

# THE INTEGRATION OF CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY LEARNING IN NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF CO-CURRICULAR SERVICE

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## Abstract

*Although we have evidence that reflection on community service enhances student development outcomes, we have little understanding of the process by which students integrate their academic and community experiences. This study is a part of a larger participatory research project, for which we collected 403 narrative accounts of awkward and meaningful experiences written by 123 Bonner Scholars. Members of an interpretive community that included Bonner Scholars examined a subset of these stories pertinent to students' integration of classroom and community work. We reliably identified several ways in which students talked about course material in their descriptions of their community experiences. Students wrote frequently about applying skills or concepts that they learned in the classroom to their work in the community. In some instances, this integration led to expressions of cultural humility and critical analysis. In contrast, few student authors discussed how their community-based learning contributed to the classroom. We identified obstacles to this, and we argue that the types of knowledge and knowledge production privileged in academia inhibit genuine collaboration with our students and colleagues across institutional divisions. We suggest ways in which we might better support integrative student learning, faculty development, and institutional improvement.*

As colleges and universities have become increasingly attuned to a mission of preparing students for citizenship and participation in a democratic society, we have seen the growth of programs designed to involve students in off-campus work starting in their early college years (Budwig, 2013). The development and implementation of these programs are motivated by two expected student outcomes. The first is that experience in community settings will prepare students for engaged citizenship as they develop a sense of efficacy and accountability for applying critical systems analysis and collaborating with community members to create change (Mitchell, 2008; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Pompa, 2002; Thomas et al., 2020).

The second is that the opportunity to utilize course material as it applies in community settings will enrich student learning of the material (Casile et al., 2011; Markus et al., 1993). A third possible outcome that has received less attention, and is the focus of this article, is that students will bring the knowledge that they co-produce with community members back into the classroom (Rodriguez, 2013; Ross, 2012).

Most community service or community engaged work during the college years falls into one of three (overlapping) categories, sometimes organized within different parts of the institution. Volunteer programs are often facilitated by student services or campus life professionals and include day of service activities, alternative break programs, or semester-long commitments for direct service. Examples of these are tutoring, serving in a soup kitchen, and affordable house building. Across campus—or perhaps in the offices next door—career services staff help students find off-campus opportunities to explore career interests or to strengthen a résumé with career-relevant volunteering. This may include work in hospital settings, schools, or government agencies where students can practice specific marketable skills (e.g., second-language skills, computer programming, or writing skills) and develop network connections. Meanwhile, many faculty members across various academic departments (sometimes with support from the academic affairs office) design service learning or community engaged learning courses that send students out in the community to make use of course concepts in off-campus settings. Encouraging research has demonstrated the efficacy of each of these means of engagement (Conway et al., 2009; George-Paschal et al., 2019; Niehaus et al., 2017; Ortiz & MacDermott, 2018). In recent years, some campuses have sought to integrate all three (or two of the three) by housing service learning and civic engagement in one administrative unit (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013).

These administrative units, often known as centers for community engagement, help to support and sustain programs that involve students in community work over multiple semesters. The Bonner Scholars Program is an exemplar of this type of program, as it is committed to the development of civic engagement and civic leadership during the undergraduate years (Keen & Hall, 2009). Bonner Scholars spend at least 10 hours a week working in the community, and they participate in regular reflection activities. This co-curricular program is grounded in a developmental model that scaffolds student progress from direct service to capacity building projects or social action campaigns over their undergraduate years. The Bonner Scholars Program seeks to involve students in community settings where they are encouraged to integrate all components of their college experience (Corella & Bertram F. Bonner Foundation, n.d.). The Bonner Scholars Program invites collaboration across campus administrative divisions in order to realize its objectives of integrating student learning, developing citizenship, and supporting structural and community change.

In this study, we sought to understand the ways in which Bonner Scholars integrated their experiences in the community with those in the classroom. We took a participatory approach, cultivating a community of practice that included Bonner Scholars, non-Bonner student researchers, Bonner staff, and service learning faculty. As we examined accounts of community engagement experiences, we asked how, and how often, students involved in this multi-semester, co-curricular program included themes in their narratives that linked classroom and community work. We sought to note the obstacles that students identified, and we raised these in ongoing discussions with the Bonner Program staff and with student representatives from each year, selected by the staff as the

Bonner Leadership Team. Our aim was to consider the ways in which we might work across institutional divides to better facilitate meaningful integration between academic and service learning.

In this article, we review previous research on the outcomes of community engaged work during the college years. We consider critiques that highlight limitations of this research, noting (1) the need for research that considers how students integrate in-class and community learning, (2) the need to reconsider which kinds of knowledge production are privileged and which are silenced in the academy, and (3) the need to involve the students themselves in research addressing these concerns.

## The Integration of Community and Classroom Work to Enhance Student Development

Community engaged work is recognized as a high-impact practice in higher education (Campbell, 2016). This recognition is grounded in a substantial body of research demonstrating its efficacy in promoting academic performance (Casile et al., 2011; Markus et al., 1993), personal development (Keen & Hall, 2009), and citizenship (Moely et al., 2002). Several meta-analyses have assessed outcomes of studies of college student community involvement. Conway et al. (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of 103 studies of both curricular and non-curricular community engagement (46 of these were college or university programs). They found positive impacts on academic outcomes with moderate effect sizes, slightly smaller impact on social outcomes, and small but positive personal and civic development outcomes. Engaging in regular reflective activities notably enhanced participating students' outcomes. Celio et al. (2011) and van Goethem et al. (2014) found very similar results in meta-analyses of 62 and 49 studies, respectively. A fourth meta-analysis found strong effect sizes for the impact of service learning on measures of cognitive, personal, and citizenship outcomes, with the civic development outcome (understanding social issues) significantly moderated by the inclusion of reflection and discussion in the course design (Yorio & Ye, 2012). In aggregate, these studies point to the likelihood that the benefits of community engaged learning are small or negligible unless the students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences in light of course material.

A majority of the studies included in the meta-analyses reviewed above involved course-linked community activity. Few studies have investigated the outcomes of sustained co-curricular service learning programs, such as the Bonner Program. In service learning courses, faculty members may take responsibility for helping students make connections between course material and community work, whereas in co-curricular service, integration is the students' responsibility, without faculty guidance. Nevertheless, we have evidence that sustained co-curricular community service leads to gains in academic, civic, and personal development (Keen & Hall, 2009). These outcomes include increased personal belief in the importance of civic engagement, service, and social justice (Keen & Keen, 2002; Richard et al., 2016).

Outcome-oriented research has provided evidence that has allowed us to consider community engaged learning to be a best practice in higher education (Campbell, 2016). We have enough evidence to convince us that students who participate in community service perform better academically than students who do not (Casile

et al., 2011; Markus et al., 1993; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000) and that they endorse attitudes or express intentions indicative of engaged citizenship (Moely et al., 2002). We have evidence that they are most likely to make these academic and civic development gains if they are encouraged to reflect on their service experience, but we have not examined the content of those reflections. Although the evidence is convincing that students integrate academic and community work, there is little evidence of *how* students apply material from their college courses to situations they encounter in their community work. A descriptive analysis of the content of their reflections could provide this evidence. In order to understand the integrative work students do to coordinate their academic study with their work in the community, we need to listen for the ways students make meaning of their experiences (Bruner, 1990; Lawford & Ramey, 2015).

## Epistemic Status and Co-Production of Knowledge in and out of the Classroom

In the field's recent move toward a more critical approach to service learning, students have been encouraged to form mutually beneficial relationships across difference for the purpose of social change, recognizing community members as fully capable partners with expertise (Mitchell, 2008; Morton & Bergbauer, 2015; Skilton-Sylvester & Erwin, 2000). While reciprocity, collaborative agency, and dialogue are encouraged in the way students engage with community members (Thomas et al., 2020), little attention has been paid to how community expertise is brought back into the classroom. In order to promote a practice of community engaged learning that is both integrative and transformative for students' learning and for social change efforts, we must ensure that knowledge moves in both directions: from the classroom into the community and from the community back into the classroom. We must look at the dynamics and roles within the classroom. We must ask ourselves how we define knowledge and expertise and whom we identify as colleagues and partners (Battistoni & Longo, 2011; Ross, 2012).

Within the field of education, Funds of Knowledge (FoK) research has emphasized the "presence of knowledge, skills, and strategies among students that were produced in settings beyond the school" (Rodriguez, 2013, p. 90). While initially conceptualized for teachers working with minoritized students and their families in primary and secondary schools, the grounding of FoK scholarship in the critical analysis of knowledge and power dynamics between communities and educational institutions makes it valuable in academia as well. In her review of the FoK literature, Rodriguez (2013) argued that FoK scholars and practitioners must stay committed to the counter-hegemonic, social justice aims of the pedagogy:

We are called on to delve more deeply into this realm to unpack the pedagogies that . . . may still reflect a pervasive power relationship that positions the educator as one who can pick and choose those aspects of students' lives that "belong" in the realm of the classroom. (p. 93)

Feminist and critical race theorists have discussed similar issues of power and knowledge in the realm of academia. In her book about feminist theory in the academy, Pereira (2017) explored the concept of

epistemic status, which she defined as “the degree to which, and terms in which, a knowledge claim . . . is recognized as fulfilling the requisite criteria to be considered credible and relevant knowledge” (p. 47). If knowledge constructed by students in collaboration with others at their community sites is to fulfill its potential in terms of student learning outcomes, we must ensure that such knowledge has epistemic status in classroom spaces.

## Collaborating With Students in the Production of Knowledge and the Design of Programming

If students find it difficult to make connections between their academic studies and their community work, this may be partially explained by the organizational structure that tends to silo the administration of these components of college life. In many institutions the faculty overseeing the classroom work have little or no regular communication with the student life professionals who place students in off-campus activities (LePeau, 2015; Syno et al., 2019). Even when commitments to holistic student learning and development foster partnership across academic affairs and student life divisions, students are generally left out: the focus is on staff and faculty relationships, and students are positioned as consumers of the knowledge offered by faculty and the support services offered by student affairs professionals (McCulloch, 2009). Recognizing students as collaborators in knowledge production in and out of the classroom changes the way we think about developing scholastic-community partnerships. We see student expertise as critical to the success of any efforts toward institutional change. Students engaged in participatory research in which the college itself is the focal community are able to provide knowledge of the divisional gaps due to their direct experience (Heckel & Moore, 2009). Researchers committed to the collaborative production of actionable knowledge are obliged to work with a variety of collaborators, including the students who are participating in both on- and off-campus programming, the faculty members who teach their classes, and the administrative staff who coordinate students’ off-campus work. Among these campus stakeholders, it is clearly the students whose perspectives are most necessary and whose voices are most crucial to the endeavor.

### The Present Study

Although we see evidence that student reflection on community service experiences enhances development, previous research has not investigated the content of student reflection or identified how students integrate academic and community experiences. We have reviewed compelling arguments that encourage an examination of the epistemic status afforded to students and community members and arguments that critique a silo-ing of expertise that silences or muffles student input in institutional decision-making. In response to these literatures, we have undertaken a study of the ways in which Bonner Scholars integrate academic learning with their experiences in community service. Our work is a collaborative effort that has included Bonner Scholars, non-Bonner

student researchers, Bonner staff, and service learning faculty in a community of practice that gives priority to student expertise in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. Our methods drew upon three qualitative research traditions and proceeded in an iterative process:

1. *Participatory Action Research (PAR)*. Our work has been grounded in the concerns and perspectives of Bonner staff and students, and it is aimed toward building program and institutional capacity for community engagement. Bonner Scholars participate on the research team, and our fieldwork seeks to hear interpretations and reactions from participants. We understand this input as both data and data analysis (Baum et al., 2006; Kloos et al., 2020).
2. *Grounded Theory*. Our interpretive community engages in independent close readings, shared discussion across disciplines and backgrounds, and open coding of qualitative data to identify meaningful, emergent themes (Charmaz, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Willig, 2013).
3. *Content Analysis*. After we have identified themes, we engage in focused coding and provide reliable, quantitative descriptions of themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These themes are then submitted for interpretation and reaction, as described in Step 1.

In this iterative process, we have examined narrative accounts of community engagement experiences, recognizing story-sharing as a fundamental meaning-making activity (Bruner, 1990). We identified instances in the narratives in which students linked classroom and community work, noting the obstacles that students identified and raising these in ongoing discussions about programming priorities with Bonner Scholars and staff. Our aim was to consider the ways in which we might work across institutional divides to facilitate meaningful integration between academic and service learning.

## Methods

### Participants

All 123 participants were Bonner Scholars at Rhodes College, a small liberal arts college in an urban setting with about 2,000 undergraduate students. The Bonner Scholars Program aims to provide college access to students with a passion for service and social justice. Rhodes is part of a national network of 65 colleges and universities that are supported by the Bonner Foundation. Fifteen students are admitted each year; 85% of each class must have an estimated family contribution at or below \$6,000; and twice as many students of color are in each Bonner class compared with the college's incoming class as a whole. Bonner Scholars have a service requirement of 10 hours per week during the school year and two full summers of service. Supported by both the national Bonner network and the college, students participate in regular training and reflection. The Bonner Program aims to support students' development as citizens through their service work, in conjunction with their academic learning. The integration of these knowledge bases has the potential to create meaningful change in the community as well as to foster the development of individual citizens who maintain a commitment to service and community development.



## Cultivating a Research Team and Collaborative Participation

Two senior members of our research team (the first and last authors of this article) began this work in conversation with the campus director of the Bonner Program. In accordance with PAR practice, initial research questions and data collection plans emerged from these conversations and were refined in continuing conversations that incorporated more stakeholders. The senior team members took responsibility for recruiting and coordinating team members and research activities. Typically, team members included six student researchers, recruited from research courses and by current team members. These student researchers included at least two Bonner Scholars. Students usually joined the team in their third or fourth semester and continued through graduation. Team members facilitated data collection and data management and constituted an interpretive community, meeting weekly to discuss research and theory and to work with data together. Our process in constituting, training, and learning with this research team is described in detail in an earlier publication (Thomas et al., 2019). The authors of the current article are members of the Community Narrative Research Team. Two are faculty members, three are recent graduates (now in graduate school), and three are current undergraduates who have been a part of the research effort for two or more years.

### Narrative Data Collection

Twice a year, Bonner students attend Bonner retreats in which they engage in programming intended to provide support and training, strengthen cohort bonds, and guide reflection. At Bonner retreats, we ask students to build upon their established weekly reflective practice through storytelling. We ask them to write and share narratives with one another in response to prompts designed to elicit meaningful reflection. In the fall retreat, we ask scholars to “please write about a situation related to your community service that felt particularly meaningful to you,” and in the spring retreat, we ask them to “please write about a situation that felt particularly awkward and you were not sure what to do.” Over four years, we collected 403 stories from 123 Bonner Scholars. On each occasion of narrative data collection, we explained the research project and asked each student author for written consent to include their story in our research. Only stories from students who provided this consent are included in the corpus of data. Their stories have not been edited for spelling or grammar. Although several students were absent for at least one of the data collections, none declined to give consent at every data collection. The institutional review board at our institution approved all the described procedures before initial data collection, and we have changed names and some details to protect confidentiality.

### Participatory Data Collection

During the four years in which we gathered narratives and over the following three years of assessing the data, members of our research team were in constant communication with current Bonner Scholars.

Representatives from the team attended monthly Bonner meetings and once or twice a year made presentations about our ongoing work with the stories, seeking input from current Bonner Scholars about our interpretations. We have sustained conversation with the Bonner Leadership Team, a body of six students who work in the Bonner office, planning, coordinating, and troubleshooting events and programs. This communication served as member checking and has ensured that our considerations of the narratives are responsive to current programming concerns. Notes from these meetings constitute both data and data analysis, informing our interpretation.

## Corpus Selection

In order to select stories in which academic themes were present, we used the word search feature of NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Stories that contained words associated with school, class, or academics were then independently evaluated by four team members to determine whether the use of these words in each story was relevant and meaningful. For example, a story that used the word *course* to refer to a three-course meal would be excluded from the subset. Interrater reliability was acceptable, with percent agreement among the coding pairs ranging from 87.5% to 94.6%. All discrepancies were resolved by discussion with the larger team. This process resulted in a set of 70 stories in which student authors mentioned both academics and community engagement. Chi-square tests showed no significant differences between these 70 stories and the full set of 403 in gender or race and ethnicity of the authors.

## Interpretive and Thematic Analysis of Narratives

The inductive work of identifying themes in the corpus was done in iterative steps, using a modified open coding procedure (Charmaz, 2005) in which pairs of team members worked with small sets of stories, bringing recurring themes to the whole team for discussion. This included conversations with Bonner Scholars who were a part of our interpretive community. Our preliminary interpretations were shared with members of the Bonner Leadership Team. As we began to reach saturation, in that these discussions were not bringing new insights, we twice brought a progress report to a monthly Bonner meeting so that we could apply pertinent insights and elaborations made by current Bonner Scholars to the narratives written by earlier cohorts. This process led us to define the story features presented in Tables 1 and 2. In multiple rounds of focused coding, five members of the research team worked in pairs to note each instance of these themes in the 70 stories selected.

Coders noted whether, at any point in the story, the student author wrote about applying course material in their community work (*classroom to community*). Intercoder reliability on identifying these occasions ranged from  $k = .612$  to  $k = .634$  for the different pairs of coders. Within this category, we noted three subthemes. These were identified by independent pairs of coders, and discrepancies were resolved in discussion with the research team. We distinguished reports of applying skills (e.g., language translation, computer programming, and research skills) from reports of applying course concepts (knowledge or vocabulary associated with or



**Table 1**  
***Frequency of Coding Categories: Classroom to Community***

Feature of story	Definition	Frequency	Percentage of selected corpus
Classroom to community		37	52.86%
			Percentage of classroom-to-community stories
Skill	Classroom skill (know-how) supports or is expected to support or fails to support community work	12	32.4%
Concept	Classroom theory, concepts, knowledge (know-that), or scholarly vocabulary is used to describe or interpret community work	15	40.5%
Overwhelm	Obligations related to classes and coursework interfere with community work	12	32.4%

*Note.* Categories were neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. A single story could fall into more than one category.

**Table 2**  
***Frequency of Coding Categories: Community to Campus***

Feature of story	Definition	Frequency	Percentage of selected corpus
Community to campus		32	45.7%
			Percentage of community-to-campus stories
Impacts own learning or career goals	Community experience improves the student's own class performance, academic, career, or campus pursuits	25	78.1%
Supports others' learning	Community experience is brought back to campus, enriching or challenging the classroom learning for others in a class or facilitating understanding for others on campus	4	12.5%
Clash	Experiences or knowledge gained in the community clashes with the academic experience, campus experience, or career goals in a way the student author cannot or does not resolve	11	34.4%

*Note.* Categories were neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. A single story could fall into more than one category.

attributed to a class or an academic major). We also identified a subset of these stories in which the student authors discussed academic work or course obligations as interference in community service because of time or energy constraints.

Coders also noted whether, at any point in the story, the student author wrote about applying knowledge, skills, or insights achieved in their community work to any on-campus endeavor, including classes or campus organizing (*community to campus*). Intercoder reliability on identifying these occasions ranged from  $k = .7$  to

$k = .8$  for the different pairs of coders. Two subthemes noted in these stories were identified by pairs of coders who resolved discrepancies with the research team. In some stories, Bonner Scholars noted that community work advanced their own academic goals or helped them with course performance. This included opportunities to practice career-relevant skills or to do class projects. These stories were distinguished from those in which the student author's community experience was shared to the benefit of classmates or of campus organizations (e.g., a committee advancing interfaith understanding, the training of residence advisors).

Stories included in our corpus that described neither campus-to-community nor community-to-campus connections were also identified and formed a critical part of our subsequent exploration.

## Findings and Interpretations

As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, in 56 of the selected 70 stories, student authors discussed either taking their classroom learning into their community service sites or bringing their community service learning back to campus, or both. There were 13 stories that did both, and there were 14 stories that did neither. In an interpretive community, we did close readings of each of the seven subsets of stories identified, seeking to understand how community and campus work were integrated into these narrative accounts.

### From the Classroom to the Community

Of the 70 narratives that described academic work in a story about community service, 52.9% ( $n = 37$ ) did so by reporting the application of material from the classroom to their work in the community. We recognized three ways these connections were made.

#### *Application of Skills*

In the most uncomplicated cases, 12 of the 37 classroom-to-community stories (17.1% of the corpus) described community work as opportunities to use specific skills they had learned or practiced in classes. A student with a Spanish minor, for example, wrote about being able to translate for a parent at the school where she was tutoring. A computer science major was able to create a computer application for a nonprofit agency.

#### *Application of Concepts*

In 15 of the 37 classroom-to-community stories (21.4% of the corpus), students used concepts or specific knowledge they associated with a course or with their academic major in describing or interpreting something at their community site. For example, students related material they had learned about health inequities, the history of the civil rights movement, or fair trade and microfinance to their service experience. Students occasionally quoted authors assigned in their classes (e.g., "In Audrey Lorde's very wise words, the Master's tools will never

tear down the master’s house”). Example 1 is an excerpt from a story in which the student uses concepts and vocabulary attributed to an academic discipline (sociology) to describe experiences off campus. The student author describes a conversation with a community activist:

**Example 1.** . . . [Name of activist] explains Reproductive Justice as a lens for addressing Reproductive Health, except it considers and focuses on the perspective of women of color. I was very interested in this paradigm, because it directly relates to my sociological understanding of intersectionality—recognizing the significant relationship between gender, race, class, etc. All of these social constructs are related, intertwined, and shape a unique experience/identity for everyone.

College courses often helped students see how historical, socio-political, and economic forces intertwine to maintain poverty and inequality. These important insights sometimes threaten to produce hopelessness and may contribute to a feeling of alienation. “What’s the purpose of community work if our government and its structure will directly destroy all efforts of this work?” one student asks. The student whose story is excerpted in Example 2 came to recognize, in their fifth semester at college, that multiple societal systems oppress some and privilege others:

**Example 2.** . . . Instead, the systems we have in place in our society (yes, the systems that I am benefitting from) forces people into these situations. I feel like some many people at Rhodes leave with a better understanding of how the world works, but so few do something about it. Instead, they take tracks of personal gain and development.

The recognition of forces that implicate the self in systems of oppression is troubling to many, and it came up frequently in monthly Bonner meetings and in biannual retreats. The author of Example 2 is disturbed that fellow students, although they come to understand this, use their college years for “personal gain and development.” We will consider below how this alienation from other students may inhibit the integration of community and classroom experiences.

In contrast to the student authors who were discouraged by the systemic nature of the problems they saw in their service communities, others applied vocabulary or concepts from their college courses in ways that reflected growth. Their stories provide evidence that the critical analysis encountered in the classroom was coordinated with the experience of direct service to facilitate genuine cultural humility. One student author, for example, explained how material in a course encouraged them to examine the motives that had guided their community work before coming to college:

**Example 3.** . . . I took Faith Health and Justice and Intro to Urban Studies (a joint class) last semester and that course work (coupled with my exposures through my Bonner service) made me *very* aware of my skin color and privilege. We talked about how historically the man with privilege sees the many problems of a

race, cultural group or neighborhood and wants to come in and be the big ole hero who fixes the problems. I identified with that, especially as I was planning to attend Rhodes.

## *Academics Overwhelm Community Service*

In contrast to these encouraging descriptions of classroom learning having a positive impact on community work, we saw examples in 12 of the 37 classroom-to-community stories (17.1% of the selected corpus) of classwork interfering with students' sense of obligation and commitment to their off-campus involvements. Students struggled with a sense that their schoolwork demanded so much time and attention that they were giving less of their time than they wished to the people and projects off campus. Many of these stories expressed a heartfelt desire to integrate community and college work—a desire that was not realized because the two competed for time. One student labeled this as part of a “sophomore slump” and expressed optimism that “as time goes on I will get better at this,” although there were similar reports from students in their junior and senior years. Example 4 is one student's complete story (not just an excerpt). It paints a compelling picture of this struggle, and the concerns expressed here were affirmed over and over by the Bonner Scholars on our research team and in meetings with other Bonner Scholars.

**Example 4.** This year, I have dealt tremendously with the issue of the sophomore slump. The stress, expectations, and pressures that come along with progressing through the college years have begun to really sink in, and I've seen my attitude in response to all of those overwhelming things reflected in my attitude about my service work and Bonner responsibilities. As a pre-med student, my classes are getting increasingly more difficult, and I find myself at a crossroads of choosing between putting 100% of myself into my school work and end academic goal of getting into medical school, or forcing myself to maintain balance in the academics, social, and service aspects of my life. Obviously the latter would be ideal, but I feel like I'm being pulled in more directions that I can realistically proceed in. Service has always been a part of who I am; this is why I was chosen as a Bonner in the first place. As a result, Bonner never felt like a “requirement” in the past. It always felt like a privilege, and attending my service site as well as attending Bonner programming was always the highlight of my weekly routine. Recently, however, my involvement in Bonner has felt like one big chore, more of an obstacle. I struggle to get my hours in on time, which was never a problem last year. Furthermore, when I do find the time to get to my service site . . . I find my patience running short with the children I work with. I'm not the same fun, enthusiastic and energetic person I was when I first met them, and that is completely unfair to them. To sum it all up, I feel like a robot, going through the motions. I have constant guilt, because when I am at [the service site] working with the kids, my bodily self is there, but my mind is elsewhere. I'm thinking about how tired I am or what assignments I still have to work on. I'm also thinking “why am I here”? In the pre-med world I'm constantly encouraged to put most of my time and energy into health/science related activities. Shouldn't my CLA [community learning assignment] site be at a hospital or a clinic? What in the world am I doing dedicating 10 hours a week to an education site for

refugee children. I'm just tutoring and babysitting! On the flip side of everything I've just previously said, I am tremendously grateful for the Bonner program and the role it has taken on in my life. I have developed truly meaningful relationships with the kids at [the service site], and I am there because I care about them and because I learn everyday about myself and the world around me from them. All I can do is try my best to connect the dots. One short-term goal of mine is to get a public health education program started at [the service site] for the middle school aged kids. It would basically take on the format of a high school health class, and we would cover topics such as hygiene, puberty, and nutrition. I don't want to abandon the kids that I have spent a year building trust and relationships with, and I also don't want to brush my academic dreams under the rug. I know that as time goes on I will get better at this. In the meantime, I'm going to continue to push through struggles and give it my all! I have the support of my fellow Bonners, and they are the only ones who understand what I'm going through.

In this narrative, as in others, academics and community work are presented as competing rather than complementary endeavors. None of the stories described the opposite problem: community work requiring so much that the student could not give adequate attention to school. In all 12 of these “overwhelmed” stories, the schoolwork was preventing service work. This is true in Example 4, despite the fact that for this student author “service has always been a part of who I am” and despite the fact that service is allowing them to form “truly meaningful relationships” and to learn “about myself and the world around me.” This Bonner Scholar has well-developed ideas for how to “connect the dots” so that the work with the refugee children and their own health science education could be integrated. Still, the struggle is presented as a choice between abandoning the relationships and work in the community and brushing “my academic dreams under the rug.” What had been a positive aspect of this student's identity has now become “an obstacle” that threatens academic success.

## From the Community Back to the Classroom

Of the 70 narratives that described academic work in a story about community service, 45.7% ( $n = 32$ ) reported the application of knowledge or skills developed in the community to their on-campus lives. We recognized three ways these connections were made.

### *Community Work Enhances Academic Preparation*

In 25 of the 32 stories (35.7% of the selected corpus), students noted ways that their work in the community facilitated either their academic performance or their career preparation. They reported using their community service as a setting for doing a classroom project (e.g., using the community service neighborhood as the site for a project in a photography class). They also used their community experience to discover career interests (e.g., “I had never thought about being a teacher, but while I was there I started to think of teaching as a possible future career”) or to eliminate career possibilities (e.g., “this situation has created uncertainty in how I should

move forward with my career”). They described their community work as practice for careers in teaching, health-care, or politics. All of these stories demonstrated the value of community work to student academic progress, without bringing these valuable experiences back into the classroom.

### *Community Work Supports Other Students’ Understanding*

In only four of the 32 community-to-campus stories (5.7% of the corpus) did students describe bringing knowledge, skills, or insights achieved in their community service back to campus to share with others. In all four, students reported using what they had learned in community service in their campus leadership positions but not specifically in classroom interactions. They described using skills they had developed in the community to facilitate on-campus discussions about healthcare inequities, about interfaith communication, or about racial insensitivity. These discussions happened in residence advising meetings, sorority meetings, and chaplain-sponsored events, but not in the classroom.

### *Community Work Clashes With Campus Identities*

In 11 of the 32 community-to-campus stories (15.7% of the selected corpus), students described a mismatch between what they experienced in their community work and what they experienced in their on-campus lives. They described a painful gulf between their own worldviews and those of their classmates. One student wrote:

Being a Bonner Scholar on Rhodes campus has enabled me to understand my place in terms of the world in a light different than I find many other Rhodes students to be able to interpret. . . . I have difficulty at times reconciling my personal identities at Rhodes.

In several of the narratives, and in numerous discussions held in monthly Bonner meetings or in the twice-yearly retreats, students spoke metaphorically about the “gates of the College” that separated two distinct identities they were unable to integrate. The discomfort that some of our students described in their stories was recognized easily by students with whom we discussed this at Bonner meetings. One year after describing how a “Faith, Health, and Justice” class revolutionized their understanding of “service,” the student quoted above wrote of a struggle to relate to others who do not share the same understanding:

**Example 5.** . . . The main struggle that resonates in my mind is not one experience, but how my Bonner experience collides with my family, my school, my friends and the church. I think about the implications of my race and privilege almost constantly and wrestle with how my actions contribute to environmental issues and oppression of minorities. My current state did not just happen, but is a product of my childhood, my immersion in the Memphis community, my faith experiences and my academic journey as an Economics, Urban Studies and Environmental Studies student. I am not saying that I am immune from



struggles within my placement, but I still feel conflict around me when I pull out of the parking lot of the [neighborhood] Development Corporation and [urban elementary school] and especially when pull back into the gates of Rhodes. One of the biggest challenges of being a Bonner is also being a student at Rhodes. First of all, being in college is an enormous stamp of privilege in itself, not to mention the demographics and campus climate present at the college.

Ultimately, I feel conflict within my daily interactions, but it usually isn't present to those around me, but it blares loudly inside of me. The internal battle has proven to be harmful and my responses have separated me from others. But, I am learning how to embrace the conflict. For example, how do I embrace and appreciate my circumstances while advocating for others and not looking down upon my classmates that don't seem to view Memphis and the work around me like I do. This journey began my sophomore year and I have made some small steps, but I have a long way to go in either mitigating or embracing the "battle."

The identity struggles described in these 11 stories may be especially acute for students of color, who find themselves known as privileged college students when they are in Memphis communities but are stereotyped as underprivileged scholarship students when they are on campus. Bonner Scholars are twice as likely to be people of color as the rest of the campus, and they are more likely to be first-generation college students. The gulf between their own understanding of reality and that of their classmates may feel especially wide for these students.

## Community and Classroom Fail to Connect

In 14 of the 32 community-to-campus stories (20% of our corpus), students described knowledge production or clear insights gained in their community work, and they talked about their academic engagement without making any connection between the two. In some ways, these stories were the most generative of discussion and insight in our interpretive community. They led us to raise questions with our Bonner Scholars about times they might have contributed their expertise in the classroom but declined to do so. The 14 "no connection" stories we read and the notes from discussion with Bonner Scholars on this topic raise three possible reasons why students may keep the academic and community domains separate.

The first of these reasons came up in Example 5, discussed within the context of the "identity clash" stories. This was the topic of several discussions with Bonner Scholars. Students sometimes felt as though their experiences were so different from those of their classmates that there was not enough common ground to support conversation. In team meetings, Bonner students explained that these identity/climate issues contribute to their hesitation to bring their experiences up in classroom settings. Several students struggled, as did the student author of Example 5, to not "look down on" their classmates whose lives have been so sheltered or whose vision of the world is so limited that they do not understand the problems encountered by people "outside the gates."

A second, related obstacle was the doubt students expressed about whether the insights and knowledge they achieved in their community work would be valued as contributions in their classrooms. As one Bonner Scholar

explained, “you already feel like you do not really fit, so it is scarier to share information that you feel will not be respected.” A classroom climate dictates not only what is considered credible knowledge but also who is considered credible in their transmission of their knowledge. Bonner students acknowledge this, consistently telling us that in our campus climate, their identities as students, Bonner Scholars, and—oftentimes—minoritized students are deeply intertwined with the ways in which their class contributions are likely to be misunderstood or devalued.

We identified a potential third obstacle that is more complex and subtle. Our participation in program planning and our discussion with Bonner Scholars about their reluctance to share their experience in classes led us to recognize a conflict between an imperative to cultivate humility and an imperative to claim the authority of one’s own experience. Bonner programming, and indeed much of the content in critical service learning courses, emphasizes the cultivation of listening skills and a respect for the subject positions occupied by people who are living with the problems we seek to address. We saw in our narratives several occasions in which students express mindfulness of their own privilege. For example, one student wrote, “I never am completely sure how my privilege as a hearing person is going to come across to the people with whom I am speaking.” In a very powerful example of the success of efforts to encourage student respect for community members, a student describes 140 hours of research and careful preparation in support of a community effort to reclaim a school designated as “failing” by the state. This student author describes organizing a critical meeting between school board members, parents, and state officials:

**Example 6.** . . . I stood in the back and realized the complete lack of experience I had with this issue. . . . Even though I have researched, studied and worked with the issue of inner city public education and the challenges it faces both in Memphis and [home city] for most of my time at Rhodes, I saw that I failed to grasp or relate to the reality faced by some of the most at-risk consumers of this system.

In the 30 minutes allotted for sharing a narrative, this student wrote over a thousand words describing the conflict they felt between a sense of responsibility to share their expertise and a sense of responsibility to listen to others “who had so much personal experience and investment in this issue.”

An imperative to listen more than talk, however appropriate for students in their community settings, may be cultivating an inclination to silence the self that is brought back into the classroom, where this student’s insights and expertise are seriously needed. We want our Bonner Scholars to claim the authority of their experience and to contribute their knowledge in classroom spaces, but our programming may be inadvertently suppressing students’ recognition of their own authority.

In the four stories in which Bonner students did discuss bringing their expertise from the community back to campus, they did so in co-curricular rather than classroom activities. Indeed, our Bonner Scholars often take leadership roles on campus. Nevertheless, they expressed doubts in these stories about whether their ideas were respected by campus administrators and about whether their efforts to promote institutional improvement were appreciated. In one of these narratives, a student writes about a meeting in which they attempted to convince

administrators to better represent community engagement opportunities during the orientation week for first-year students:

**Example 7.** . . . Students are socially and culturally influenced by administration and faculty, so we knew that this would be an important way to integrate community service into the lives of students. . . . We had an incredibly successful meeting yesterday, and we decided together that an entire day be dedicated to service for the first-years. This is a huge improvement over the 15 minutes we have had in the past. I was very encouraged by the outcome of this meeting, and I still am. However, while we were exiting, I noticed a sketch calendar from a planning meeting that had occurred before our meeting with [administrator]. It already had “service day” written in on one of the days. This confused me a lot, because we had not spoken with him until that very meeting. It upset me to think that we may have only been successful because that was something an administrator had already decided, and not something that our efforts and our desires as students and student leaders produced. It made me wonder: are our ideas about what is best for this school respected as we thought they were in that meeting?

This student author expresses confusion at the behavior of an administrator, calling into question this person’s authenticity. They tell of going into the meeting believing that their ideas were respected but coming out feeling as though that respect was just a pretense and that student leadership did not actually matter. The dialogue that took place in the meeting, the student author realizes, was a pretense, designed to make the students feel as though they were a part of decision-making, when the decisions had actually been made before the meeting. Experiences such as these are likely to depress the inclination that students have to bring back to campus the leadership skills they are developing in their service sites.

## Implications and Conclusions

The 70 stories written by Bonner Scholars about their academic and service experiences included much material in support of prior research showing how beneficial community engagement is to college student development. We found that students used their community experience to practice academic skills and to discern and promote their career goals. They used the concepts and vocabulary learned in their courses to describe and interpret what they saw in the community. Their community placements provided material that they used in research papers and projects and brought back to campus leadership skills they developed in off-campus work. They approached community partners with respect and cultivated cultural humility, even as they achieved impressive expertise. Week after week, as our research team assembled as an interpretive community doing close readings of these narratives, we marveled at the insights these students shared with us and at the rich resource they represent for the improvement of our institution.

In our discussions with service learning faculty and with the Bonner Leadership Teams, we heard support for the expectation that students who work in off-campus communities will come back to campus with insights and

experience that will enrich our class conversations. Indeed, the general education degree at our college requires every student to take at least one course (colloquially called their “beyond-the-gates” course) designed to facilitate “connections between the classroom and the world.” We found, however, that students were much more likely to write about taking their classroom learning to the community than about bringing their community engaged learning back into the classroom. This seemed to us to be a tragic waste of a remarkable resource. We read stories about students doing policy research for school districts, gathering oral histories from civil rights activists, organizing community gardens, developing programming for refugee women and children, developing public health information campaigns—students engaged with other citizens in these and dozens of other remarkable projects that promise to transform our city. If the knowledge and understanding our students achieve in these projects are not invited into our classrooms, and if students or faculty fail to see their experience in off-campus communities as “classroom worthy,” we lose valuable educational opportunities.

Critical data analysis requires that we notice what emerges in our data and also that we note what is absent. Failing to find community-to-classroom integration stories, we examined our stories closely for evidence of obstacles to this kind of integration. We also initiated discussions of this with Bonner Scholars and with the Bonner Leadership Team. This exploration led us to identify four problem areas that may be inhibiting the academic-community integration we hope for. First, students told us that they are overwhelmed by time and energy demands resulting from their sense that academic obligations compete with (rather than coordinate with) their community work. Second, students described a painful gulf between their worldviews and the sensibilities of their classmates who either don’t see or don’t care about the social justice issues that are so important to our Bonner Scholars. Third, Bonner Scholars are encouraged to listen more than talk—as a means of enacting the cultural humility they are encouraged to cultivate. This may decrease their likelihood of sharing their expertise in their classes or other spaces on campus, particularly if they fear that this sharing would not be valued by peers. Fourth, and related to this, we heard an uncertainty from students about whether the knowledge and experience they achieve off campus would be respected and valued in their classes or in their co-curricular involvements on campus. All four of these difficulties spring from an epistemological blind spot in academic communities that limits the kind of experience that is valued in the classroom and the kind of knowledge that “counts” as knowing. We argue below that both of these are symptomatic of institutional structures and practices that can be transformed in support of holistic student development and democratic undergraduate education.

## Bringing Community Into the Classroom: Whose Knowledge Counts

In order to address the problems identified above, we must reconsider both what knowledge is seen as classroom worthy and who is considered able to produce such knowledge. This requires a critical examination of the way in which we devalue the knowledge of those outside of the academy and position students as passive recipients of faculty expertise. Pereira (2017) connected this devaluation to larger power structures in society, writing that “the assessment of particular people as less able to produce proper scientific knowledge is reflective

of macro-structures of power where they occupy a subordinate position, and is also in itself a form of subordination” (p. 56). The makeup of the city of Memphis, in addition to the demographics of the Bonner Program at Rhodes College, makes this power analysis all the more essential. The institution’s location in a majority minority city means that many of the community members that Bonners are working with are likely to “occupy a subordinate position” as a result of racism and classism. Here, as in many college towns, poverty and non-whiteness are associated with “the outside community,” whereas the academic institution embodies wealth and whiteness. Critical service learning pedagogy recognizes that positioning students and academics as the “experts” in service sites who can “fix” community problems is counterproductive and oppressive (Mitchell, 2008), but many stop short of positioning community members as experts who produce knowledge that not only is important to the betterment of their own community but is also worthy of consideration in the classroom.

Yosso (2005) argued that although those who have theorized power and oppression (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986) have noted the forms of capital that are valued in academia and are most freely available to the children of the privileged, they have failed to notice the community/cultural wealth that is prominent in marginalized communities. For example, one form of community/cultural wealth identified by Yosso that holds exceptional possibilities for bringing community-constructed understanding into the classrooms is resistance capital. This form of capital refers to the skills developed in marginalized communities that are deployed against inequality and oppression. Many of our students are working in off-campus communities with a rich history of resistance to racial, economic, and gender oppression, the very forms of oppression that they may be studying in their college classrooms. We have seen students write in their narratives about the courage and wisdom of the people they meet at their service sites. The powerful examples of resistance they have observed off campus ought to inform and enrich classroom conversations that focus almost exclusively on the obstacles these communities face.

We may have made more progress toward preparing our students to go out in the community with respect for the forms of community/cultural capital that Yosso identified than we have made in preparing the professoriate to receive and to honor these sources of wealth.

Our findings suggest that many of our Bonner Scholars have cultivated an attitude of respect they take into the community and that this sets them up well to honor the community/cultural wealth they find there. We must consider whether they bring that humility back into the classroom in a way that silences them. In addition to teaching our students to approach community partners with humility, we must encourage them to have confidence in the understanding achieved in their collaborations. We want them to have enough humility off campus to foster genuine collaboration and enough confidence on campus to share their expertise.

This issue is compounded by the fact that students bringing such knowledge into the classroom tend to be viewed as recipients, not producers or transmitters of knowledge. What’s more, many Bonner students themselves belong to marginalized groups. A Bonner student in a classroom already faces a challenge of sharing knowledge produced with community members outside of the academy. In such a role, they may be viewed as a border-crossing agent, or a student doing boundary work (McMillan, 2011; Pereira, 2017; Ross, 2012). Their social positionality, however, may afford them more credibility on one side of the boundary than the other, and their dual participation may serve to diminish their credibility on both. If that Bonner Scholar is both a

student of color and from a low-income background, their very presence in the classroom represents a breach in the boundary between community and campus, and they are even less likely to be granted authority in the classroom. The campus climate that Bonner students write about in their narratives and discuss in meetings is inextricably linked to oppressive societal power structures—which are both reflective of and perpetuated by the continued denial of epistemic authority of marginalized groups within the academy. More faculty recognition of the cultural/community wealth that students bring to the classroom by virtue of their off-campus experience and by virtue of their own backgrounds may serve to disrupt these norms (Yosso, 2005).

## Bridging Institutional Divisions: Whose Expertise Is Valued

Another, related barrier to integration of “academic” and “community” learning may be institutional. The demarcation of what is and is not classroom-worthy knowledge is reflected in administrative divisions within institutions of higher education themselves. This can be seen in the long-standing struggle to bridge the work of student affairs and academic affairs in a meaningful way to support student development. This institutional divide is one that many are still trying to navigate to promote successful collaboration (LePeau, 2015). As a co-curricular program with objectives for both student learning and growth as well as structural and community change, the Bonner Scholars Program does not fit neatly into one of these two institutional structures. While the program provides an opportunity for collaboration across the divide, continued silo-ing of academic and student affairs may interfere with the realization of the program objectives. One reported barrier to this collaboration is a “perceived value difference” between student affairs and academic affairs, with the work done by student affairs and staff members often being perceived as secondary or inferior to the work of academic affairs or the scholarship of faculty (LePeau, 2015; Syno et al., 2019).

As we work toward holistic student learning and development through community and civic engagement, we must interrogate an academic history and culture that contribute to the devaluation of both the experiential learning facilitated by student affairs and the community-based knowledge students learn from, or co-produce with, community members (Yosso, 2005). To do so, we must challenge the enduring notions of knowledge production and expertise both within and outside of academia. This imperative can manifest in many ways. One such way would be a commitment to pedagogies, such as FoK, that are rooted in counter-hegemonic social justice aims. If faculty genuinely respect the knowledge and experience students gain in their off-campus work, students might be less likely to see their community work as competing with their academic goals. The student who felt conflicted by a choice to “abandon the kids that I have spent a year building trust and relationships with” or to sweep “my academic dreams under the rug” might be encouraged in a plan to integrate their interest in health education for refugee children with work in on-campus health sciences courses.

One solution proposed in the student affairs and academic affairs collaboration literature is a change in the organizational structures and incentive mechanisms used by institutions of higher education. For example, engaged learning and scholarship with undergraduate students and community partners are not valued in many institutions, as they do not clearly fall in one of the “buckets” of faculty work. In such a context, accomplishments that



integrate service, teaching, and scholarship—such as institutionally supported centers for community engagement that bring together staff, faculty, and student expertise—are confounding to an evaluation system that relies on three separate scores for teaching, research, and service. Furthermore, faculty are rewarded primarily for scholarly research and contributions to their narrow fields of study, and this work is often carried out in isolation or with limited collaboration (LePeau, 2015). In general, little importance is placed on collaboration in faculty culture (Syno et al., 2019).

Reward structures remain out of sync with institutional values and strategic goals in many cases, and faculty and staff workload is already quite heavy. Faculty and staff may be more motivated to engage in community engaged scholarship if it counts explicitly as such and as it is connected explicitly to key issues facing institutions and campus-wide initiatives already underway. For example, our college is one of many taking stock and engaging in college-wide work around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Senior-level leadership has drafted a guiding document that expands on our strategic plan and lays out specific priorities and initiatives (Turner, 2021). We see multiple roles for faculty, staff, and student leaders who can contribute to these collaborative institutional efforts.

We see student expertise that arises from the integration of academic and community-based learning as central to these efforts. For example, professional development for faculty and staff to equip them to support our diverse and changing student body could include attendance at Bonner Scholar capstone presentations. Each year, graduating Bonner Scholars present incredibly rich reflections on community engaged learning and leadership. These are open to the entire community but are attended by only a few faculty members, who come as a gesture of support for their students. These events should be considered faculty development opportunities with the expectation that faculty and academic affairs professionals attend to learn from the presentations, not simply to support or evaluate the students.

As we envision diversity and equity in our campus life and community, we may look to Bonner Scholars and other student leaders from Memphis who could serve as teaching assistants for community engagement courses, helping to teach and model skills needed for democratic citizenship, community building, and productive engagement with others. Our students are doing impressive work to integrate what they learn in their classes with what they are trying to accomplish in their on- and off-campus communities. If we recognize students, staff, and community members as collaborators in knowledge production and institutional change efforts, we will benefit from the work they do and more fully recognize our aspirations for democratic and transformative undergraduate education. Finally, if we wish to facilitate holistic student learning and development in a way that truly prioritizes diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is not enough to simply teach critical epistemologies and cultural humility: we must also value diverse funds of knowledge and further democratize institutional practices.

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