Political Consciousness but not Political Engagement: Results from a Service-Learning Study

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How does participation in a service-learning program impact the way students think about politics and political engagement? There are reasons to expect that service-learning can contribute to the development of a political consciousness and the skills necessary for political participation. The author uses participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups to examine how participation in an in-depth service-learning program shapes the ways students think about their service as it relates to politics. Students in this sample clearly develop a deeper sense of political consciousness, but not a deeper level of political engagement. These students feel as though they "should" be more political in order to make an impact on the issues on which they are working, but they face several obstacles: they do not know how, do not see politics (at least in its current state) as a viable solution, see politics as too divisive, or are too busy with their service and/or school.

There has been no shortage of attention paid to questions around potential contributions among the current generation of college students to sustain and improve our democracy. In particular, social scientists have shown a great interest in the effects of community service on the political engagement of students. Depending on where one draws the boundaries on birth points for the generation (as early as 1978 and as late as mid-2000s), anywhere from 80 to 100 million Millennials will be of voting age by the 2016 election (Rankin, 2013). Thus, the sheer size of this age group – which in 2015 overtook Baby Boomers as the largest generation (Fry, 2015) – makes it a significant presence in U.S. politics, and their impact will only continue to grow (Rankin).

Young adults are the object of many programmatic attempts to imbue the values and practices upon which a healthy democracy depends. Service-learning has been promoted and widely touted as a means of increasing students' sense of civic responsibility (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000) and the knowledge and skills necessary for involvement in the democratic political process (Hunter & Brisbin, 2000). There has been a surge in service-learning across the board, with citizens (especially students) engaging in such programs in record numbers. At the same time, there has been great concern over the demise of civic life, the lack of engagement in associations, and the decline of political participation (perhaps most notably, Putnam, 2001). Despite the widespread institutionalization of service-learning, there are mixed findings regarding its relationship to political engagement.

Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, and Corngold (2007) call for more explicit attention to be paid to political learning in colleges and universities if society intends to "take full advantage of higher education's opportunities to prepare thoughtful, skilled, and active citizens" (p. 41). The process and underlying influences by which politicization does or does not occur as a result of service-learning engagement is an understudied area. This article uses qualitative data to explore how students involved in a long-term service-learning program attach meaning to their service. Of particular interest are the ways in which these students think about their service in relation to a sense of politics and political engagement.

Relevant Literatures

It is important to understand how young people think about politics and their role in our political system. However, research on the impact of service-learning on political engagement remains inconclusive, with considerable debate about the potential for service-learning to contribute to a healthy democracy (McAdam & Brandt, 2009; Walker, 2002). It is clear that more knowledgeable and informed citizens are more likely to engage in politics and in their communities (Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Yet, Macedo et al. (2005) showed that in general, younger generations are less likely to care about, know about, and engage in U.S. politics than older generations. There are, however, trends in recent years that suggest these worries are overstated, and there may be a reversal in young people's participation. Recent studies indicate that those in the emerging Millennial generation are increasingly engaged politically, but new forms of democratic participation must be recognized (Bennett, 2007; Dalton, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

While Millenials, similar to the electorate at large, have soured on federal electoral politics, they care deeply about their country and are willing to work to improve the quality of life in their communities through public service programs (Harvard Public Opinion Project, 2014). Students enter college well accustomed to community service. The 2005 HERI U.S. Freshman survey reported the highest percentage ever of incoming students who had volunteered at least occasionally – 83 percent. The 2006 HERI survey reported an all-time high of 67.3 percent of students who stated there is a good or some chance they would continue to volunteer in college. College students accounted for 3.1 million volunteers in 2010, and the last ten years have seen a service-learning "movement" emerge among institutions of higher education (Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, 2011). According to the 2011 Campus Compact survey of 1,100 college administrators, the number of students who engage in service, service-learning, and civic engagement activities has risen steadily in recent years, to a current high of 35 percent of all students represented in the sample. In addition, 93 percent of schools in the survey reported offering service-learning courses (Campus Compact, 2011).

Service-learning has been promoted as a means for increasing students' political knowledge, civic skills, and general sense of civic responsibility. By involving students in service-learning, proponents aim to contribute to the development of informed, committed participatory citizens (Youniss, 2011). There is a belief that such involvement in service-learning can lead to politicization of the individual, impart a deeper understanding of social issues, and instill a sense of social justice and create the potential for social change (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996; Marullo & Edwards, 2000a, 2000b; Matthews, 2000; Zlotkowski, 2007). Marullo and Edwards (2000b) believe that service has the potential to transform and politicize individuals to become change agents who attempt to alter the structural or institutional practices that produce inequalities. Service-learning can lead to growth in a number of developmental areas for students as well: a change in perspectives on people and problems; seeing the links between theory and practice; increased interpersonal, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills; an education in citizenship; and engagement in communities (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gray et al., 1999).

There are good reasons to suspect that high rates of volunteerism can translate into high levels of political engagement as students move into latter stages in life (Verba et al., 1995; Yates & Youniss, 1998). According to Macedo et al. (2005), those who volunteer are more likely to engage in political activity and feel less alienated from public institutions. McFarland and Thomas (2006) also show strong effects of participation in youth voluntary associations on adult civic and political involvement, particularly among student activities involving community service, representation, speaking in public forums, and generating a communal identity on adult civic and political involvement. McAdam and Brandt (2009) suggest that the voluntary nature of such programs impacts the effectiveness of political socialization. Further, youth voluntary associations "entail a variety of activities that develop civic and political skills… which in turn strengthen the individual's sense of interpersonal competence and self-esteem" (McFarland & Thomas, p. 403).

Lempert (1996) and Schwerin (1997) assert that service-learning participation can increase students' trust in government, personal sense of political power, and confidence in democratic procedures. Participation in service-learning can also broaden students' scope of participation in politics, interest groups, and social movements, particularly at the local level. Thus, it is argued that service can change a student's democratic ethic and ability to appreciate the value of participatory political acts (Battistoni, 1997; Lempert, 1996; Schwerin, 1997). Battistoni suggests that a community-based learning experience with a strong foundation in democratic citizenship – including the development of three essential components: intellectual understanding; civic skills and attitudes; and civic action – can lead to students coming away feeling more a part of their communities. This includes a better and more critical understanding of communities and the students' own role within them. Eliasoph (2013) also shows that volunteering can sometimes lead people to pose bigger questions about how our society works. "Volunteers may start out serving meals to the hungry and then go further, to ask why a wealthy society like ours even has hungry people to begin with" (p. 2). Community service and service-learning, in other words, can lead people to realize that truly helping to address an issue requires not just one-on-one volunteering but deep political action as well.

However, Walker (2002) argues that most research on service's contribution to young people's political participation is anecdotal and not rigorous. Among research that does directly measure the impact of volunteer service on political engagement, the effects are far from certain. A National Association of Secretaries of State study (1999) found that voting and volunteering are not statistical predictors of one another, nor are the two variables significantly correlated. In a comparison between service-learning students and a comparison group, Newmann and Rutter (1983) found that both groups showed a similar increase on measures of social responsibility, future social affiliation, and political participation. In a study using data from all accepted applicants to the Teach for America (TFA) program

from 1993 to 1998, McAdam and Brandt (2009) contradict the presumption that youth service invariably encourages long-term civic engagement. In fact, graduates of TFA measured lower in several forms of civic and political activity.

Service does appear to have a significant positive impact on young people's attitudes toward service itself. Multiple studies have shown a statistically significant commitment to further service in the future among those already engaged in service-learning (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Gray et al., 1999; Melchior, 1998). Thus, service is successful in encouraging young people to engage in more service, and also appears to have an impact on students' feelings of responsibility and desire to help others (Astin et al.; Gray et al.; Melchior). However, none of these studies found a relationship between service-learning and political participation. Newmann and Rutter (1983) argue that changes in political participation cannot be expected because most service opportunities are structured as a means to affect an individual students' growth or development rather than the students' participation in the public sphere. If personal growth is the main selling point, political engagement is left behind (Boyte, 1991).

Critics of voluntary service see community engagement as a moral, rather than a political act (Eliasoph, 2011; King, 2004; Poppendieck, 1998; Walker, 2002; Wang & Jackson, 2005). In this view, service is a good, noble, and principled thing to do, but is often perceived to be apolitical. In other words, much of the service that is conducted is perceived to be an act of charity by the volunteer, intended to achieve a small, but noble outcome that improves the life of individual service recipients rather than one that can alter the stratification systems that produce inequality. In this way, service programs can actually provide a "non-bureaucratic alternative to traditional government" (Wofford & Waldman, 1996, p. 30). Volunteers often disavow concern with larger policy questions, and service is increasingly conceptualized as an alternative to politics – a way of "doing something" without the mess and conflict of politics (Boyte, 1991; Walker, 2002). Students are willing to be civically involved, but would prefer to do so outside the political system. While young people, as with many of their older counterparts, have a desire to "help," they are likely to think about service and politics as two very distinct activities. Students often see a dramatic split in thinking about service and politics as very different types of activities with very different value structures (Stone, 2008; Walker, 2000, 2002). Rankin (2013) sees a clear gap among Millennials between the familiar act of community service and the much less familiar concept of political engagement. Perhaps because they are so much more familiar with this style of engagement, Millennial-age students tend to view community service as more directly relevant and impactful.

Methods

This inductive, multi-method, qualitative study was designed to explore the meanings that long-term student service-learners attach to their service, and in particular, if they consider these meanings political. This research method offered a deep view of students' engagement in the community, and illuminated a number of the factors that inform and help shape the volunteers' perceptions of their service work, and how these perceptions relate to a sense of politics. To be clear, this is not a study designed to measure the impacts of service on the eventual political activity of volunteers (which would be best measured by a longitudinal study). Rather, one-time, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus groups were conducted with current student volunteers participating in long-term, time-intensive service experiences. Through their engagement, students develop perceptions and opinions of their service, as well as beliefs about the social issues on which they worked. It is these constructed meanings that are at the heart of the analysis that follows.

Participants

This article emerged from a larger study comparing students who have participated in an organized service-learning model through the "Engaged Scholars"[1] program with others who volunteer on their own, but for a similar number of hours, and with the same community partner organizations. However, this article will focus solely on the Engaged Scholar students, not the comparison volunteers. Interviews also were conducted with staff members of the Engaged Scholarship Center and community partner organizations to better understand the structure, design, and goals of the service projects, and thereby gain an additional vantage on students' engagement. The primary research question was intended to explore the meaning that these service-learners' attach to their service, but this approach also illuminated a number of the factors that inform and help shape the service-learners' perceptions of service and influence this attached meaning.

The Engaged Scholars are a diverse group of students at a mid-sized public, liberal arts college in the Northeastern region of the United States (referred to as Northeast College or NC hereafter), who work as part of a team of students, staff, and community members to improve the quality of life in their surrounding area. This Engaged Scholars program is one of nearly 25 similar programs at colleges and universities

nationwide that work with an Engaged Scholarship Foundation (ESF), supporting 1,500 students to be actively involved in social justice issues. These four-year programs are intended to provide students with opportunities to enhance their own skills while promoting positive change and social justice. In return, Scholars receive an annual scholarship, which can cover either 50 to 100 percent of their tuition (based on need). Scholars are expected to fulfill the following requirements each year: attend an intense orientation, training, and community planning session prior to service; conduct 300 hours of meaningful service, meetings, or workshops (7-10 hours per week); attend weekly reflection meetings and occasional forums or conferences; go on class-based service trips; and remain in good academic standing.

At the beginning of their involvement in the program, Scholars choose to join one of 12 issue-based service teams, made up of approximately 5-8 students each. As students continue in the program, they are expected to pursue their interests and increase their levels of participation, commitment, and leadership – both at their respective community organizations and on campus. The Engaged Scholars program was chosen for this study because of this long-term, in-depth model of "deep partnerships." It has been shown that regardless of the community organization, youth volunteers benefit from lengthier volunteer commitments that expose them to the structural causes of social problems (Nenga, 2011).

Data Collection

To witness the students' service engagement as it occurred, participant observation was conducted. Participant observation requires the researcher to become directly involved in the work and participate in the daily life of research participants. In this study, that meant serving alongside the students at their community organizations. Volunteer work is an especially rich activity for studying the ways in which people make meaning of social issues because this work offers the potential to bring volunteers into contact with people different from themselves to collaborate around community issues (Nenga, 2010). Observations are useful in documenting interactions between the students and service recipients but in-depth interviews are also necessary to understand the meaning attached to these interactions (Nenga, 2011).

In addition to on-site participant observation, I joined the Engaged Scholars and staff for their intensive summer orientation and training for two consecutive years, and attended a number of weekly meetings where all Scholars came together. These all-Scholar sessions are intended to be an opportunity for students to participate in discussions and activities designed to reflect on the role of their service as it relates to larger systemic issues.

Forty-six interviews relevant to this article (26 Scholars, 20 program and community staff members) were conducted, ranging from just under 30 minutes to almost two hours, although the average interview was roughly an hour.[2] Among the service-learners, interviews were evenly distributed through each of the four class years (First Year, Sophomore, Junior, Senior). There were slightly more students identifying as female than male in this study, which is consistent with the program overall. The Engaged Scholars program recruits and chooses an intentionally diverse group of Scholars by race and class, and this diversity is reflected in the sample as well. This sample group is thus more racially and economically diverse than the NC student body as a whole (including 11 Scholars and 6 staff members of color).

This study focused on students who volunteered with one of four community partners, forming four issue-based teams (housing, hunger, education, and health care/developmental disabilities): Homes for All (HFA), which partnered with the housing team; the Mid-Atlantic Soup Kitchen (MASK) – hunger; The Learning Coalition (TLC) – education; and Community House (CH) – health care/developmental disabilities. These host partners were selected due to their deep relationship with the Scholars program, as well as the diversity and high number of student volunteers that could be accommodated at each of these sites. Students were involved with homework help in the after-school program with the education team, playing kickball and other recreational activities with the health care team, sorting donations with the housing team, and serving lunch with the hunger team. Interviewing the student volunteers and staff from each of these four sites enabled a better understanding of the service experience as well as the meanings of service constructed by the main actors in the service experience, paying particular attention to the potential connections between service and politics. No research was conducted with the clients or communities served by these programs, only the students and staff. IRB approval was received for all aspects of this study.

Purposive sampling (Palys, 2008) was used to achieve a sample reflective of the Engaged Scholars program in gender, race, and class year. After the four site-based teams were identified, staff members of the Engaged Scholars program provided the contact information for the Scholars, and attempts were made to contact each team member for an interview. The Engaged Scholar staff also provided contact information for community partner organizations, and my familiarity with the community partner staff occurred during Engaged Scholar events and through participant observation with the Scholars.

Purposive sampling allows researchers to "iden-

tif(y) cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). Interviews were conducted within each sampling group until all interested actors were interviewed or the "saturation point" was reached, when the information gathered from interviews began to be repeated, and no new relevant information was gained (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Data Analysis

During the data analysis stage, two interpretive focus groups – one with Engaged Scholarship Center staff, and one with a group of Engaged Scholars – were also conducted to ensure accuracy of the emerging themes. Interpretive focus groups are a form of secondary analysis that involves a more participatory method of analysis exploring the meaning of qualitative data (Dodson, 1998). These differ from conventional focus groups in that participants analyze existing qualitative data to extend the analysis and co-create new primary data (Dodson, 1998; Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005; Redman-MacLaren, Mills, & Tommbe, 2014). Conducting interpretive focus groups after individual interviews allows the researcher to explore issues that came up during the analysis of the interviews in further depth and detail (Morgan, 1997). Such groups also offer the advantage of observing group interaction on a topic, and can be particularly useful for topics typically not thought out by participants in detail prior to the group discussion (Morgan). Focus groups can be particularly useful because the complex dynamics of groups often reveal unarticulated norms or normative assumptions that may not have emerged in individual interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed as an ongoing process while additional interviews were conducted. The transcription process enabled building a deep understanding of the data. During the transcription of interviews, an evolving list of analytical codes were developed based on topics and ideas repeated by students and staff. This process allowed emerging themes and new leads and existing gaps in the data to be identified. According to grounded theory methods, each new interview, focus group, or field note can inform earlier data, so codes developed during one interview transcription could provide insight into other data (Charmaz, 2005). Thus, the data from each interview was given multiple readings and renderings to ensure a complete understanding of the Scholar and (both program and community) staff experience in service. The codes were applied to interview texts using qualitative analysis software, and the data were then used to build overarching themes to be explored and discussed in further depth with the interpretive focus groups.

Results

(Dis)Connecting Service and Political Engagement

The Scholars Program attempts to connect direct service experiences with the deeper issues underlying the Scholars' work. Donna, the vice-president of the Engaged Scholarship Foundation (ESF), sees this connection at the core of the Scholars model.

> There are six core values, that all the Scholar programs have, and a big one is civic engagement – and that is defined as political engagement, like understanding what I can do through the political process, through the democratic process, voting, you know advocacy, lobbying, etc. And these themes run through all of the Scholars programs, through the reflections and trainings.

Donna went on to explain the Scholar model in terms of connecting personal experience to deeper political thought.

> We have this developmental model thing, so it's like, in the first year, do you know how to manage your time, do you know how to listen well, do you know how to reflect, do you know how to write? And in the second year, do you know how to be a part of a team, can you balance all your responsibilities, have you started to think about diversity in any real way? And then third year is when people, the programs usually get into more critical thinking, like introducing civic engagement, activism, lobbying, running a team, more facilitating dialogue. And then, if you do it right, then you can get students to those experiences, where they're thinking about, well I've got all these years of experience, I know the people, I know the site, I know the issue, now what?

Bill, a Scholar with HFA, seems to be an example of how the developmental model described by Donna works in practice.

> I think in my first two years I was really idealistic… And then I think over the years, especially now being a senior, and being more of an adult and a citizen, those issues have come to a sort of broader sense of let's figure this out in a way that can be equal, ethical, and fair for everyone. And definitely Homes for All and Scholars has pushed me towards that.

When asked if she saw a connection between her direct service and larger structures and institutions, Samantha, a Scholar with TLC, told me:

> Yes, and I think the Scholars do a good job of bridging the gap as we go along in our years here. As you get older you start doing more trainings on grant writing or getting involved in public policy and things of that nature. So we go

> from the micro level, which is our service sites, to this macro level where we're working on actual policy.

Fiona, another Scholar with TLC, explained how she thinks this process works for most Scholars, and why it is effective.

> What Scholars tries to do in general is taking kids like at NC, okay they're volunteering with kids at TLC for a couple of hours but in the process they're becoming more aware of how education policies affect these kids. … We can look back and say well, if these policies change, then the people we care about will benefit from it.

However, while it is recognized as an important component in the design of the Scholars experience, Engaged Scholarship staff also noted limitations to the program model, and that the connection between service and politics does not always happen. Donna, vice-president of the ESF, discussed the limitations in making the connection between service and politics.

> Getting to the part where people can propose systemic solutions… I'm not sure if we're doing that….. I don't know that we're getting students there. That's part of the reason that we're doing those discussions with students, is because we want people to be comfortable analyzing what they think their own viewpoints are, and for example … if they were going to run for office or something, what would they propose? And I don't even know if anyone is successful in that, even with an intensive political engagement training program.

Ian, president of the ESF, also discussed the limitations facing the field of service-learning in this area, particularly the lack of paths available for students to make the connection between service and politics. "If students aren't experiencing and playing a role in that systemic, problem-solving, collaborative kind of collective work, then their understanding of it is going to be hampered." After discussing how few service-learning opportunities actually engage in that type of collaborative, solution-based work, he continued:

> While the field has talked about, 'people need to get involved in politics,' we haven't really crafted that many direct roles. … People talk about organizing, and then they talk about letter-writing, and they talk about canvassing, and petitions, and sort of more protest oriented approaches, and while those are important too, obviously, they're not a normal place for students to get heavily engaged. Students want to do more hands on stuff anyway, and so we're trying to figure out how you can do this.

Frustration Motivates Political Consciousness

Many Scholars told me that seeing the impact of their work motivated them. When I asked them why they were so committed to service, I repeatedly heard about seeing youth test scores improve, homes built, lessons learned, meals served, and many other similar successes. However, most Scholars also admitted to feeling deep frustration in their service work. Rather than being seen solely as negatives in the service experience though, these frustrations seem to be a necessary step for many Scholars in seeing a connection between their work and the larger systems and structures that shape the issues on which they work. Donna, the vice president of the ESF, sees this as an important piece of the Scholars model:

> If you're being successful with students in the upper class years, in some ways, you find that they become more disenchanted, or discouraged, as they become more knowledgeable of an issue. Because they come to a place where it's like, well maybe what I'm doing is not making an impact right now, and there has got to be other types of solutions.

Many Scholars discussed frustrations in their work that led them to question the effectiveness of community service. Sometimes this was a realization that their work is impacted by a much larger system than just their site. Rachel, a Scholar with TLC, had this to say:

> There are challenges built in, because we can't control it 100%. The school system overall, the teachers have like 30 kids in their classroom, they have charter schools closing every year, just bringing 200 more kids into the school that is already over-capacity…And those are the things that you can't really just change, it takes way more, it takes a school board, it takes the state, it takes so many things to change it, you know.

Brian, a Scholar with HFA, expressed a similar frustration with the limitations of his service:

> I think one of the largest challenges is working within a system that's already messed up… But, if we weren't involved to the extent that we are involved, if we aren't involved this much, then it's that much worse, you know. So I feel like you're making an impact, and you're trying to help the issue, but solving it has to come from another level.

Ashley, a Scholar with TLC, expressed her frustration with the lack of progress she has seen in her time as a Scholar, and the need for much larger changes.

> I just don't even know if it's realistic, for even a group of 80 people to tackle it. Like, you really need a huge movement to change everything.

> And you're not just changing public school, but you need to change politics and economics too, so it's like, (*pause*) who's going to do that?

Some Scholars even begin to question why nonprofit organizations are required to meet the needs in their community at all. Thus, while many Scholars feel frustrations and limitations in their work, the key seems to be harnessing and redirecting these frustrations before they lead to despair. Penelope, a Scholar with MASK, had this to say:

> You often feel very frustrated or dejected because of your service, and you feel like you're not actually doing anything, because if you were doing something, wouldn't you see it? So that's something that I struggle with sometimes.

Political Consciousness, Not Political Engagement

According to Rankin (2013), college students demonstrate consistently high levels of interest in national politics and world affairs. However, despite this prevalent interest, there is individual disengagement, what Rankin refers to as "distant politics" (p. 107). In other words, students are interested in significant national and world events, yet they are unsure of how to connect such interests to action. In a similar manner, many Scholars reported that they attempt to follow news or policy and considered themselves reasonably well informed, particularly with news relating specifically to their work. For example, headlines about housing or education regularly grab the attention of Scholars with HFA or TLC. As noted above, Scholars also spoke about the connections they see between service and politics, and some even mentioned the meaningful conversations they have around this connection. However, seemingly contradicting these actions, many Scholars also noted that they actively separate their service work from what they define as politics. In other words, there is a disconnect between the development of a political consciousness and actual political engagement. This distinction is key to understanding the ways in which Scholars relate their service work to a broader sense of politics.

There is a common recognition among Scholars that they should be more politically engaged, but there are a number of factors that stand in the way. Many offered statements similar to, "I know it's political, but…" before explaining the reasons that they do not consider themselves "political" and are not politically engaged. These terms were defined by the interviewees themselves. Among the reasons that Scholars fail to make a connection to political action are: (a) they do not know how to engage politically, (b) they do not see politics (at least not in its current state) as a viable solution, (c) they see politics as too divisive, or (d) they are too busy with their service and school work. Each of these views contribute to a conception of service engagement stripped of "politics," where service-learners see making a difference as an individual as the best potential for creating change.

Not knowing how. A number of Scholars indicated that while they know they should be political, or know that they need to engage with the political system in order to make a real difference on the social issues of inequality with which they were engaged, they did not know how to do so, as indicated by Hector, a Scholar with Community House: "I just honestly think it's all confusing. I want to be more of an advocate. I just don't know exactly how to do that yet." Ashley, a Scholar with TLC, gave a similar statement: "I know we talk a lot about policy, like writing different laws or things like that, or creating different programs, and I don't even know where I would begin, to be honest, to start something like that."

Several other Scholars also reported that they would like to be more involved in politics, but they simply never learned how, and have never felt comfortable engaging politically. Emily, a Scholar with TLC, had this to say:

> I think policy has a huge influence on what we do, I just wish I knew more about it. … I just found policy to be so daunting, just like there was so much and they're speaking in all this political jargon…

A number of Scholars mentioned that they want to be involved politically, and realize it's important for their work, but they don't feel like they have the level of knowledge necessary to participate politically. Justine, a Scholar with HFA, had this to say:

> I'm not very involved in politics and I probably should be a little more aware of what's going on … If I'm going to be political and really understand it, I want to be able to understand all aspects of it…

Not seeing politics as a viable solution. Most Scholars and staff members of both the ESC and community partner organizations expressed the idea that large-scale structural change is ultimately necessary to make any real impact on the issues of inequality on which they work. These changes, they admit, involve the political system, and would involve political engagement to increase the government's role in addressing these issues, but they do not see politics, at least in its current state, as a viable solution. Anjuli, a Scholar with MASK, had this to say: "A lot of the issues end with politics, but a lot of us aren't really into politics because we see it as a dirty game. I'm not really interested in politics…" Ashley, a Scholar with TLC, expressed her distrust in the government.

> I'm not very hopeful. I'm not. Because I don't

> think people are willing to put their personal interests aside, or their political interests… someone in a high position is not going to want to get rid of their six-figure salary, to fix whatever needs to be fixed … because of their personal, or their money interests.

Other Scholars recognize that while political engagement is necessary, they perceive political systems moving frustratingly slowly, and they would rather make an immediate impact with their work. Brad, a Scholar with MASK, said: "Politics is such a long process. Just trying to put something into effect, just trying to get like a politician to recognize that this law needs to be changed or this law needs to be revised a little, it's going to take so long…"

This is a difficult position for most of those involved with the Scholars program to reconcile – to recognize the limitations of direct service, and to see that the government and the political system must be involved to address issues like hunger, housing, education, and health care, yet to not trust the government to do so. Kevin, the director of MASK, expressed this dilemma in his own work on hunger. "The answers and solutions are far beyond anything I can ever do…You're just putting a Band-Aid on things, that's what you're doing, just trying to help people get through the day."

A number of staff members with the ESC and community partner organizations expressed similar frustrations with the political systems as the Scholars above. Melissa, director of operations at Community House, said:

> Well, I think we kind of steer clear. We kind of just do our own thing. I mean, politics and policy, it tends to be slow, right… We can't be like, oh we want to change this, so let's write a letter, and try to get this policy changed. No, in the meantime we're going to do what needs to be done, and hope that the policy turns out the way we need it.

During the ESC staff focus group, some staff explained how they and their students feel on the topic of politics. For example, one staff member said:

> I think students are somewhat intimidated by politics, or not really willing to engage in those conversations, because they feel like some of the political systems are unattainable. So I feel like that's what holds people back from engaging in that, in those systems, because they just see them as stagnant or stable systems.

When asked if doing direct service appeals to her because it has more of an immediate impact than politics, Anjuli said:

> Yes, because I like the fact that I'm here and I'm trying to change an issue. Even though it's not on a big scale, at least I'm trying to do something at least for a school year or two. I know I'll see a change or I'll see something happen with my volunteering, but with politics you never know. It's sad but politics aren't my thing.

Ashley offered a similar response when asked if she preferred focusing on direct service because she could see the impact.

> The small things. Yeah, yeah, I do. Because at least you're in control of that and you can try to change it as much as you can. At least to help a few people, even if you can't help everyone. And I think that if everyone tried to help just a few people, maybe things will get a little better.

Susan, a Scholar with TLC, said that she does not even like talking about politics: "I hate politics. I hate the conversations that people have about politics. I think it brings out the worst in people… I feel very cynical about politics." Later in her interview, Susan explained why she prefers a direct service approach.

> I just don't think that me talking about it necessarily convincing another person who is clearly going to disagree with me is going to get me anywhere. I don't think it's going to change anything above us. I'm very much a close to home type of person and that's what's going to affect my life versus things that are probably going to be decided anyway…

Seeing politics as too divisive. Perhaps the most common reason Scholars (along with some ESC staff) gave for purposefully avoiding "being political" was that they see politics as too divisive. Particularly to Scholars who thought of "politics" in the more narrow terms of electoral politics, any discussion of political topics usually just served to divide people among partisan lines and lead to angry arguments that they would rather avoid altogether.

The Scholar program has what was described to me as "a culture of niceness" even when there is conflict. Scholars as a whole are, for the most part, a very tight-knit group, and there is a very real hesitancy to cause rifts within that group. As one ESC staff member said in the focus group:

> Sometimes we're just too formal, or too nice, to really debate. I think we can understand that someone is slightly different with their own ideology about politics … but I don't think we allow ourselves enough conversations and deep, deep really critical thinking about allowing each other's voice to be heard on those issues.

As such, it is not surprising that many Scholars do not want to engage in discussions that they feel might anger or offend each other. As Jesse, a Scholar with

TLC told me, "It's [politics] always so controversial that I try to stay out of it." Gina, another Scholar with TLC, expressed a similar sentiment: "I hate talking about politics; it makes me feel very uncomfortable. I don't want to know how other people stand; I don't want them asking me how I stand … I hate politics. It's so divisive."

Brian, a Scholar with HFA, clearly sees his work tied in with politics, but also sees how quickly any discussion of politics can lead to the type of fighting he tries to avoid: "Education and housing are completely political issues… and I'm always very interested in politics, but I hate to talk about them sometimes because people get into fights about them."

When I asked Brian if he thought that type of divisiveness is something that limits people from being more politically engaged, he said, "Yeah, because it's a turn off when you turn on the TV and there's two people yelling at each other, even in an educated way …. And you're like, I don't want to be a part of that."

Many Scholars see political partisanship as a major obstacle that keeps politics from being an effective form of engagement. Fiona, a Scholar with TLC, told me:

> I don't like to think too much about it [politics] because then I get really pessimistic, and I start to think like, well, it's just not realistic, because no one is willing to put their personal interests aside to make change happen.

Several Scholars spoke about how they avoid political discussions outside of the Scholars program as well – at home or in their classes – because they saw them as too divisive. Sheila, a Scholar with MASK, said:

> My Mom is … a Republican and I don't always agree with the things that she says but I don't know how to voice an opinion because she would freak out. So I just don't say anything. There are things that I do agree with and then when you come to school, especially in the History Department, there are a lot of Democrats, and it just gets complicated.

Larissa, a Scholar with CH, also explained: "I avoid politics like the plague, because it just makes people angry. …you're not going to change other people, they're not going to change you."

Several students also told me they think political partisanship often makes such conversations pointless. Samantha, a Scholar with TLC said, "My best friends here are very conservative Republicans and I'm a very liberal Democrat and very opposite. So I have a really hard time discussing with them a lot of things that I believe in because we disagree so strongly." During the focus group with Scholars, Steve, a Scholar with HFA, said,

> Politics has become such a polarizing topic, especially in recent decades, with the 24-hour news cycle, and especially political pundits on both sides … So, I think with that trend, politics has become especially unpleasant to talk about with most people.

Being too busy. Many of those involved with the Scholars program were aware of the limitations when civic engagement projects keep service and politics as distinct entities. However, they said that they were usually so busy with their service or keeping up with their classes that they did not have time to think about the connection between their service and politics in any meaningful way. So while there is a vague recognition among Scholars and staff that politics is important in their work in some way, it is not something they connect with their ongoing direct service on a day-to-day basis. Thus, for the Scholars, these issues come up sporadically in meetings, but they keep them mostly separate.

Scholars and ESC staff who already often feel overwhelmed with their responsibilities related to the program feel as if they do not have the time to engage with important political concerns even if they want to. As Steve, a Scholar with HFA told me, "Usually during the school year I'm just so frazzled I just don't get around to it. But no, I just can't follow politics. It's something I want to do but I don't." Similarly, Roger, a Scholar with Community House, said:

> I don't purposefully stay away. I try to keep up on it [politics] but honestly I get caught up in my day-to-day life, I guess. I'm just really busy. I wish I did more … I quite honestly don't keep up with it as much as I should.

As Justine, a Scholar with HFA, explains:

> I don't know where to start. That's exactly it. It's not disinterest, because I would like to be informed, I would like to know and understand it all. I just don't have enough time…

Ashley, a Scholar with TLC hopes that when she has more time, she would become more politically active: "I probably should be more active… maybe when I have more time, like when I'm not a student, then I can invest more time in it, hopefully."

ESC Staff also spoke about how the time required to meet daily student challenges often precludes time to focus on making the connection between service and politics. In the focus group, one staff member said:

> I see the importance of understanding the structure and understanding the laws, and understanding how policies are made and how they affect people. But our day-to-day struggle to do what

> we need to do in the present moment doesn't allow us almost to really engage in that, in that sort of more in-depth politics, or systems … We know that you need to get involved in politics so that you can have more impact, but when do we have the time to get there?

Reforming Current Structures Rather than Addressing Root Causes

While many of the Scholars and staff expressed their distrust of politicians or lack of knowledge about politics, when asked directly if the government should have a responsibility in addressing the social issues on which they are working, many said that the government should be doing more to address these issues. However, these responses were usually framed in terms of what the government can do to support existing nonprofit efforts or to expand volunteer efforts, not to change the level of inequality in our society. Thus, most proposed solutions or goals around service were based on reforming current structures rather than challenging the overall social structures that create and reinforce housing, hunger, education, and health disparities.

Rachael, a Scholar with TLC, expressed the view that the government has a clear responsibility to help citizens. However, when asked what she thought that role might be, Rachael focused on the government's ability to get more people involved with volunteering efforts:

> I get back to the education part of it, because sometimes people kind of don't know [about volunteering] … And if you say hey, this is available, you want to help out? You can go do this, then they're like aha, I can do that! So now it's something they know about, and it's something that they now can be willing to help out with because, and the government is a huge medium, like, they can disperse information to a large group of people…

Several of the most committed Scholars – those wanting to dedicate their lives to addressing the issues on which they were working as students – framed their ultimate goals as opening their own nonprofits, or continuing to get others involved in volunteering once they graduated rather than through political engagement. Justin, a Scholar with TLC, said:

> If I could create a socially conscious business, then you don't have to go through politics. I want to be able to say, hey, they need book bags or they need this, hey we got it for you. And if that's embedded into your business, which it will be eventually when I create it, it will be an easy way to make a difference without anyone controlling your decision.

Anjuli, a Scholar with MASK, described how she made connections between her service work and broader social structures, but her realization is still framed in terms of volunteering.

> I used to not get the full grasp of why I needed to volunteer, or why people needed us to volunteer. But with our meetings and staff they bring awareness to different issues and students bring awareness to different issues, and why they exist in the first place. So it's really helped me understand why we still need to volunteer even after our Scholars career is over.

It is worth considering then if the Scholars model serves to reinforce the role of nonprofits in meeting needs rather than challenging the systems of inequality that create need. When discussing the goals she has in mind for graduates of the Scholars program, Marina, the associate director of the ESP, said:

> My hope is whether they choose to work in social justice, nonprofit organizations, academia or corporate world, that somehow the experience that they have now is not just an experience. I hope that they will get involved in boards or they will donate their time or donate their resources to nonprofit organizations or to kids or to the school system in their own, their own area, where they go from here…So that's my hope, is that they keep that engagement going in some form…If they're working in the corporate world … letting their corporation know about things outside of it and being engaged. And if they're working in nonprofit organizations learning from this experience and doing it better.

Discussion

Many Scholars experience frustration as a necessary step in connecting the issues on which they work with a sense of political consciousness. They continue to find motivation in their work, and escape falling into hopelessness around their issue. However, if programs such as the Scholars want to avoid the risk of students just giving up on service work as futile, and becoming resigned to the inevitability of such issues as hunger, homelessness, and educational inequality, these frustrations must be funneled into productive channels to create social change. As described earlier, however, these channels and pathways are often lacking in the current service-learning landscape. If Scholars see their work as connected to a sense of politics or policy, these pathways seem clearer. However, even though most Scholars see that changes need to be made to larger systems or structures in order to make a meaningful impact on the issues on which they are working, they often purposefully separate their work, and themselves, from "being political."

Scholars are not alone in keeping service and political engagement as two separate spheres. As mentioned previously, students are volunteering at record high levels. However, by even the most obvious and minimal indicator of political engagement – voting – young people are increasingly disengaged in recent years. Peak millennial voting was in 2008, with 51.1 percent going to the polls (CIRCLE, 2010). However, the turnout dropped to 45 percent in 2012 (CIRCLE, 2013). In the 2010 midterm election, less than a quarter of voters ages 18 to 29 voted (CIRCLE, 2011). The rate of voters younger than 30 who could say with certainty that they were registered to vote also fell steadily after 2008; by 2012, it hit 50 percent, the lowest number recorded since 1996 (Pew Research Center, 2012a). The midterm elections of 2014 again produced the lowest youth voter turnout (19.9 percent) and youth voter registration (46.7 percent) ever recorded (CIRCLE, 2015).

Many Scholars explained that they know politics are important, and they know they "should" be politically engaged, but they don't know how. These trends seem to align with larger national findings. Some researchers argue that most Americans can, if given the opportunity, reason and think about politics (Gamson, 1992; Hochschild, 1981; Reinarman, 1987). However, citizens are rarely given the space and opportunity to develop the skills necessary to engage in politics, and these civic skills must be learned (Eliasoph, 1998). Many Americans are ignorant of how best to express their political demands, and lack essential knowledge about political institutions and public policies (Barber & Battistoni, 1993). A number of studies indicate very low levels of civic learning in the U.S., such as the 2012 National Task Force on Civic Learning report. The U.S. ranked 139th out of 172 world democracies in voter participation in 2007 (McCormick Tribune Foundation, 2007). Only 10 percent of citizens contacted a public official in 2009-2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Only 24 percent of graduating high school seniors scored at the proficient or advanced level in civics in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2010) civic reports show that only about one-quarter of twelfth graders are at or above the basic level of civic proficiency, while one-third of high school seniors test below what Galston (2004) calls the working knowledge needed by most citizens. The number of civics courses taken in public schools has declined by two thirds since 1960 (Macedo et al, 2005). This is not solely a concern for high schools, however. A survey of 14,000 college freshmen and seniors conducted in 2006 showed that the average college senior failed in all four subjects of American history, government, international relations, and market economy, fairing only slightly better than the first-year students (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006). These numbers seem to indicate that most Americans are underprepared to participate fully in a healthy democracy.

Many Scholars also said that they are not politically engaged because they don't see our current political system as a viable solution. Responses like this are hardly surprising, given recent levels of faith in the government, as indicated in polls. Only 19% of Americans surveyed by the Pew Research Center (2013a) said they trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most of the time. The share of the public saying they are angry with the federal government reached an all-time high of 30% in October 2013. Another 55% say they are frustrated with the government, and only 12% say they are basically content with the federal government (Pew Research Center, 2013a). The number of Americans that say they trust the government in Washington has steadily declined since the late 1960s, while distrust has steadily risen (Pew Research Center, 2013b).

Responses from Scholars who say they do not trust the government to do what is right to solve the issues on which they are working also seem in line with national polling data. Eighty-one percent of Americans believe that elected officials in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly, and 62% say, "most elected officials don't care what people like me think." In 2012, just 41% of Americans said the government is really run for the benefit of all the people. That was down from 49% three years earlier, and matches previous lows in the early 1990s (Pew Research Center, 2012b).

Thus, while many students and staff recognize that engagement in politics is necessary to create real change, they also see political engagement at this point to be futile. Several Scholars and staff members saw the government as too dysfunctional or corrupt to effectively address the issues about which they care. Other Scholars know that political engagement is necessary, but feel that this approach moves much too slowly. In all of these cases, students and staff say that while they recognize that service may not solve the issues on which they are working, it is at least taking some form of action, and is making some sort of difference – a difference that they do not see political engagement capable of making. This purposeful avoidance of "political talk" also typically keeps volunteers, staff, and community partners from discussing the root causes or possible solutions to the issues around which they are engaged (Eliasoph, 1998).

Many Scholars also actively distance themselves from political engagement because they see politics as too divisive. Winograd and Hais (2008) suggest that a penchant for group-oriented, "win-win" solutions

among the millennial generation leads many young people to be turned off by what they perceive as the endless bickering of partisan politics. A national survey of college students in 2007 indicated that there is tolerance and support for dissent and debate, but distaste for the bitter partisanship and political gamesmanship associated with much of the media reports on federal politics (CIRCLE, 2007). Of course, college students have a reason to feel this way. Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines – and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive – than at any point in the last two decades. Partisan animosity has also increased substantially over this period. In each party, the share of people with a highly negative view of the opposing party has more than doubled since 1994 (Pew Research Center, 2014). A Pew Research Center report (2012b) showed that the values gap between Republicans and Democrats is now greater than gender, age, race, or class divides. In recent years, both parties have become smaller in terms of registered members and more ideologically homogenous (Pew Research Center).

Many Scholars discussed the issues on which they were working in structural terms throughout the interview, and admitted that volunteering alone will not be enough to solve these issues. They have developed a sense of political consciousness, the sense that they know these issues are political, and that they "should" be politically engaged. Scholars also noted that "something bigger" needs to happen, and that politics clearly play a role in these solutions. Yet when asked specifically if they are politically engaged, or if they consider themselves political, there is an active distancing. Ideology plays a role here, as Scholars were often wary of increased government influence. Several even mentioned that increased services provided from the government would only lead to people taking advantage of these programs. The influence of a "personal responsibility" ideology which insists that hard work and good decisions will be enough for anyone to "make it" was thus very strong in these interviews, so strong that some Scholars regularly offered contradictory statements within the span of minutes. Several staff members from community partner organizations, who see their work as connected to larger structures, also said that they do not necessarily think the government should play a larger role in addressing social needs other than increased funding for their programs. However, ideology alone does not explain the gap between political consciousness and actually becoming and remaining politically engaged.

As discussed above, many Scholars see politics as divisive and ineffective. Most Scholars feel a desire to give back, help their community, and make a difference that directly contradicts the powerful ideology that each individual is responsible for their own fate. This tension is what Stone (2008) describes as the "Samaritan's Dilemma." Scholars, like most volunteers, want to "do good" and feel a real connection with their communities. However, as described above, politics is often seen as something entirely different and separate from "doing good." While most Scholars felt a moral or civic responsibility to be involved, active, and helping in communities, many also felt that the government's responsibility should be limited in order to promote personal responsibility and avoid the risk of encouraging dependence or abuse of government programs. Thus, the Scholars program seems to most often result in the formation of what Westheimer and Kahne (2004) call the "participatory citizen." Such citizens are active as participants and organizers in community improvement efforts for those in need, know how government agencies work, and know strategies for accomplishing collective tasks. "Participatory citizens" also assume that to solve social problems and improve society, they must be active and take leadership roles within established systems and structures, rather than challenging the structures that reproduce inequality (Westheimer & Kahne, p. 240).

These findings also seem to support those of Hunter and Brisbin (2000). The Scholars, as with the students in this 2000 study, viewed the service experience positively and were inclined to seek out further service opportunities. These students learned about and developed a deep connection with their community and the issues on which they work. Volunteer service appears to raise students' assessment of the value of paying attention to politics, and community responsibility for addressing problems such as hunger and poverty. Thus, service demonstrates the potential for increasing political knowledge and fostering civic responsibility. However, service is "not a miracle cure for students' apathy, civic disengagement, or lack of support for values supporting pluralist participatory democracy" (Hunter & Brisbin, p. 626).

Both Scholars and Engaged Scholarship staff clearly recognize that one of the main goals of the Scholars program is to connect direct service with the recognition of larger structural issues related to their work. Part of this process for many Scholars meant developing a sense of frustration with the limited impact direct service has had on their overall issue. Scholars see that volunteering makes a difference to those with whom they interact, but makes very little difference to the root causes of these issues. This outlook is similar to that of Eliasoph (2013); that volunteering and political action need not be separate creatures. She argues that this divide is largely due to the common vision that volunteering is warm and comfortable, while political activism is hot-headed and angry. To connect these two seeming-

ly disparate forms of engagement, Eliasoph contends that civic engagement programs must make it clear to volunteers that the issues on which they are working are a result of human decision-making. In addition, the definition of what counts as "politics" must also be expanded, and participants must "connect the dots" to see how problems are interrelated.

The Scholars program is successful in getting most students involved with the program to think structurally about the issues on which they work. This is a goal that is clearly built into the Scholar model, and in a number of ways, Scholars begin to think about the connections between their work and the policies and political structure that shapes these issues. However, even a program that is very successful in meeting this goal (which is also a very common goal of most service-learning programs) faces a severe limitation. To Berger (2011), the term civic engagement tends to conflate social engagement, moral engagement, and political engagement; all of which are necessary for a healthy democracy. The Scholars program seems very effective in promoting social and moral engagement amongst students, but falls short in promoting political engagement.

Implications for Practice

Among those involved in the Scholars program, low levels of political engagement are not due to apathy or self-absorption, as some may suggest (Davis & Mellow, 2012; Kohnle, 2013; Twenge, 2007). It is also not a case of excessive individualism, undermining a commitment to others in society, or eroding concern about the public interest (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1992, for example). These students care deeply about their issues and the communities in which they engage. They often see service as a responsibility, and they commit tremendous amounts of time and energy to their work. Many Scholars have developed a strong political consciousness or awareness, yet are not "political." They see a connection between their work and the larger social and political structures that create and reinforce the issues on which they work.

However, there are a number of barriers remaining that keep these students from becoming politically engaged. Students and staff may face frustrations with their service, and recognize that service alone will not solve the issues on which they are working. However, they are taking some form of action, and making some sort of difference – a difference that they do not see political engagement capable of making. Any service-learning or civic engagement program built on models similar to the Engaged Scholars using service-based partnerships must consider ways to overcome these barriers. There is enormous potential for students to make a clear connection between their service experience and deeper political engagement, but too often this potential is not being met.

Service-learning practitioners who hope to fulfill the potential of increasing political engagement through direct service must understand that many students do in fact develop a sense of political consciousness, and see the need for structural change. However, this is not enough. To bridge the gaps between service, political consciousness, and political engagement, students also need to be given the tools and opportunities to further develop the skills they see as necessary to engage politically. Effective service-learning programs must also convince students that our political system is a viable option to create change, and convince students that politics need not be divisive. Finally, service-learning programs must dedicate time specifically to political engagement efforts. If students are not required to address root causes on a political level, the focus will remain on reforming and improving ways that nonprofits provide direct services to meet immediate needs.

Future Directions for Research

This study offers an in-depth examination of a relatively small sample of service-learning students, program staff, and nonprofit staff. As such, these results are not generalizable to the overall population of college students or service-learners. This is also an examination of one specific service-learning model, and is not generalizable to other forms of service-learning. As an in-depth qualitative study, it is also difficult to make any predictions based on these findings. The observations, interviews, and focus groups used to gather data for this study were all intricately tied to my own evolving relationships with individuals in the sample, and to the Scholars program as a whole, and would thus be difficult to replicate exactly by another researcher.

Future studies to expand on these findings could include a quantitative study exploring these same themes with a larger, more generalizable sample. Researching across various service-learning programs based at different categories of higher education institutions would advance our understanding of the relationship between service, service-learning, and political engagement. A comparative study between a service-learning model that focuses specifically on political engagement and one that has broader service-learning community engagement goals could explore potentially different outcomes in political engagement among students. It would also be valuable to explore how the various barriers to political engagement are developed among young people, and how they might vary. Are these barriers

inevitable given the overall political climate, or are there ways to mitigate them? There would also be value in researching students who define themselves as politically engaged in order to explore what factors led them to that point. Are there successful models connecting service to political engagement?

Conclusion

While many Scholars readily discussed how their work is political in nature, or at least connected to politics and policy in some way, they themselves did not consider themselves political, for a number of reasons. Scholars often see politics as overly divisive while service was noble and meaningful. Many Scholars also see the current state of politics as ineffective, overly partisan, and very slow. Meanwhile, service is something they knew could be impactful, and with which they could see immediate results, even if they were only on a small scale. Several Scholars also said that while they realize politics are at the root of the issues on which they work, they did not know how to engage politically. Both Scholars and staff admitted that while they see the need to connect their service with political concerns they were often too busy with their service and school work to do so. Thus, many of the Scholars see the issues on which they are working as inherently structural, and even political in nature, but at the same time say that they themselves are not, and often do not want to be, political.

Ideology clearly plays a role in the ways Scholars think about the solutions to the issues on which they work as well. While some Scholars thought the government should play a larger role in meeting social needs, many reflected a strong sense of personal, individual responsibility. Even among those who think the government has a responsibility to address social issues, this is often framed in terms of supporting existing nonprofit or volunteer organizations. Thus, most proposed solutions are reform-based, and do not challenge existing structures. Many students have developed a sense of political consciousness in the sense that they have an understanding of structural inequality, and understand that the issues on which they are working are not just a result of individual failure. However, an ideology of personal responsibility frames the role of "politics" in the form of greater government involvement as harmful. Thus, the role of "politics" is often absent from the ways students think about solving these issues.

Notes

[1] All names of individuals, programs, and organizations included in this article are pseudonyms.

[2] Contact the author for a copy of the interview questions.

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