Utilizing Domestic Off-Campus Experiences to Influence Social Justice Awareness and Career Development

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Abstract

This study examines the transformative experiences of a group of academic coaches who participated in the Target New Transitions (TNT) program during the 2014–2015 academic year. The TNT program trains undergraduate students, through professional development workshops and reflective exercises, to serve as year-round academic coaches for first-year students in Chicago's most impoverished high school districts. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 20 academic coaches in order to understand the transformative nature of the program in relation to social justice learning, translatable skills and values, and career development. Findings demonstrate that significant learning occurred in relation to coaches' awareness of social justice issues, including issues of power, privilege, and systemic causes of inequality; that learning was translatable to other academic and nonacademic settings; and that many students developed greater commitments to public service careers. Implications are also presented for colleges interested in further anchoring their institutional commitments within their local communities.

Keywords: social justice, career development, off-campus experiences

Introduction

*T*here are myriad ways in which a college or university can anchor itself within the surrounding local community and help to improve the quality of life of its members *(Taylor & Luter, 2013).* Building reciprocal partnerships in which both communities and institutions learn and benefit from one another *(Dubb, McKinley, & Howard, 2013)* offers great promise in addressing the most pressing social issues facing local communities. A host of potential benefits also accrue to those students who participate in domestic off-campus learning opportunities, including "a greater understanding of the interrelationship that exists between what they know (knowledge) and how they think (awareness or disposition) and act (skills)" *(Sobania, 2015, p. 24).* Thus, college programs

that intentionally situate undergraduate students in their local communities to address pressing social problems, such as gaps in educational achievement or college access, may be particularly powerful in their potential to benefit local community members *and* undergraduate students.

The Target New Transitions (TNT) program, a grant-funded initiative supported by state, federal, and private monies, was aligned with these reciprocal purposes in mind in trying to achieve the following goals:

1. Provide first-year students attending the most impoverished high schools in the Chicago Public School (CPS) system the academic, social, and emotional support to successfully transition into high school and realize their future educational and vocational goals;

2. Train undergraduate college students to become academic coaches that provide CPS students with ongoing mentoring, support, and access to different resources and social networks to realize their future goals.

The TNT academic model was a derivative of a 2002 program at Loyola University Chicago titled *Who Wants to Win a Scholarship (TNT, 2016)*. Modeled at the time on the popular reality show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, the program engaged hundreds of high school students in a televised scholarship competition that was funded through a GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) grant. GEAR UP, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Education, is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. CPS students in *Who Wants to Win a Scholarship* were matched with undergraduate students at Loyola University Chicago, who acted as academic coaches and provided 4 hours of coaching every Saturday morning to prepare the students for the competition, which awarded over $750,000 in scholarship funds. The scholarship challenge evolved into a team-based competition in 2006, which allowed more students to participate.

The TNT academic model was formally launched in 2008 with multiple CPS schools, and the current study examines the experiences of academic coaches in different high-poverty high schools on Chicago's South Side. First-year high school students attending the TNT program do so on a voluntary basis, often learning about the program from their teachers, past students, or signs that are posted throughout the school. The TNT program

begins by recruiting, interviewing, selecting, and training under-graduate students as academic coaches who commit to spending 4 hours every Saturday morning at one of the CPS schools. Although the TNT program is a voluntary, paid, noncredit opportunity, academic coaches' motivations to join the program include gaining teaching experience, giving back to their communities, and generating extra income to use toward college expenses. The academic coaches receive professional development training throughout the academic year that is focused on the academic priorities of the high school students, processing their experiences in the CPS school system, and reflecting on their own social identities in relation to issues of power, privilege, and positionality.

Before beginning the TNT program, students attend a 2-day orientation that incorporates several experiential-based activities designed to heighten their understanding of their own privilege, recognize important stages of adolescent development, learn communication strategies, and understand their roles and responsibilities as academic coaches. The professional development activities continue throughout the academic year, offering three 4-hour sessions that focus on a wide range of topics (The TNT professional development activities are described in more detail at *https://www.luc.edu/tnt/aboutus/academiccoaching/professionaldevelopment/*). Empirical data has demonstrated the impact of the program on the high school students through math and reading improvements and significantly higher graduation rates compared to a control group of non-TNT participants *(TNT, 2013)*; however, the impact of the TNT experience on the learning and development of the academic coaches has yet to be documented. This latter point is of particular significance given the reciprocal nature of service-learning programs and the importance of understanding the impact of the experience on *both* community members and student participants.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The focus of the current study is to more closely examine the impact of the TNT program on the learning and development of the academic coaches. In particular, we conducted semistructured interviews during the 2014–2015 academic year with 20 academic coaches to better understand how their involvement influenced their understanding of social justice issues, provided transferable learning, and affected their career development. This study is significant on many levels. First, we hypothesize that such experiences can be transformative for the academic coaches as they encounter and interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds, leading

them to a greater understanding and appreciation of the systemic and structural forces that perpetuate and reproduce inequality, and of their own agency to work for social change and make a difference in the lives of others. Second, we believe this experience may also influence the career trajectories of the academic coaches, as many who never considered a career in public service find a new awakening through their participation in the TNT program. Finally, we believe the study provides an important example of how colleges and universities can utilize their own human capital (i.e., undergraduate students) to address community-based needs while concomitantly improving their students' awareness and understanding of social justice issues.

Literature Review

In the following review, we examine literature that demonstrates the potential for domestic off-campus experiences to influence participants' learning and development. Although numerous studies have examined the effects of such experiences on student development, we focus our review on those studies that are most closely linked to the social justice and career-oriented outcomes under investigation in this study. Furthermore, although domestic off-campus experiences appear in numerous forms (e.g., alternative spring break, internships, community-based service; see *Sobania, 2015* for a further review), our review focuses primarily on service-learning experiences, given their congruence with many of the programmatic components that constitute the TNT academic coaching experience.

Service-Learning Experiences

Service-learning represents an important "high-impact" *(Kuh, 2008)* educational practice that "integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" *(NSLC, 2008, para. 1)*. Development, however, is not simply an artifact of embedding oneself within a community-based experience; rather, development occurs through a reflective process in which participants are regularly challenged to make meaning of their experiences, especially when those experiences include opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions across important group differences *(Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Jones & Abes, 2004; Keen & Hall, 2009; Lechuga, Clerc, & Howell, 2009)*. The TNT program, in particular, provides students with professional development activi-

ties, reflective writing assignments, and opportunities to interact across differences throughout the academic year that focus on asset-based thinking *(Cramer & Wasiak, 2006)*; issues of power, privilege, and positionality; team-building; and culturally responsive interventions.

Service-learning and social justice. Service-learning and community-based experiences have been linked to a number of cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal outcomes that are aligned with principles of social justice. For instance, studies have demonstrated that service-learning programs have the potential to broaden students' understanding of social and cultural issues *(Lechuga et al., 2009; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000)*, which is especially true when students are placed in communities that challenge their preexisting stereotypes and unrecognized privileges *(Jay, 2008; Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000)*. In these situations, students must often struggle to reconcile their preconceived notions with what they are experiencing in the community, which often leads to an internal struggle in which students must reevaluate their current belief systems *(Jones & Abes, 2004)*. Such a struggle with one's identity can facilitate greater introspection around the concepts of privilege and socialization, which can often facilitate more complex attributions for societal problems and deeper understandings of the myriad identities that are located within a particular milieu *(Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Jay, 2008; Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000)*. Finally, research has shown that service-learning experiences can increase an individual's civic and social responsibility *(Kuh, 2008; Myers-Lipton, 1998)*, which can foster deeper connections to giving back to local communities.

As noted above, the primary mechanisms that drive social justice learning are steeped in the reflective and meaning-making activities that surround the service-learning or community-based experience. Reflective activities, in particular, can help students examine their beliefs and assumptions while prompting the search for alternative viewpoints that can lead to more complex understandings of societal issues *(Brookfield, 2010)*. According to Preskill and Brookfield *(2009)*, learning to critically reflect allows individuals not only to become informed leaders, but also to take action and confront social injustices. Ongoing reflection helps with the development of "the relationship between self and other (intrapersonal); shifts in the nature of commitments made, including career plans and aspirations (interpersonal); and increased open-mindedness about new people, experiences, and ideas (cognitive)" *(Jones & Abes, 2004, p. 153)*. In the TNT program, academic coaches regularly

interact with students from backgrounds very different from their own, and in doing so, they encounter many of the systemic and oppressive issues that the CPS students face on a regular basis.

Service-learning and career development. Service-learning experiences can also benefit participants as they integrate their experiences into their career discernment process. Greenhaus, Callanan, and Godshalk *(2000)*, for instance, demonstrated that different community-based experiences (e.g., internships, cooperative education programs, apprenticeships) can bolster students' self-concept, improve their understanding of various career choices and organizational environments, and allow them to evaluate the fit between individual characteristics and the demands of different jobs. In particular, researchers have found that service-learning experiences can influence the choice of a service-intensive career and future plans to participate in service after college *(Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000)*. Jones and Abes *(2004)* further posit that community-based experiences can increase students' commitments to socially responsible labor. However, students do not always commit to changing their careers to service-minded positions; rather, they become more aware of systemic issues and take on citizenship-like practices to help effect change in the community. Thus, under the right conditions, service-learning and community-based experiences can help students discern their potential fit in nonprofit and public-service careers and disrupt previously held ideas around their career trajectories.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is steeped in the previous review of literature that suggests that structured, domestic off-campus experiences are potentially potent avenues to foster student learning and development *(Sobania, 2015)*. When these experiences incorporate opportunities for students to encounter differences, especially in communities or milieus that are unfamiliar, coupled with opportunities to reflect on and process such experiences, students can gain a deeper understanding of societal issues while concomitantly reflecting on their future commitments *(Jones & Abes, 2004)*. This type of development is particularly effective when it occurs over a longer duration and provides opportunities to develop reciprocal relationships with community members who challenge pre-existing notions related to important social justice concerns *(Jay, 2008; Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000)*.

Method

We adopted a social constructivist perspective in approaching the study's main research questions: How does the TNT program influence the academic coaches' learning for social justice? Is this learning transferable to other settings? Also, how does the TNT program influence the academic coaches' career development? In a social constructivist approach "individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed towards certain objects or things . . . leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow meanings in a few categories or ideas" *(Creswell, 2014, p. 8)*. Thus, meaning-making is conceptualized as a subjective process that is rooted in the interactions one has with others as well as the sociohistorical norms and values that shape organizational culture. In adopting such a social constructivist perspective, we recognize that an individual's perspective is based both on the campus norms and expectations related to social justice and on interactions with different campus and community stakeholders involved in the TNT program.

Qualitative Interpretative Approach

In developing a general understanding of how participants make meaning of their experiences as academic coaches, we used an interpretative qualitative approach steeped "in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved" *(Merriam, 2009, p. 22)*. In this study, we were specifically interested in understanding how academic coaches experienced their roles as coaches, and in what ways, if any, this influenced their perspectives on social justice and future career commitments. In employing this framework, we assumed that participants' experiences are socially constructed and multiple—that the unique context under which participants are performing as coaches will both frame and position their experience as potentially different from those of others *(Merriam, 2009)*.

Sampling Frame and Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining IRB approval, we used a purposeful sampling frame in which we invited academic coaches, during one of their professional development workshops, to participate in individual semistructured interviews. We invited all of the academic coaches (i.e., total of 45) to participate in individual interviews, which resulted in 20 academic coaches agreeing to participate in the interview process. Of the 20 participants, nine identified as male and 11 as female. Additionally, eight participants identified as White,

eight as Asian, one as Latino, and three as mixed race. Five of the participants were in their second year of college, eight were in their third year, and the remaining seven were in their fourth year. In terms of academic majors, three participants were majoring in education, six were majoring in the sciences, and 11 were majoring in the social sciences. All of the individual interviews occurred on the home college campus after students had participated in the program for the full academic year (mid-April), and each lasted approximately 30 minutes. Prior to beginning the interviews, participants completed an informed consent and short demographic questionnaire. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Interview Protocol

The semistructured interview protocol incorporated six different sections. The first section addressed the preliminaries of the study, including the study's purpose, the structure of the interview, and a discussion of confidentiality and consent. The second section focused on the reasons for becoming an academic coach and initial expectations for the position. The third section examined the coaches' experiences in both professional development sessions and academic coaching sessions, focusing on specific experiences that were memorable, challenging, or possibly resulted in learning. The fourth section examined whether any of the coaches' views on social justice or educational equity had changed as a result of the program. The closing section examined whether the experience influenced their thinking about their future careers, with additional questions pertaining to suggestions for improving the program.

Data Analysis

We used a constant comparative method that consisted of both open and axial coding procedures to analyze the interview data *(Creswell, 2014)*. The constant comparative method is an iterative process in which information is gathered and analyzed throughout the collection of data, enabling researchers to recognize initial themes while still allowing for concomitant themes to emerge until saturation is reached in the data collection process *(Creswell, 2014)*. During the open-coding stage of analysis, we analyzed a subset of transcripts based on three interviews. At the completion of this initial stage of analysis, the researchers met to identify the "central phenomenon" that emerged from the data collection and resultant open coding *(Creswell, 2014)*. The researchers then employed axial

coding to identify a more refined set of categories and subcategories that captured major learning and developmental themes that emerged from the data. After establishing an acceptable level of interrater reliability *(Cohen's kappa > .70)*, we proceeded to individually code each of the remaining interviews based on our agreed-upon coding rubric, while still allowing new themes to emerge when examining the full set of transcripts.

Trustworthiness and Research Positionality

Unlike quantitative methods, which present internal and external consistency in terms of numbers, qualitative methods examine the overall trustworthiness of a study by assessing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the results *(Lincoln & Guba, 1986)*. We utilized a number of methods, including multiple peer reviewers, checking for interrater reliability, member checking, and keeping an accurate record of our procedures throughout the analytic stage. Because each member of the research team identifies differently across social identity groups and has different levels of experience working in public school systems, we discussed our assumptions surrounding inequality and access throughout the process, making sure to acknowledge our biases throughout the process of gathering and analyzing our data.

Limitations

We encountered several limitations in this study. First, we were able to interview only 20 of the 45 academic coaches; thus, our results represent only a subset of academic coaches who worked during the 2014–2015 academic year. Second, our data collection relied primarily on semistructured interviews, and some of the questions were more retrospective in nature, especially those that asked students to reflect on their initial reasons for selecting into the program or the substance of a particular professional development session. Third, we relied on the participants' description of their learning in their own voices, and although we triangulated their responses with our own observations, we recognize the possibility that our own biases may have influenced the manner in which we probed certain questions and elicited different responses. Finally, we are cognizant that the students in the study were also engaged in different campus activities and coursework, all of which may have contributed to their overall learning from their TNT experience. Future studies that implement a causal design will be helpful in teasing out these exogenous influences.

Findings

We organized our findings around two major themes: learning related to social justice and career development. In the section that follows we present information about the relevant themes we uncovered in our analysis, highlighting key verbatim passages that illustrate particular themes (see Table 1).

Social Justice Learning

We uncovered a number of themes related to students' social justice learning. In particular, we noted themes related to their awareness of social justice issues, especially as coaches were better able to see the world through the unique perspectives of the high school students. Social justice learning was also facilitated through the coaches' own reflective process, particularly as they reflected on their own privileges and became more aware of the systemic issues facing the school systems in which they were working. In some cases, this learning also led to specific actions and commitments to furthering social justice. Finally, students also discussed the ways in which they had acquired skills and values that were transferable to other areas of their lives.

Awareness of issues. The interview data revealed several instances in which the academic coaches reported an increased awareness of educational disparities impacting the students they worked with: lack of resources and the quality of education students were receiving, the achievement gap, and violence and poverty impacting students' communities. Such increased awareness can provide the initial conditions in which coaches begin to situate their observations within a broader societal context.

Academic coaches repeatedly used words and phrases such as *disheartening, injustice, unfair, disparities, inequality, lack of access, and unequal funding* when describing their reflections on the issues students face. Two academic coaches grappled with their observations of the uncleanliness of the students' school, including the cafeteria where students eat every day, wondering what type of message this sends to students who attend this school. Many academic coaches described feelings of frustration and anger as they reflected on these observations. As one academic coach explained, "it's just really unfair and it makes me mad." It is evident through their reflections that the TNT program provided many students with the opportunity to step outside their own experiences to better understand the experiences of others in a very tangible and real way. As one academic coach put it, "I always knew there was

Table 1. Overview of Thematic Findings

Theme	Definition	Example Quotation
Social justice learning: Awareness of issue	Student shows awareness of issues that youth face.	"I always knew there was inequality, but I never had a picture. . . . it [TNT] definitely gives a hands-on experience."
Social justice learning: Perspective taking	Student declares understanding the youth by taking their perspective.	"I think the biggest thing that it's [TNT] taught me is to really, really step away from the statistics that you read. Step away from what you see on the news and look at the individual."
Social justice learning: Reflecting on privilege	Student reflects on privilege and showcases social justice learning.	"My experiences in life have been so, so, so different."
Social justice learning: Awareness of systemic issues	Student shows awareness of issues that the education system creates for youth.	"The system is failing them [the students] . . . it's not the students who are failing."
Social justice learning: Action/commitment	Student projects their action/commitment to social justice.	"Continuing to help people in the community beyond the TNT program."
Transferable learning: Skills	Student proves they have learned transferable skills.	"[It] helped me with asking the right questions and knowing when to seek out help."
Transferable learning: Values	Student proves they have learned transferable values.	"Students that I work with are on my mind when I come home so you really learn how to value human life and care for people."
Career development: Vocational discernment	Student recognizes that this program will help them with their vocational discernment.	The program helped them look inward and think about "what really makes me really happy."
Career development: Public service	Student experience inspires a future commitment to public service.	"I don't plan on teaching anywhere except for in a public school that actu-ally needs some help, with students that actually need help, and TNT has been a contributing factor for sure."

inequality, but I never had a picture. . . . it [TNT] definitely gives a hands-on experience."

Perspective taking. In addition to increasing their awareness of educational inequality, the data also suggest that the TNT experience provided many of the coaches with opportunities to better understand the unique perspectives of their students. Many academic coaches talked about stepping outside their own high school experiences to better understand their students' unique lived experiences. As one coach discussed in the interview, "I would say to discard different stereotypes that one would have to be open-minded, accepting, and tolerant to learn about others." Another academic coach summarized her biggest takeaways from the TNT program as tied to taking on others' perspectives in order to validate the dignity and commonalities in everyone's lived experiences:

> I think the biggest thing that it's [TNT] taught me is to really, really step away from the statistics that you read. Step away from what you see on the news and look at the individual. . . . Don't look at what they're wearing or what their race is, or the way they speak, or the things they say. Just look at the person who they are at the core, because we're all really the same at the core, and we all want the same things for the most part.

Reflecting on privilege. In addition to acknowledging the experiences of students while working to better understand their perspectives, the data also suggest that several of the academic coaches were able to reflect on their own privilege through their experiences with the TNT program. Academic coaches reflected on their backgrounds and upbringings by using words and phrases such as *sheltered, privileged,* and *appreciative.* One academic coach shared that he had considered himself underprivileged, but comparing his experiences to those of the high school students was a very eye-opening reflection. This coach further elaborated that his ability to go home each night to food, shelter, and other necessities made him rethink the perspective he once held and better understand his own privilege.

Many academic coaches acknowledged that students they interact with have backgrounds, stories, and experiences vastly different from their own. One coach explained that "the stories they would tell about hearing gunshots—that is something I never experienced . . . that never crossed my mind as a kid to think to hear them or anything," while another shared very simply that

"my experiences in life have been so, so, so different." Recognizing and acknowledging their own privileges and lived experiences are critical learning experiences associated with the TNT program, particularly in helping academic coaches better situate their own experiences and privileges within a broader societal context.

Awareness of systemic issues. The coaches' critical reflections on their experiences with the TNT program also suggested that many of the academic coaches demonstrated a burgeoning awareness of the systemic issues impacting the education system. Such reflections were useful in helping academic coaches understand the broader societal context of the issues students face. As one academic coach acknowledged, people are "born into [society] and it's a cycle . . . [it] puts things into perspective of how a lot of things aren't fair and it's out of your control in a way." Another coach made the statement that the "system is failing [the students] . . . it's not the students who are failing." Several academic coaches identified the need for the educational system to be reformed and for funding for schools to be more equitable. One academic coach took it a step further, critically examining the limitations of his role as a TNT coach, given these systemic disparities:

> I'm putting a good impression on these kids and minimally helping to improve the system, but it's like putting a Band-Aid on a wound that needs stitches. There are large issues at play. It kind of makes you a little depressed because it's like I am helping the symptoms but not the causes of a lot of the issues.

Action/commitment to social justice. The data also revealed that many of the academic coaches articulated a commitment to social justice and a call to action based on their experiences with the TNT program. Many academic coaches shared how this experience sparked their passion for working with youth, and one described her desire to provide social-emotional support to students who are facing many external factors that directly impact their ability to learn. Several coaches also described a vested interest in "continuing to help people in the community beyond the TNT program," and another coach described her commitment to responding to systemic inequities.

Transferable learning skills. Through engaged learning experiences the students developed transferable learning skills that helped them acquire new abilities that they used at their home campuses and to prepare for their professional futures. The words

"helped me learn" were mentioned in various interviews, high-lighting the potential of the TNT program to improve the coaches' learning and development. For example, the academic coaches described several skills they acquired through the TNT program, including interpersonal skills in working with high school students, improved teaching skills, intrapersonal skills, and teamwork skills. As interpersonal skills, one coach indicated gains of "learning how to interact with kids that are a bit younger . . . and learning how to be very careful and tactful." However, it isn't only about interacting with high school students; it is also about engaging with them to facilitate their development. For instance, one academic coach mentioned learning how to "get them to see that they can suc-ceed." This participant learned how to encourage others to believe in themselves, while simultaneously increasing her teaching skills. Other coaches discussed how their experience in the TNT program improved their facilitation skills and helped them learn to teach certain subjects. One academic coach captured how her teaching skills improved through working with diverse learners:

> I can work with individual students and sort of teach them in a way that they'll understand that same topic. Because I know that not all students learn the same. Some are obviously visual learners, some are kines-thetic, so I like that I have the ability to find out how a student can learn something best and can use what I know to try and teach it that way.

Not only did several students gain teaching skills, the data suggest that they also obtained intrapersonal skills through their coaching experience. According to one participant, "This posi-tion made me open up because I had to facilitate discussions with students; I had to open myself up to students so they could open themselves up to me." Other intrapersonal skills mentioned by the coaches were patience and learning to ask the right questions. For example, one student stated, "I am a lot more patient," and another stated, "[It] helped me with asking the right questions and knowing when to seek out help." Finally, academic coaches also shared how they expanded their teamwork skills, especially in learning how to communicate across difference and work collaboratively with other team members. One participant stated, "I learned how to adapt to different kinds of personalities, whether it be fellow coaches or stu-dents I have to work with," and another shared having advanced in terms of "learning how to cooperate towards the [common] goal."

Overall, these findings suggest that participating in a domestic off-campus experience, like the TNT program, offers many students the opportunity to gain a variety of transferable skills.

Transferable learning values. Transferable learning values are described as values the participants gain through their interactions in the TNT program. These values are ones that coaches feel inclined to continue utilizing in the future. The data revealed that several participants learned meaningful values that included empathy, civic engagement, social responsibility, and social justice. Many of the coaches noted their increased empathy as they learned more about the experiences of the high school students they were working with: "Students that I work with are on my mind when I come home so you really learn how to value human life and care for people." Another coach shared how the TNT experience influenced the importance of civic engagement: "I think it was very eye opening, it made me passionate enough that I'll be sticking around TNT for another two years." Other coaches shared the importance of social responsibility: "We have students who don't take showers or [who] wear the same outfit every single weekend on Saturday mornings and aren't clean; stuff like that, it makes you want to make things better for these people because it is not right." Finally, most students learned the value of social justice. One participant noted how being a part of Loyola University Chicago and the TNT program truly impacted her perspective on social justice. She stated:

> I just feel so lucky to be part of Loyola [which] has an emphasis on social justice. When we learn about teaching, we don't just learn the academic content, Loyola really focuses on having culturally relevant pedagogy, about having an understanding whose story is being excluded from history, about different resources that the schools have, and understanding the struggles that students might face. . . . So, I think that Loyola has really broadened my social justice view and [I have] this desire to live the Loyola mission of being a woman for others. And I think that TNT is such an extension of that. I think that my educational background has really helped me with TNT, as well.

The values students learn from being academic coaches suggest different ways in which the TNT program may have a lasting influence of their future growth and development.

Career Development and Future Pathways

In examining the influence of the TNT program on the academic coaches' career development, we uncovered two related themes. The first theme related broadly to the ways in which the TNT program influenced the career development process of the academic coaches. The second theme examined how the TNT program influenced the future career trajectories of the academic coaches, particularly the ways in which coaches planned on giving back to their communities through public service careers.

Career/vocational discernment. A number of academic coaches commented on the ways in which their involvement in the TNT program helped them in their own career discernment process. For instance, several coaches discussed how their involvement in the TNT program helped them look inward and think about "what really makes me really happy"—a hallmark of the career discernment process. Additionally, in modeling the career discernment process for their students, several of the academic coaches who were nearing graduation were simultaneously thinking about their own careers, "realizing I need to figure out what I need to do so I can show them by example." For many of the coaches, their experience working with first-year high school students reminded them of their earlier dreams and the passion they had for different career options while in high school:

> Seeing those kids, like, talking about what they love doing. It brings me back to that moment of when I did what I liked to do, like what I wanted do versus what my parents wanted me to do and I guess a lot of the times they talk about how they are so passionate about going into things like designing . . . and I'm just like, oh, wow, I remember having those types of dreams.

The experience of working directly with high school students also helped solidify the career pathways for several of the academic coaches. One coach, who was an education major, commented that through the TNT program, he realized that teaching was "something that I can do and something that I do enjoy doing. . . . I haven't been able to get that during student teaching as much." Another coach, who was a history and anthropology major, commented on how the coaching experience helped him realize that teaching was something he really enjoyed:

I definitely realized that personally I enjoy teaching and explaining things, especially when kids have history homework. I like taking these complex events and breaking it down and explaining it in a way they can understand and use modern day examples or everyday kind of situations to compare to the past and that really I have realized that I enjoy it and I'm good at it helping make these things make sense.

For other academic coaches, the TNT experience may not have directly influenced their career goals, but it did influence how they planned on spending their gap year before going to graduate school. One coach commented that prior to going to medical school he planned on spending a year abroad helping students in a developing country learn English and math skills. "Without this position, I would have most likely never heard of that (opportunity abroad) . . . and at least now I know I have the ability to teach in a way some subjects, particularly math." Another coach, who was an anthropology and psychology major, discussed how her involvement in the program inspired her "to take a more qualitative approach to life . . . stepping away from statistics, away from quantitative information, because that just doesn't really do it for me anymore."

Careers in public service. For several academic coaches, the TNT experience inspired a desire to go into teaching after graduation and solidified their postgraduate plans: "I've always kind of had this idea in the back of my mind that I kind of sort of want to teach. . . . I feel like the idea is stronger than ever." Thus, for several coaches, the TNT program provided them with an opportunity to learn more about public service, and in several cases the experience made them "actually think about teaching because I enjoy it. I really enjoy it."

Academic coaches also discussed how the TNT program provided a "trial run" so that they could test the waters in terms of whether teaching or working in a high school was aligned with their career goals. In some cases, this led students to question their earlier career pathways: "I hadn't experienced anything like this, I didn't think about it. So it is definitely, definitely very interesting." And for others, it led to the decision to minor in education in order to pursue a career related to their TNT experience.

Finally, a number of academic coaches discussed how their TNT experience solidified a desire to give back to their communities and integrate public service into their postgraduate lives.

For some, this was a commitment to work in the Chicago Public School system: "I really want to be part of making them [Chicago Public Schools] even better and just . . . I feel really connected to Chicago and this community." Another participant commented, "I don't plan on teaching anywhere except for in a public school that actually needs some help, with students that actually need help, and TNT has been a contributing factor for sure."

Discussion

In this study, we investigated three research questions that focused on how the TNT program influenced the academic coaches' learning for social justice, the transferability of that learning, and their career development. In doing so, we utilized semistructured interviews to learn more about the experiences of the TNT academic coaches and the extent to which those experiences were transformative in their learning and development. Several themes emerged from these questions, and we organized these themes around social justice learning and career development. Below, we examine these themes more closely, integrating relevant literature to highlight both the meaning and contribution of our findings.

The first research question examined the broader theme of learning for social justice, as prior research has demonstrated that service-learning programs can help students to broaden their understanding of social and cultural issues *(Lechuga et al., 2009; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000)*. Our findings lend additional support to the potential of domestic off-campus experiences to improve learning for social justice, as many of the academic coaches demonstrated an increased awareness of issues bigger than themselves and their own lived experiences. As a result of their experiences in the TNT program, many of the academic coaches articulated an ability to explore and grapple with social and cultural issues that exist on a systemic level.

Our research also underscores the important finding that interactions across difference, especially through structured programming, encourage critical reflection on one's own privileges, lived experiences, and inequitable access to resources and opportunities *(Jay, 2008; Jones & Abes, 2004; Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000)*. Our findings, for instance, suggest that students are not only able to reflect on their own privileged identities and experiences, but that they are also able to see the world through the eyes of the students they are serving. In taking the perspective of another, students must often grapple with their own unexamined stereotypes and biases,

which can foster a reevaluation of one's belief systems and a greater empathetic connection with individuals whose life circumstances are very different from one's own background *(Jones & Abes, 2004)*. The academic coaches in this study were not only able to identify differences when comparing their experiences with those of the high school students, they were also able to validate the human dignity of these students and understand them on a deeper, more profound level *(Eyler et al., 1997; Jay, 2008; Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000)*. As one academic coach mentioned, "we are all really the same at the core, and we all want the same things for the most part." Lastly, our results add to the extant literature that demonstrates the value of service-learning experiences for students' lifelong commitments to acknowledging and responding to social inequities *(Jones & Abes, 2004)*. This type of lifelong commitment demonstrates one of the most significant benefits of service-learning experiences in encouraging civic-mindedness and helping students continue to consider their context and impact within society.

The second research question analyzed the transferable learning skills and values that the academic coaches gained through the TNT program. Much of the literature focuses on how service-learning experiences are meaningful due to the service and reflection process *(NSLC, 20008)* rather than the transferability of that learning to other school and professional settings. The coaches in the study learned interpersonal, intrapersonal, teaching, and teamwork skills, but the most important theme that coaches alluded to was the fact that these were transferable skills that they could utilize in myriad academic and professional environments. Through a combination of orientations, workshops, and retreats coupled with practical, hands-on experiences at the schools, the coaches were able to learn a range of skills that were profoundly ingrained in their professional development. For example, one coach professed how working in the TNT program provided a valuable lesson of when to ask for help, which is important to know when working in any environment. These findings also strengthen the argument about the value of high-impact practices, such as service-learning *(Kuh, 2008)*, and their potential to provide transferable learning skills needed throughout one's career.

In addition to gaining transferable learning skills, the academic coaches gained transferable learning values. Although the coaches described numerous values that were applicable to their futures, many of them associated their TNT experience with learning values such as empathy, civic engagement, social responsibility, and social justice. Many participants learned to develop

new values by discerning through old ones and comparing their own upbringings to those of the students they served. This process allowed the coaches to decide what was truly important to them. Above all, most participants noted a greater sense of empathy and care for others. Additionally, they shared their desire to continue to serve others and the responsibility they felt to do so. This finding resonates with other research that has demonstrated how service-learning supports the development of personal and civic identities *(Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005)*.

Our final research question investigated how involvement in the TNT program influenced coaches' career development and future commitments. In several instances, the academic coaches described ways in which their experiences in the TNT program assisted them in their career discernment process. Research on high-impact practices has demonstrated that internships, cooperative education programs, and apprenticeships can help students develop a self-concept, gain an understanding of various career choices and organizational environments, and check for fit between individual characteristics and the demands of different jobs *(Greenhaus et al., 2000)*. Service-learning, in particular, has been shown to foster students' choice of a service-intensive career and plans on participating in service after college *(Astin, 2000)*. Numerous coaches in our study felt a calling toward public service careers because of their involvement in the TNT program, which strengthens the idea that experiences outside of the classroom can be influential in making postgraduate career plans and discerning among different options in for-profit and service-related careers.

Implications

Solutions to college access are complex, multifaceted, and cut across individual, community, school, and state and federal policy levels *(Perna, 2006)*. Too often access-based solutions overlook the abundance of human capital available at our nation's colleges and universities, as well as the ways in which colleges can structure experiences for undergraduate students to perform service, reflect on critical social justice issues, and simultaneously provide our nation's most impoverished schools with additional resources to ensure that every student has an opportunity to be successful in school. The TNT academic coaches, in many cases, form lasting mentoring relationships with the CPS students they work with, and many continue these relationships after formally leaving the program or graduating from college. The experiences not only help to dispel many of the myths about inner city students, but also

help the coaches develop a more critical understanding of the root causes of inequality while leading to a transformational shift in how they see themselves as advocates for social justice and their future roles as engaged citizens working with and giving back to communities in need.

As colleges and universities consider how they can further anchor their institutions within their surrounding communities, it will be important to bring together community and campus stakeholders to collectively discuss their most pressing social concerns. Hopefully, these discussions will lead to the recognition that many solutions to critical social justice issues can be addressed through reciprocal partnerships that provide opportunities for campus constituents (i.e., students) and members of the community to learn from each other. The empirical data gathered from this study converged around the potential for programs like TNT to change lives in a reciprocal manner as both students and coaches take on simultaneous roles as teachers and learners.

Future research is certainly needed to advance an understanding of how institutions can use domestic off-campus experiences to advance learning and social change. More research, for instance, is needed in understanding how such programs work across different social identity groups and whether any of the outcomes addressed in this study are conditional on these group differences. Future studies can also examine the sustainability of the outcomes uncovered in this study, and examine whether such experiences translate into increased civic engagement, volunteerism, or public service careers in the coaches' postgraduate lives. Additionally, more attention should be directed to understanding whether sustained involvement over multiple years leads to more stable and long-lasting outcomes. Finally, future research should consider more rigorous approaches to understanding the causal impact of the TNT program, such as randomized, controlled experiments that utilize longitudinal designs.

Conclusion

As more postsecondary institutions recognize the importance of anchoring their institutions within their surrounding communities and building reciprocal partnerships that advance institutional and local concerns *(Dubb et al., 2013)*, the TNT program provides an important exemplar in promoting a socially responsible institution. The TNT program also underscores that learning about social justice and developing civic-minded graduates can be achieved

through structured, domestic off-campus opportunities *(Sobania, 2015)*. When these programs incorporate opportunities to interact across difference coupled with reflective methods to process one's experiences, they offer tremendous potential to increase students' understanding of contemporary social justice issues while simultaneously developing their future commitments, especially in working with communities facing pressing social concerns *(Jones & Abes, 2004)*.

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