview four individuals; two Parkland students, one parent of a Parkland student, and one Parkland professor for a more in-depth opinion on this topic. Participant observation seemed vital to our work and we carried it out around campus. However,
since the research took place during a fall semester, the colder weather had students and faculty bundled up. Had the weather been warmer, results from this method may have been different.

The quantitative data collected from the surveys almost unanimously agreed with our thesis. Out of 100 surveys, only four of those surveyed completely rejected the idea of any form of tattoos or piercings. More than 60% of the surveys collected agreed that body art left a positive first impression and of these, students noted that their parents thought the opposite. Nearly 60% of survey respondents answered that they display body art themselves, half of which stated that this body art is generally visible. More than half of those surveyed said they were somehow affected by having body art themselves or knew someone who has been affected by having body art. The interview answers also aligned with our thesis. One parent interviewed stated “kids, punks, and dropouts” are the type of people to have tattoos and piercings while the two students agreed that tattoos are a great way to express yourself in today’s society. The interview conducted with a Parkland faculty member surprised us. This professor shared with us that many teachers they know, including themselves, viewed body art positively. This may be due to their exposure to a variety of students that display various tattoos and piercings. This teacher also thought some of the coolest people they knew have tattoos. One of my professors, when asked about this topic, told me that my body art did not negatively affect his opinion of me and that he has gotten used to seeing many different people with tattoos and piercings around campus.

I found myself interested in pursuing this topic due to its increase in popularity within pop culture, social media, and television. Most of my family and Parkland friends portray some form of body art. I myself display various tattoos and piercings, so I can easily relate to others who have them as well. To me, my body art is a way to express myself and offers the world a
more genuine image of who I am. My friends who also have tattoos each come from different backgrounds and are of different races but each have meaning behind their body art. There are such a wide variety of people that I know who are so different in many aspects of their life but they all have body art in common. Thankfully my friends and family have always been supportive in my decision to express myself in these ways.

The fact that I myself have body art and know so many people who have it, together with the fact that I’m a Parkland student, make me a native ethnographer. An article that explains what this means in research is one of the first we studied in our cultural anthropology class. In “Is Native Ethnography Really Possible”, anthropologist Takeyuki Tsuda introduces this concept. He defines native ethnography as the ethnographer having close cultural familiarity to the community of study. My two group members and I feel that being native ethnographers gave us an added advantage in this research project as many of our subjects were students just like us. This familiarity may have allowed the people we have studied to feel a sense of connection with us and since many of our interviewees were friends and family friends, we were able to collect data that Tsuda would have noted as more emic, or from the insider’s point of view, and authentic to Parkland’s community (44).

An article that helps explain our work is “#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Radical Politics of Social Media in the United States” by Bonilla and Rosa. This article explores today’s version of what could be considered armchair anthropology where anthropologists build their ethnography without physically interacting with anyone. Through online forums, social media, and television, anthropologists collect their data from the comforts of their computer screens. The article points to the fact that as technology advances and people interact socially online, cultural beliefs and norms change, as we have seen in our research
results for this project (445). Technology and different forms of interaction also relate to our project because body art has become increasingly more popular thanks to online platforms, and beliefs and norms are changing as they become exposed to people from many different backgrounds. In fact, I believe that an ethnographer could easily research this topic behind a computer screen and also acquire a wealth of data, especially since many people in today’s world are more comfortable sharing their body art on social media and other various online outlets, making it much easier to know what forms of body art they accepted for themselves.

After collecting the data for this research project, our group concluded that the Parkland community has an overall positive opinion towards body art. Students and teachers are widely accepting of various forms of body art. Many student’s parents are also more accepting of their body art than they were when they were younger. While body art has become more popular online, through social media, and on television, it has also become more popular and accepted in our society. Although there was an overwhelmingly positive overall view on body art at Parkland, many students wanted it to be clear that this did not include obscene, vulgar, or highly unprofessional tattoos, including facial tattoos. Something that could be beneficial to further research is another round of participant observation during a spring or summer semester to better gauge the extent of body art and its acceptance in public spaces. My group members and I believe that the importance of our project is that it contributes to knowledge on culturally acceptable customs in our college community. I myself also believe that projects like this help students to better connect with their educational community.