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Served Through Service: Undergraduate Students' Experiences in Community Engaged Learning at a Catholic and Marianist University

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Students participating in sustained community service at an urban Catholic and Marianist university were volunteer informants in this qualitative exploration of the meaning they make of their service experiences. A PhD student research team (nine members) interviewed fourteen undergraduate students (10 of whom were seniors). Findings were organized as themes constructed within three domains: background, experience, and meaning. Within "background," students who had prior work in faith-based service before college deepened their meaning of service. Within "experience," there were social and cultural dynamics of navigating on and off campus life, including the roles students played as well as the challenge of time management. Within "meaning," building relationships was central to community service. Students built strong personal relationships with and deep commitments to city residents; the meaning of their own identities grew and developed. Experiencing the roots of social injustice led students both to confirm and to reconsider their life vocations.²

Keywords: Service, service learning, community engaged learning, student leadership, undergraduate students

1 The research team was a team of equals; each contributed in essential ways to the successful completion of this study; and, thus, the co-authors are listed only in the alphabetical ordering of their last names

2 We are grateful to the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community. Without the unhesitating collaboration of and input from Dick Ferguson, Executive Director at the time of the study, and his staff, our research would not have been possible. We dedicate this work to him and to the students who generously shared their lives and experiences with our research team.

Within the past 15 years, research findings have shown an increasing number of colleges and universities incorporating service projects into their programs for undergraduate students (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Eyer, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Hellman, Hoppes, & Ellison, 2006). College students active in local communities link the university to their surrounding communities, a boon to both constituencies. Some students experience community service as an extension of their faith. On the other hand, by including real world experiences into the college years, community service benefits people's lives in both material and social assistance. Through service, young people can develop empathy, altruism, leadership, and generosity. This study began, in Fall 2013, when our research team, consisting of one professor and eight Ph.D. students in the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program, wanted to explore the dynamics of students who serve at our own university, the University of Dayton (UD).

Purpose of the Study

At the University of Dayton, the *Fitz Center for Leadership in Community* sponsors students who volunteer in the community. Students have an opportunity to supplement their traditional academic curriculum with various community service experiences. With the then-executive director of the Fitz Center, we explored the Center's mission. The Center had adopted a model, unlike the classical service-learning approach, in which learning and service are equally important goals (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). In that model, community service is linked to and structured by courses in a wider curriculum. Fitz Center programs were not linked to specific courses on a semester-by-semester basis but to service characterized by civically engaged partnerships.

The Fitz Center model was sustained community engagement, a model of "working *with* [not *for*] a community on a shared vision" in order that relationships based in inequality are not reinforced" (Fitz Center for Leadership in Community, n.d., p. 1). The problem we investigated was whether or not students active in community service were, in fact, making meaning that relates to community engagement on a sustained basis. For example, the executive director's questions included: to what extent and how did students' perceptions of community service include meaning related to continual, civically-engaged community service in Dayton long-term? With the executive director's input, the four Fitz Center programs chosen for study included: Semester of Service, Dayton Civic Scholars, Neighborhood School Centers,

and River Stewards. The extent to which listening to student voices can add to the story of how these programs have value for students currently and for the long-term, for the community, and for the university, was what made this study important.

Conceptual Framework: Hindsight, Insight, Foresight

In this section, we provide a rationale for a conceptual framework that both guided the study and provided a lens through which we organized and analyzed the voices and experiences of the student participants. We then attempt to link that conceptual framework to a strong tradition in education, Dewey's (1938) notion of experiential education.

We employed a conceptual framework, rather than a theoretical framework, to guide our study. The conceptual framework was: hindsight, insight, and foresight. Our analytic perspective was to draw meaning from students' talking about service experiences prior to their lives at UD, talking about their experiences in sustained community engagement while at UD, as well as how their experiences may impact future service potential. Three lines of reasoning supported our decision for this conceptual framework.

The first was the structure driven by the a priori purpose of the study articulated in the prior section (i.e., how do students make meaning of engaged community service and does that meaning include sustained community engagement long-term). Second, we used the logic of Thomson and Holland (2003). They used this framework in their longitudinal qualitative study, and we are alluding to it in retrospect but from a similar logic. Those authors covered the time span directly in their longitudinal design, interviewing students intermittently over nine years. We covered the time span, only we covered it retrospectively, contemporaneously, and prospectively. In other words, from the meaning students made of experience in service prior to their UD lives (Jones & Hill, 2003) to the implications for a future life in Dayton or in service elsewhere (Giles & Eyster, 1994), we expanded our purpose across the past, present, and future. Thomson and Holland used the phrase "hindsight, insight, and foresight" in the title of their article reporting on their study. Interestingly, the same framework and phrase is used by authors writing about financial crises (e.g., Woo, 2000), and in the field of poetry (e.g., Corn, 1989).

The third line of our reasoning argues that our study is part of a move toward theory. This argument is based on Giles and Eyster's (1994) call for more work in theory development. Since the beginning of service-learning in the late 1960s, practices, not theory, have driven its development, according to Giles and Eyster. To encourage theory development within the field

of community service, they offered Dewey's notion of democracy and "The Great Community" as a possible starting point. We place our research within one of Giles and Eyler's "nine areas for theory development and testing" (p. 82) within service learning: The Great Community. They pose this query, "Is the creation of community important for citizenship as Dewey had hypothesized? Will involvement in community-focused service-learning lead to lifelong community involvement..." (p. 83).

Setting of the Study

Contrasting social classes between the university and the urban setting situate this study. The Dayton community is a mid-sized city of approximately 140,000 in southwest Ohio. Not unlike many Midwestern manufacturing centers, the city has suffered job losses and increased poverty in recent decades. No fewer than 200 manufacturing businesses left the city between 2001 and 2011, including auto equipment processing plants, canneries, refineries, mills, and consumer goods factories (Bennish, 2011). The proportion of persons living below the poverty level between 2009 and 2013 was 34.7%, while median household income during that same period was \$28,456 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). At the same time, applications at the university have maintained a steady enrollment of upper middle and middle class students; the acceptance rate is 53%. In 2013, undergraduate students (of whom there were approximately 8000) paid \$40,000 for tuition and fees alone. In other words, a typical Dayton family's annual income would pay only about 2/3 of a single year's tuition.

The University of Dayton (UD) is a top-tier Catholic and Marianist university, offering programs from undergraduate to doctoral levels. Its stated mission includes the idea of a diverse community that is committed to "... educating the whole person and linking learning and scholarship with leadership and service" (University of Dayton, "Mission," n.d.). The university's Catholic and Marianist identity manifests itself in various programs and initiatives, which inculcate insights from the Catholic intellectual tradition and Marianist educational philosophy, into best-in-class academic scholarship and practice in higher education. To the research team, the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community stood out as an archetypical example of the university's commitment to its mission, and thereby to its students and the Dayton community.

Fitz Center for Leadership in Community

The Fitz Center was formed in 2002. Aligned with its emphasis on educating leaders who build community, the Fitz Center set out on a mission to initiate and sustain "...partnerships within urban neighborhoods and larger communities that both support comprehensive community building and provide a context for broadly connected learning and scholarship" (University of Dayton, "Fitz Center," n.d.). The Fitz Center is named in honor of Brother Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., a Marianist brother, who served as the university's president from 1979 to 2002 (Columbus, 2012). During this 23 year period, "Bro. Ray" led the university's efforts to transform itself into a world-class center for academics and research, and at the same time, sustain and promote its Catholic and Marianist values, encapsulated in the commonly used phrase on campus: "Learn, Lead, Serve" (University of Dayton, "Student Organizations," n.d.).

Engaging students to learn, lead, and serve. On completing a decade of service, Brother Fitz said:

We wanted an integrated way of serving the Dayton community and the larger region, and also to educate leaders who build community. The students have exceeded our expectations and have seized the opportunity to lead and innovate to engage our community partners. (University of Dayton, 2012)

The Fitz Center for Leadership in Community has been appreciated for being an expression of the "...university's recognition of its responsibilities at the center of the life of Dayton and the surrounding area" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 16). The Fitz Center has adopted a novel approach. It has emphasized transforming the idea of *service-learning* into the practice of *community engaged learning*, thus focusing on "...building reciprocal community partnerships that foster and deepen campus engagement for meaning academic and civic learning" (Bohrer, 2013, p. 6). In doing so, the Fitz Center essentially becomes a "confederation of stakeholders seeking to become partners with a shared vision and mission..." (Ferguson, 2009, p. 99), which provides opportunities to discover, learn, and practice the principles underlying its practice.

The principles underlying the practice. To practice its leadership principles, the Fitz Center gives students opportunities to engage in the community in a sustained manner. Approximately 140 students make commitments of one semester to three years in numerous leadership programs (Pant,

2012). The inner dynamics of any of these programs reveal their underlying principles: (a) focusing on community assets—not just needs or problems, (b) cultivating social capital through trustful relationships, (c) balancing inquiry and advocacy through constructive public conversations, (d) building adaptive capacity by learning together to change, and (e) creating a widely shared vision, instead of that of just one person or institution (Ferguson & Fitz, 2003; Fitz Center for Leadership in Community, 2012).

Background Literature

A substantial knowledge base about community service includes a profile of who participates and why, and what might be its outcomes. After a brief review of who serves, the bulk of this review addresses the latter: outcomes of community service by university students.

Students who participate in community service tend to be those who previously participated in service activities in high school or in other settings; moreover, they tend to be students who experience a connectedness to their community (Elyer et al., 1997; Winniford, Carpenter, & Grider, 1997). Student service participants also tend to be female, on-campus residents, politically moderate, and internally motivated for service (Fitch, 1987, 1991).

Various motivations drive students to opt into community service when not required in their college programs. Some gain satisfaction and even enjoyment from helping others and improving the communities as well as society (Astin & Sax, 1998; Hellman et al., 2006; Marotta & Nashman, 1998). That the service was “personally meaningful” (p. 532) was the source of sustained service in Jones and Hill’s (2003) study. Berger and Milem (2002) described three motivational dimensions: altruistic, egoistic, and obligation. Their findings suggest that a sense of obligation had an impact on students’ self-concept more than did altruistic or egoistic motivations.

Studies have revealed a wide array of outcomes of service participation. Outcomes fall into several categories, which we divide into four advantageous dimensions: enhanced civic awareness, growth in personal life skills, academic skills, and job skills. All have been found even though there is a cost to be paid in the time students must spend (Chambers & Lavery, 2012), a noted disadvantage, albeit usually a minor one.

Astin and Sax (1998) documented three of these four outcome categories in their study: students experienced an enhanced sense of civic responsibility, academic development, and critical life skills, which included leadership skills and social self-confidence. In a follow-up study, Astin et al. (1999) found

that participating undergraduate students were likely to aspire to academic development in terms of attending graduate school and obtaining advanced degrees. Similarly, Weber and Weber (2010) found that service-learning experiences had a significant impact on students' perceptions of civic participation. For instance, students expressed insights into the importance a college education as one pathway to address social issues.

Life skills and job skills were found by Laing (2013) to be developed by students in their service experiences. Even non-credit earning service-learning assignments helped increase the students' awareness of the importance of teamwork, communication, and accounting skills. Laing indicated that his findings are similar to other studies relating to experiential learning in vocational school settings. In addition, Crossman and Kite (2007) examined English as second language (ESL) student reflections on community service-learning projects as they related to their other higher education experiences. ESL student reflections were similar to the reflections of their English-speaking counterparts. However, their cultural backgrounds appeared to influence their experiences, their perceptions in written reflections, collaboration, coauthoring, and community service. These challenges led to cultural sensitivity, teamwork, contributive roles, conflict resolution, and pragmatic communication skills.

Results of four studies make the argument that engagement in community service has led to possible attitude shifts. Seider, Gillmor, and Rabinowicz (2010) studied the impact of community service-learning experiences on students' perceptions of their ability to achieve the American Dream. Students who participated in service-learning believed less in the American Dream compared to those with no community service experiences. When a sample of pre-service education students expressed (in writing) their reflections on community service, most perceptions were positive. One negative perception centered on the time involved in service-learning (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Furze, Black, Peck, and Jensen (2011) found that physical therapy students' involvement in community engagement activities in combination with structured reflection produced meaningful insight into students' personal beliefs about social responsibilities and professional formation. Themes from students serving one time included self-awareness, contemplating change, and self-recognition of service capacity. In contrast, emerging themes for students engaged in more than one activity included professional transformation, sense of community impact, and awareness of impact on others. In another study of mentors serving female middle school math and science students, Banks (2010) found mentors' meaning revealed valuing the setting,

awareness of culture, negotiating group dynamics, affirmation of abilities, and a focus on career guidance.

Other possible outcomes for students from their community service participation are new job skills. Students who leave the campus and venture out into the community may learn skills related to future careers. For example, McLaughlin (2010) examined how students in a business school gained “real-world” experience through service-learning activities. Students reported that service-learning helped them in three areas. The first, “hands-on,” was operationalized as non-classroom experiences working with organizations; the second, “career enhancement,” was defined as skills that could potentially augment a student’s occupational track; and, the third, “beyond the classroom,” included students’ experiences in community service. Similar to the findings of Chambers and Lavery (2012), however, time constraints associated with community service sometimes produced stress among these students.

Our study may contribute to the literature in two ways. We found much of the published research (mostly quantitative) focuses on service-learning but fewer studies have been built on sustained community engagement (Keen & Hall, 2009). First, this is a qualitative study of the meaning students make and, thus, adds this dimension to a knowledge base dominated by quantitative measurement. Second, this study expands the focus from service-learning to a focus on sustained community engagement.

Method

Collecting Empirical Materials

Participants. Eligible students for participation in the study included undergraduate UD students who were at least 18 years old and who had participated in one or more of these four sustained community engagement programs offered through the Fitz Center at the time of the study: Semester of Service, Dayton Civic Scholars, Neighborhood School Centers, and River Stewards. Upon request from the research team, the executive director of the Fitz Center e-mailed all students who, at the time of the onset of the study, met these criteria. Fourteen students (all who responded to the executive director’s email and met the researchers’ criteria) were participants, 10 of whom were seniors. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the 14 informants; five were men and nine were women. Ten of the 14 students had experienced two or more years of community service at UD, and their weekly time commitments during the semester of the study ranged widely—from two hours to more than 40 hours.

Table 1

Profile of study participants: Service program, academic major, year in school, years of UD service within the Fitz Center, and number of service hours per week

Student ¹	Fitz Center service program ²	Academic major(s)	Year in school	Years of UD service	Service hours per week
Tom ³	Riv. St.	Pre-Phys. Ther.	Soph.	1.0	2-4
Alexis ³	Civ. Sc.	Internatl. Stds. Political Sci.	Sr.	2.5	10
Kristina ⁴	Civ. Sc. Nbhd. Sc. Sem. Serv.	Political Sci. Human Rights	Sr.	3.0	20
Ann ⁴	Nbhd. Sc.	Education	Sr.	3.0	8
Danielle ⁵	Sem. Serv.	Psychology	Sr.	2.0	40
Chris ⁶	Riv. St.	Enviro. Geology	Sr.	3.0	2-3
Emma ⁷	Sem Serv.	Psychology	Sr.	1.0	40
Miranda ⁸	Civ.Sc. Sem. Serv.	Internatl. Stds. Spanish	Sr.	4.0	15
Anita ⁹	Sem. Serv.	Sociology	Sr.	2.0	40
Beatrice ⁶	Riv. St. Sem. Serv.	Political Sci	Sr.	2.5	46
Sam ⁶	Riv. St.	Mech. Engr.	Jr.	2.0	3
David ³	Civ. Cc.	Political Sci. Philosophy	Soph.	0.5	4-6
Ben ⁹	Sem. Serv.	Psychology	Sr.	1.0	35
Emily ⁹	Nbhd. Sc. Sem. Serv.	Psychology	Grad.	3.0	40

Note. ¹ Pseudonym (selected by each participant at the time of the interview)

² "Riv. St." stands for River Stewards; "Civ. Sc." stands for Dayton Civic Scholars; "Nbhd. Sc.;" stands for Neighborhood Schools; "Sem. Serv." stands for Semester of Service. Seven interviewees are numerically coded (3 to 9) after each informant pseudonym.

Research site. Seven members of the research team conducted the interviews (see Table 1). Interviews were audio recorded and all but one was conducted face to face on the University of Dayton campus or at nearby locations, ranging from cafeterias, public lounges, restaurants, and offices. One informant responded to questions by phone when face-to-face arrangements could not be made. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Dayton approved the research.

Interview approach. A pilot test of the interview protocol involved two graduate students, unaffiliated with the course and unaffiliated with the Fitz Center, role-playing student informants in mock interviews during one class session. Each participant was interviewed once. Participant interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes and followed Spradley's (1979) guidelines for ethnographic interviews. The interviews and guided reflections reinforced Spradley's three most important elements in ethnographic interviews: explicit purpose, ethnographic explanations, and ethnographic questions.

Interview documents. Students signed consent forms and completed a brief demographic survey at each interview. While the goal was always an unstructured and unscripted casual conversation, if needed, all interviewers had a common list of guiding questions (e.g., invitation to talk about possible service experience before coming to UD, discuss motivation for volunteering for community service, describe pathway to initial involvement in community service at UD). Transcriptions of each recorded interview were completed either by the researcher who conducted the interview or a third-party transcriber who was external to the study.

Trustworthiness

Achieving credibility is a twofold task: first, to carry out the inquiry in such a way that enhances the probability that the findings will be credible and, second, to demonstrate the credibility of the findings by having them approved by the constructors of the multiple realities being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research team demonstrated or participated in three different techniques in order to build credibility or trustworthiness: triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking.

Triangulation. Different sources of evidence were gathered by the researchers, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notion of triangulation, i.e., "either different data collection modes (interview, questionnaire, observation, testing) or designs" (p. 306). The research team utilized an interview, a brief survey, and supporting documents. A demographic survey was used

prior to each interview to gather participant demographic information including: year in school, number of years participating in service through the Fitz Center, number of service projects in 2013-14, number of hours per week engaged in service, academic major, gender, race, and domestic or international student status. The supporting documents were reports, brochures, program descriptions, and newsletters about the four programs in which participants had served during the semester of the study.

Peer debriefing. Peer debriefing was also implemented. Peer debriefing is a process of exposing the researcher to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session to help explore aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the researcher's mind (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). The research team was divided into two primary groups with different focuses, one on the literature review (composed of two members) and the other on participant interviews (composed of seven members); peer debriefing occurred between the two parties. One member of the research team participated in both groups.

After the group that focused on participant interviews coded their data, structured discussions occurred in class to challenge findings and interpretations. Challenges were posed from findings of other studies via the literature review. Therefore, analysis and interpretation were based on the collective efforts of the research team. Only those themes agreed upon by the entire team were ultimately constructed and reported herein.

Member checking. Each researcher was responsible for sending a transcript of the recorded interview to the participant in order to check for accuracy. Some participants responded to the researchers' inquiries for checking and others did not. We accepted some participants' decisions when they verbalized their a priori agreement to accept the transcript "as is" without their personal review.

Analyzing Empirical Materials

Analyzing the interview transcripts began as an effort by individual researchers and then moved to a collaborative team activity. Individuals on the research team read through the transcripts from their own interviews, coded them line by line, and, depending on the individual, derived preliminary themes. Then the team adopted what Saldaña (2009) calls *structural coding* from the work of MacQueen, McLellan-Lemal, Bartholow, and Milstein (2008). In structural coding large portions of the data are separated out for analysis based on a preconceived structure of the study, perhaps a theoretical

one. We had a priori constructed three parts to our purpose, aligned with our conceptual framework as hindsight, insight, foresight. After an initial review of our transcripts, we refined the structure to the major themes of students' backgrounds, students' experiences, and the meaning students make; these became the three segments of coding: background, experience, and meaning. Ultimately, as we studied the data, it seemed that background and experience strongly made up the "hindsight," while the meaning-making informed the "insight" and "foresight."

By "background," we meant the years and experiences in service prior to becoming UD undergraduate students. "Experience" was the students' engagement. What they actually engaged in during service would fuel the meaning we were after. "Meaning" was the goal; we were interested in how students made meaning from community engaged service, and, more specifically, what that meaning was.

In addition, we reached a consensus that *in vivo* coding (Wiener, 2007) would also direct our analysis, i.e., capturing not only the voices but also the language undergraduates used. Those words and phrases would ground our coding as much as possible. According to Saldaña (2009), *in vivo* is particularly appropriate for coding materials from young people. He reasons that their voices often are ignored. Young people can adopt special linguistic forms that are part of contemporary culture. We wanted their language to come from their descriptors of routine and everyday experience.

Findings

The problem we investigated was to explore: (a) the experience of, and the meaning made by, UD students who were engaged in community service; and, (b) whether or not these students made meaning that relates to community engagement on a sustained basis. We found, first of all, that of the 14 students, five had 3 years or more of service experiences and five had between 2 and 3 years. Students differed markedly in the numbers of hours spent engaging in service per week (between approximately 5 hours and over 40 hours), and the service programs themselves differed in the types of activities performed. While these would be interesting questions for future researchers, we did not sort and analyze the students' transcripts by these three variables (years of service experience, hours per week, and types of activities). Rather, we sought to understand how the full group of 14 students made meaning of their service experiences. From analyzing the empirical materials, we constructed themes to capture that meaning.

Within the segment on “background,” the findings encompass the following themes: prior faith, prior service, and prior collaboration. Within the segment on “experience,” themes include the dynamics of the workplace itself, breaking out of the “UD bubble,” service as a cultural divide among students, personal professional development, various roles played, and time management. Finally, the segment on “meaning” revealed the subthemes of envisioning one’s self and life’s work, relationships at the heart of service, personal growth, building social justice, and affinity with the city of Dayton.

Background

This section includes three themes we constructed from stories students told about experiences they had prior to becoming part of the Fitz Center, including what led them to service at UD. Students talked about their faith prior to coming to UD, how collaboration played a role in their lives before attending UD, and many talked about their experiences in service prior to enrolling at UD. Combined, these seemed linked to their decisions to engage in activities with the Fitz Center.

Prior faith. First, many participants found a need to serve based on their faith backgrounds. Many came from either Catholic families or Catholic schools and cited their family or schooling as driving their interest in service opportunities. For example, Ben stated, “Marianist values were taught to me in high school and kind of continued.” Tom added:

And so, through high school, I think I really began to develop what my faith was about, and again, through high school, I was involved with many clubs and organizations, so that really started to get me involved and get me active.

Prior service. Students discussed their service participation prior to coming to UD. Such experiences drove students to provide service in college. One student, Beatrice, talked about her experience in the Girl Scouts and in helping clean up roads and rivers. She stated:

We had service requirements every year, a certain amount of service hours to get. So, when I got to the University of Dayton and saw an opportunity... and types of people that were interested in service... communities that I felt most at home with.

Prior collaboration. Many students' prior collaboration experiences took place within their faith or service communities. As Chris stated, "I enjoy meeting people." This and other expressions of relationships with others were important to many participants. Finally, some students mentioned a combination of prior faith, prior collaboration, and prior service, such as participation in mission trips, which reinforced their ongoing desire to continue giving back to others.

Experience

The second domain of meaning relates to how students described their experiences. Two integral components of the Fitz Center's approach enriched the meaning making process out of the lived experiences of the students. First, the Fitz Center personnel value the reciprocal nature of community involvement. For example, people who are served benefit, but so do those who serve. Second, Fitz Center personnel encourage students to engage in reflective practice. The community engagement by itself is less valuable than the experience enhanced by thinking deeply about it. Within this two-pronged context, we constructed six themes under the domain of "experience" and they are discussed next.

Workplace experiences. While the "personal/professional development" theme helps understand how students might think of themselves as future professionals, this theme focuses on "place" and expresses the strong connection between "service-place" experiences and workplace experiences. Most students talked about community engagement experiences as partly an opportunity to apply their skills in an actual workplace. For instance, in relation to her future career, Anita stated, "Now I am fully putting myself into a career because of service and because of the opportunities I have had in service, I think I have found my niche in the world where I can give my all." Another student, David, completed an internship in planning and stated that he:

...found great beauty in the way in which we have to create those things, and we can create them in very boring ways, we can create them in beautiful facades that lift up the soul... [what] I found fascinating about the planning is that planners can change a community, adding, widening a road, adding streets, adding sidewalks, uh, allowing zoning to happen for a community center, blocking zoning for a company, building a highway through a certain neighborhood.

Breaking out of the “UD bubble.” Being off campus and engaged in the community, some participants who undertook service opportunities believed that many of their fellow students lived life inside a campus “bubble.” These students, in other words, never ventured off the confines of the campus to experience life “outside,” i.e., in the city of Dayton and beyond. Some student informants expressed hope that more of their peers would become involved in the outside community.

Anita, for example, expressed concern for her fellow students, stating that, “I feel my friends are very sheltered.” She verbalized her belief that service opportunities opened doors for students to experience life outside the campus walls, as she maintained, “Semester of Service is a great way to get people to realize what is out there.” Another participant, Emily, said that many students did not stray too far from campus, stating that, “we’re in this city, but there’s so many kids from UD who haven’t been downtown ever before.”

Experiences with friends or roommates. Being engaged in service can divide students into subcultures. Many participants talked about the fact that the time they spent participating in service activities put them at odds with people in their social circle, such as friends or roommates on campus. Adding to the “bubble” metaphor was a possible divide that might exist between students who engaged in service and students who did not. For example, speaking about his roommates, David said, “I have a roommate who doesn’t do anything. I have a roommate who’s... he’s very involved, he’s involved in his academics and likes to do stuff for himself, but he doesn’t go out.”

Personal/professional development. In one way or another, most students expressed the belief that engaging in community service enhanced how they thought about their vocational choices and life skills. Engagement activities that were linked to a future career included tutoring, listening to community presentations, urban gardening, case management, kindergarten boot camp, DECA (a college prep charter school), Daybreak (a homeless teen shelter), tours on the river, water treatment, phone calls, teaching, daycare, project planning, meeting people, and more. When talking about enhancing professional skills, Chris stated, “It’s hard to work with a budget and it is one thing that students don’t know how to manage a budget and manage financials and it is one of the biggest takeaways I have learned, professionally.” Another student, Beatrice, mentioned:

...[my] experience at Daybreak has really opened my mind to how I see people who have grown up very, very differently than me. I used to

be afraid to talk to some of these people...But, every person has a story and I, I think that kind of helps my fear of, you know, trying to connect to people who have different backgrounds.

Examples such as these suggest that students might have been linking their community engagement with their thinking about themselves as future professionals.

Various roles. University of Dayton students engaged in community service work with children, teens, and adults. Their voices told of a wide variety of roles, which included teacher, tutor, fundraiser, leader, organizer, player, case manager, and gardener - to name just a few. Emily mentioned that she served in many different roles through her service involvement. Some of these roles included, "helping them [students] with homework," coordinating "a tee ball program after school," and organizing "a service group with different age groups every day that's kind of focused on citizenship and community service." Anita also played a diversity of roles; she was involved with "case management," "worked to secure housing," and "partnered with social workers."

Time management. The students had a variety of obligations to manage other than service commitments, including: educational requirements to graduate, part-time jobs, and social activities with friends. Some students struggled to balance their time commitments in order to have a full collegiate experience. According to Emma, besides her interest in community service, she "is an RA with heavy time commitment." Emma expressed that she also is in a service fraternity and swamped with other activities. The combination of managing her various commitments can create some "pretty crazy weeks." Another student, Ben, worked at his service site "from 8 a.m. to 4:30 [p.m.] every day" (Monday through Friday). Outside of Ben's semester of service commitment, he worked an outside job of which he stated, "Monday's are my awful day, I work 5 to 7, uh, and then I have an hour break for dinner which I usually eat dinner with a friend and then I work again from 8 to midnight."

Meaning Making

The third domain is meaning making itself, that is, the meaning the students ascribed to their experiences. The Fitz Center's model of community engaged learning places a special emphasis on ongoing reflection. Students meet regularly in small groups to discuss their experiences, and "think aloud" about the life lessons they can derive from their experiences. We constructed the following six themes within this domain.

Learning who I am and what I will do for the rest of my life. Participants saw a connection between what they had experienced in their work through the Fitz Center, and how these experiences were forming their perspective about their life's work. All participants viewed their experiences as educational and formative, and directly or indirectly preparatory for their future professional careers. One of the students, Miranda, said:

I think it's given me a vocation...it's also made me realize that what I want to do after graduation isn't just for myself...before, I was very, very concerned with individual concerns after graduation. Now, I realize that I want to do what I want to do because of the people that I worked with, and I see how that kind of work can impact them...

Building relationships is essential to community engagement/service. A repeated theme in our conversations with these students revealed that students place building relationships as the critical and central element that ensures effectiveness and success, i.e., genuine engagement. To students, superficial engagements are not likely to lead to enduring influence and social change. Building relationships was described as a prerequisite for consensus building. Thus, building relationships was the prerequisite for meaningful service. Spiritually speaking, it was about seeing God in others. Rather than participating in "othering" (Fine & Weis, 2003), many students felt a connection to people they may have never encountered outside their service involvement. Emma talked about what she had "put into" her service work, while also sharing, in emotional tones, the loss of relationships when leaving the site. She said:

At the end of the semester, we had to do a reflection [about] our whole summer, and I honestly started crying when I was writing it because it was so hard for me to think about leaving these kids behind. After everything I had put into building that relationship with them...I definitely wanted to continue to be a presence to them...[thus] I'm very happy that I'm still continuing that now.

Personal growth: Expanding my thinking, feeling, struggling, and understanding. Students described personal gains they had accrued. Both the students themselves and the Fitz Center's program participants in the city "are served." Chris captured that meaning when he expressed what he gained:

It just broadens your view of the world and gives you a different perspective of humanity...it helps you develop as a person and [realize] how your passions and your faith and your interests all kind of coincide...I would choose [service] as it has given opportunities I would not have had to develop as a person, my faith life, my academics, [and] my professional life. It makes me a better person at least.

Experiences with service in community were not always without struggle. The students expressed a certain cost of engagement, that is, the price one has to pay in order to serve. Furthermore, the students recognized that the costs were not just in terms of time and work assignments; they were also deeply emotional and spiritual in nature. Many students expressed their thoughts and feelings about encountering poverty, injustice, and unmet human needs. This deeply moved them, awakened their awareness, and challenged them towards action. The students expressed a heightened sense of empathy, feeling hurt for the pain of others, and the personal desire to do something about it.

Justice: A fundamental assumption that is reinforced. One of the most important constructs in the minds of the students was social justice. For these students, justice demands a personal response. There was an active understanding of justice; that is, working toward building just structures in the world leads to organizational systems that work not only for the privileged and powerful. The Fitz Center's emphasis on bringing about social transformation was echoed in the personal expressions of these students. Simply put, they were constantly trying to connect micro-level activities on the ground, to macro issues of justice for everyone. They viewed their work as part of a larger canvas, a collective response that is called for by the demands of justice for all. One of the students, Alexis, said:

I had this reading that talked about citizenship... about three types of citizens: the personally responsible, the participator, and the justice oriented...I made a conscious decision that I want to strive to be justice oriented, looking for the root causes of social injustice, and developing and working in partnership with other people...I'm not content being personally responsible...and bring a contributive citizen...I'm passionate about the idea that individuals in communities can make a significant change...they can work together to develop the community which can then lead to larger ripple effects...

Getting to know the city of Dayton. This deep engagement with people and institutions in and around the city of Dayton had an indirect positive influence on the students. They discovered the city through fresh eyes and got to know its people, culture, and institutions. Some students were impressed with those with whom they served, the citizens of Dayton who were actively engaged in service in their own communities. Consequently, many students expressed what we interpreted as a love for the city, along with a sense of gratitude for what it had given them. These students not only felt linked to the university community, but also linked to the larger Dayton community. Many of them expressed that they would consider living in Dayton after their graduation, if they had career or higher education opportunities that fit their aspirations. Simply put, many of them who were not native Daytonians exclaimed that Dayton had become their “second home.” One of the students, Tom, said:

...it's really gotten me involved... really reaching out and seeing these new opportunities and seeing... the city of Dayton in a completely different way... I was so comfortable in the UD bubble... it's really opened my eyes to the good things that are happening in the city of Dayton... my perspective on the city is completely opposite of what I thought it was last year... I've been able to see what problems there are, but more importantly, with the Fitz Center, what assets there are in the community.

Deeper meaning of service than before. The Fitz Center has been promoting a paradigm of community engaged learning that goes beyond the traditional service-learning approach. The students embodied this emphasis in their work and meaning making thereof. In the student's conceptualization, service was not something that one did to another. Service was about being present; it was about doing with, not doing for. To students service was about challenging yourself. One of the students, David, said:

You're not providing a service, but you are working with people... you are working in solidarity, and they're providing a service to you [too]. That's crucial, going forward, to recognize that there is no them and us. There is no—the poor. The poor don't exist. We're poor too. We're poor in spirit, or we're poor in ego, or poor in our possession with things—money, beer, sex—whatever it may be. We are poor...That's service. I am there...I am there for them.

Discussion

Our discussion in this section returns to the origins of the study: a study limited to the perceptions of 14 undergraduate students who had spent substantial amounts of time in community service. We concluded that college students who engage in community service can possibly bring change in the community. Of equal value is that they themselves are changed through service; and, their transformation promises ripple effects in the world around them. We discuss these and other conclusions next, enhancing the discussion in places with more of the students' words.

For the most part, these students came to UD predisposed to become border-crossers from UD to the city. Community engagement began earlier, within their families and in their high schools. UD's Fitz Center provided the transition to new sites for service, and deeper meaning making through service. Service engagement in itself was not new. Thus, when educators and administrators in higher education are designing community engagement programs, the recruitment strategy could benefit from considering the predisposition to service, indicated by service experiences in the personal histories of prospective students.

Returning from the community sites in the city to their campus homes, the value added by community engagement was assured through the Fitz Center's activities of reflection. For instance, when Beatrice talked about time in a teen homeless shelter and how she "used to be afraid to talk to some of these people," she is being honest about what some would call "othering" (Fine & Weis, 2003). Through reflection, she realized that in the past, she might have seen those unlike herself as separate from her, fearing their differences – whether, we speculate, it be social class, ethnicity, or religion. Likewise, Danielle reflected, "The campus shares a zip code with people who, I think a lot of times...we disassociate ourselves with...that's a disservice to our campus and all the students because Dayton has a ton of resources." We surmise that the experience alone, without reflection, might have been insufficient to evoke students' awareness and change in their consciousness. This is an important insight for educators and administrators, suggesting that reflection and action need to be inextricably intertwined if the goal is genuine learning, change, and growth.

When Beatrice and Danielle talked about people in the city of Dayton as "these people" or "people a lot of time we disassociate ourselves with," they were separating people on UD campus from the people in the city, the "others." Amid her wider conversation about time in the city, the one demographic

Danielle pointed to was ethnicity; she spoke of students from Hispanic and Turkish families who struggled with the English language. Beatrice showed her own growth beyond fear of “others,” when she differentiated who she is now from who she used to be, saying she “used to be afraid to talk to some of these people.” Furthermore, when talking about crossing the city – campus border (i.e., bursting the bubble), none of our transcripts revealed students talking about the white and African American profiles on UD campus (approximately 78% white and 3% African American) and in the city (approximately 51% white and 43% African American). Nevertheless, the distinctions they made had to have some basis; and we can speculate about what that basis might have been, other than language differences.

At least three possibilities come to mind. First, perhaps the distinctions between the campus and the city were based in socioeconomic status, i.e., students from the middle and upper income strata and city partners from the middle and lower income strata. Several students talked a lot about poverty, income inequality, and social justice based on work status, joblessness, and family income. Perhaps poverty separated the campus and the city in these students’ thinking. Second, perhaps race was a differentiating factor in students’ thinking, but it was not given voice during the interviews. It may not have been sufficiently salient in their experiences to override other more powerful and more immediate influences. Interviews cannot reveal everything. Third, perhaps race was not a part of their reflection on experience, and, therefore, not a differentiating characteristic in students’ thinking at all. If this were true, perhaps the meaning making of their service was based on a complex combination of social characteristics of their experiences, possibly including race and socioeconomic status.

Danielle may have articulated best the core of community engagement, i.e., changing oneself. She spoke of the people of Dayton she met who are working to reverse social injustice. Those interactions led her “to ask how we can take that information, reflect on our experiences, and integrate [the two].” And, she then got to the core—which is transcending the experience itself, “understanding that the program is not what you’re doing there, but it’s kind of how your thoughts [change] as a result of your experience, and how that will carry on to your future choices.” Thus, the findings in this study have implications for the larger community within which the university resides, because community engaged learning addresses the deeper mission of higher education, which includes the movement towards the greater good and transformation of its constituents and of society itself.

Repeatedly these students showed a growing maturity toward their own consciousness, their own self-awareness, increasingly able to draw self-portraits by discovering their own impulses, their own reactions to new people, and their own aspirations for the future—asking such questions as: Who am I? What do I want with my life? Community engagement encourages students to play adult roles, to practice professional skills in a safe environment, to try out collaboration as a work skill, to risk close relationships with unfamiliar and diverse groups of people. Consequently, this study adds to the “evidence” that decision makers in higher education often look for in order to justify allocating the necessary resources for such programs to continue and grow.

When the campus and the community differ widely in socioeconomic status, the clash between the two can result in new responses, new insights, new learning for partners on both sides of the clash: for upper middle class university students and for their peers in low-income families in the city. New insights can lead each of the partners (the city partner and the university partner) to understand each other more fully and deeply than before, i.e., understand beyond socioeconomic differences. Stark differences in the foreground initially might recede to the background once personal relationships are built. David, for instance, made meaning of poverty beyond socioeconomic status when he said, “Each of us is poor,” citing examples, among others, of being poor in ego, poor in spirit. A UD student outside the common upper middle class profile of the university, David was from a predominantly low-income town and identified with both socioeconomic sides of the university-city boundaries. His interpretation provides hope that, when the community engagement goal is personal relationships, barriers to such relationships, including socioeconomic differences, might diminish. However, the more common upper middle class UD students who participate in service activities can cross the border both ways, always returning to their protective university environment, while low-income community partners continue to be confined to their lives in the historically marginalized city. Relationships with UD students might thrive but their socioeconomic poverty does not diminish.

Students who cross the campus-city border become links between the two. While college students may have engaged in their home communities during high school, the experience is very different in college. In college, they are usually not engaged in familiar home communities and culture. Students often enter a new city, a new community, a new culture. These UD

students surrendered to vulnerabilities in a new community, and in the process, they became champions of the city of Dayton—further closing the city-campus gap. Universities benefit when that gap narrows, especially for urban campuses like UD that are situated very close to the heart of the city. In any city, higher education leaders and civic leaders strive for cooperation, for understanding, for finding mutually beneficial policies and practices (Jacoby, 2003). Students engaged in community service cross those borders and, in many ways, might begin to fulfill those leaders' efforts. Thus, decision makers in government, civic, and industry-related organizations need to take heed of the long-term value that can be generated by sponsoring and participating in community engaged learning programs, not just the immediate value the service generates, but the long term relationships, commitments, and goodwill that are nurtured. To be sure, our research and our findings are limited to only the student perceptions and meaning, not the perceptions of community citizens or university personnel leading UD's service programs.

Father Gutierrez (2004) is clear about the end goal of community engagement in service: and that goal is societal change. Social change only happens when people make it happen, and we saw glimmers of his vision in the voices of students who admitted undergoing their own transformations. Community engaged service is not about coaching tee-ball or helping homeless teens or distributing soup. It is building relationships with people. The most powerful meaning was building relationships between partners who are equal, emotionally and spiritually. Danielle articulated the process well by expressing what it was like to have "genuine" interactions with people. She described it as opening yourself to others in the city, "putting yourself probably in an uncomfortable or challenging position." Because when one is a friend, when one is close to someone "who is addicted to drugs, one becomes hurt through their pain. In this pain that's mutual, you can work authentically and passionately for social change."

When UD friends of students engaged in service also participated, friendships strengthened. When UD friends of engaged students did not participate in the community, their sensitivities and consciousness were, nevertheless, affected because they became audiences for students' talking about their community activities. These audiences forced the engaged students to reflect further on the meaning of their service experience. Nonparticipating friends were a source of consternation, and sometimes, even derision, for not getting out of "the bubble." Thus, a potential area of inquiry for future researchers could be to understand how students navigate the challenge of being outli-

ers, in terms of devoting a significant portion of time and energy to service activities that a large proportion of their peers do not engage in.

Furthermore, researchers and practitioners need continually to discover new ways and means to support and nurture this positive phenomenon of students who have the desire to serve and the will to act upon it. We also invite administrators to envisage new strategies to scale up existing community engagement programs, so that they include increasing proportions of the student population in higher education. In this Catholic university, the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community is a noteworthy example of how to offer experientially derived best practices for students envisioning a future of faith-based community engagement.

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