

## **“A Double-Edged Sword”: College Student Perceptions of Required High School Service-Learning**

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*This article presents the findings from a narrative inquiry exploring the perceived outcomes associated with a high school service-learning graduation requirement from a diverse group of college students. In particular, we were interested in participants' stories related to their experiences meeting the requirement, the meaning they made of the requirement, and the relationship between their high school experiences and college involvement. Results suggest a tenuous connection between the two because students focused primarily on completing their hours for the requirement and engaged in service primarily at their schools. Students perceived the requirement as a burden while in high school, but retrospectively understood the value of the requirement once they were in college, describing it as a “double-edged sword.”*

With increased national, university, and community attention focused on civic engagement and participation, service-learning is increasingly touted as an efficacious strategy to promote such goals (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Metz & Youniss, 2003; Raskoff & Sundeen, 1999). Growing numbers of high school and college students are involved in community service and volunteering (Higher Education Research Institute, 2006; Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006). Drawing upon data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Corporation for National & Community Service (CNS) reports a 20% increase in the number of college students who volunteered from 2002 to 2005, attributing this in part to what they referred to as the “9/11 Generation.” However, evidence exists to suggest that college students are involved in more “episodic,” short-term volunteer activities which may not be directly related to the cultivation of patterns of participation needed for civic engagement (Dote, Cramer, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006; Marks & Jones, 2004) and that college student volunteer activity is on the decline (HERI, 2006). To promote a “culture of college service,” the service-learning “pipeline” (Dote et al., p. 3) from high schools to college must be examined.

Community service and service-learning requirements are increasingly common among high schools and colleges, presumably as one strategy to promote continued community participation. Indeed, many school districts throughout the United States have established community service graduation requirements (Education Commission of the States, 2001). However, only Maryland has a statewide mandatory service-learning high school graduation requirement. Implemented in 1997, this mandate stipulates that all

students who attend public high schools complete a minimum of 75 service-learning hours. Existing research on the link between required service and continued participation is mixed at best and does not match the certainty with which requirements are increasingly pursued in an effort to develop patterns of civic engagement and continued service (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1987; Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Jones & Hill, 2003; Marks & Jones, 2004; McLellan & Youniss, 2003; Metz & Youniss, 2003; Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 1999). For example, CNS research reports that the state of Maryland is ranked 34th among all states in college student volunteering, with a 30.2% volunteering rate (Dote et al., 2006). This is surprising given that 46.2% of all Maryland public high school graduates become college students in the state’s public and private colleges and universities (Maryland State Department of Education, 2006).

What is clear is that despite growing interest in service-learning in high schools and colleges, and investment of resources in promoting such activities, very little is known about the effectiveness of service-learning requirements in promoting civic engagement and continued community involvement (Niemi, Hepburn, & Chapman, 2000). No studies investigate how a statewide service-learning requirement influences students’ future intentions to serve in college or beyond, or other outcomes associated with a requirement.

### Competing Rationales for Required Service

Early conceptual arguments associating education and service as a means of encouraging post secondary community involvement can be traced back over 100 years to educational pioneer John Dewey (Harkavy,

2004). More recent advocates such as Ernest Boyer (1983), former Federal Commissioner of Education, recommended mandatory high school service as a means of preparing students to assume responsibility for living as contributing members of their community and society during and after high school. Barber (1994) documented the historical trend of teaching citizenship through service noting that only in recent history has service been separated from education. This rationale positions service in primary and secondary education as a means of promoting continued service involvement in adulthood. Although these arguments may ring true for some, they are not grounded in or borne out in empirical research.

The number of college students who participated in service while in high school has steadily increased over the past two decades (Chronicle Almanac, 2007). According to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program about one-third of first-year college students graduated from high schools with some type of requirement for service (Vogelgesang, 2005). High school service requirements are more prevalent for students attending private and/or religious high schools (Raskoff & Sundeen, 1999). However, data on collegiate service involvement suggested the number of high school students continuing with service participation in college may be falling. Vogelgesang and Astin (2005) found that the number of high school seniors engaged in service has increased over the past decade, while participation in service during and after college has declined during the same time period.

### Relationship between High School and College Service

A review of empirical evidence suggests that the nature of the relationship between mandatory high school service and continued participation in college service is ambiguous. Although a number of studies (e.g., Astin & Sax, 1998; Berger & Milem, 2002; Eyer & Giles, 1999; Hart et al., 2007; Vogelgesang, 2005) have identified high school service as a predictor of college involvement, when the research has focused on required service the results are less clear. Further, the research that does exist examining the outcomes associated with required community service or service-learning suggests a disconnect between the espoused goals, objectives, and purposes of required service and what students actually experience. However, what is clear is that college students bring with them to higher education a whole range of characteristics, including the vestiges of their high school experiences (Cruce & Moore, 2007; McEwen, 2003).

For example, in two longitudinal studies of multiple

student cohorts at one public high school in suburban Boston, Metz and Youniss (2003, 2005) found that the completion of a 40-hour service requirement was related to higher rates of high school volunteerism and also associated with an increase in students' intentions to volunteer in the future. However, consistent with HERI results, this study focused on intentions, rather than actual college service activity. In several studies that explored this relationship between high school and college participation, patterns emerge that suggest requirements do not necessarily result in continued service in college. Great variability exists in factors such as school structures to support the requirement and the nature of activities in which students engage to meet their requirement, which have been found to make a difference in outcomes associated with service (McLellan & Youniss, 2003). Further, Jennings and Stoker (2004), in a longitudinal quantitative study, found the effects of students' high school participation in community service may not immediately translate into college involvement.

Marks and Jones (2004) analyzed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) database which contains measures of several educational outcomes. They found that students who attended Catholic high schools and performed service as a requirement were more likely to discontinue serving in college. This trend held true for students who participated in community service as 10th graders or were mandated to perform community service as seniors. Students who were encouraged, but not required, to volunteer as 12th graders were more likely to continue volunteering in college.

Jones and Hill (2003) discovered that college students who participated in service in high school tended to continue in college if their motivation came from an internal commitment along with family and school encouragement. Those who participated more sporadically because of a requirement or to build up their resume were not likely to continue serving once they entered college. Interviews with participants revealed two reasons against required service. First, if service is framed as a requirement, then it was no longer considered service. Second, students worked only toward completing the requirement and discontinued service once they met the conditions of the requirement. Service requirements can deter any lasting continued involvement in students as well as civic or social responsibility (Jones & Hill). Therefore, service becomes "just another homework assignment" (p. 524).

Finally, Stukas, Snyder, and Clary (1999), in a study of college students enrolled in a service-learning course, found that if students only perform service when required, they are less likely to freely volunteer in the future. This was affected by how much prior

community service students had completed. Students with significant prior experience with service were less likely to be negatively influenced by required community service. However, if they had little to no prior experience, they were more likely to decide not to volunteer in the future. Researchers found that student choice regarding type of volunteering emerged as one way to counteract the negative impact of required service (Stukas, Snyder, & Clary).

The overall results from these studies suggest that students who participated in service in high school tended to continue in college if they made an internal commitment and received strong family and school encouragement. Further, those who participated more sporadically because of a requirement or to bolster their resume were not likely to continue serving once they entered college (Jones & Hill, 2003; Marks & Jones, 2004). To date, no studies provide compelling evidence to support the efficacy of required high school service-learning as an impetus for a sustained commitment to service during and after college. As a result, current evidence leaves few clues as to how college practitioners might counter the mediating deterrents to service that may be rooted in the high school experience.

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceived outcomes associated with a high school service-learning requirement from a diverse group of college students. In particular, we were interested in investigating the nature of the service-learning experiences participants had in meeting the requirement, the meaning they made of those experiences, and how these experiences influenced (or not) their college experiences. Specific research questions guiding the investigation included: (a) What meaning do college students make of their high school service-learning requirement? (b) What influence does a high school requirement have on college involvement, particularly continued community service? (c) What is the congruence between espoused goals of high schools and the actual learning as perceived by graduates? (d) What are student perceptions of the requirement? and (e) How do students understand their own service experiences?

## Method

This study utilized a constructivist theoretical framework and a narrative methodological approach. Because we were interested in students' constructions of meaning of their high school service-learning experiences, a constructivist framework, which assumes knowledge is mutually constructed between researchers and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and emphasizes the role of context (Flyvbjerg, 2001), was appropriate. A constructivist design situates the focus of the investigation on research partic-

ipants' meaning making of their experiences and perceptions of outcomes related to the service requirement (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

To access these experiences and perceptions, narrative inquiry was utilized as an approach that illuminates human experiences as lived and told as stories (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Chase identified five characteristics of narrative inquiry: (1) narrative researchers treat narrative as retrospective meaning making; (2) narratives represent verbal action in the constructing of an experience; (3) narratives are constrained and augmented by context and particulars of time and place; (4) narratives are shaped by the time and setting of the telling and thus, are variable; and (5) narrative researchers serve as narrators as they interpret the stories told (pp. 656-657). Narrative inquiry was particularly well-suited to research grounded in the nature of experiences, reflection on these experiences, and the stories that emerge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), such as uncovering narratives that make up the stories of students' experiences with service in high school.

## Research Context

In 1997, Maryland became the first state to implement a mandatory service-learning high school graduation requirement stipulating that all students attending public high schools complete a minimum of 75 service-learning hours. More than 99% of graduating seniors complete the 75 hour service-learning requirement prior to graduating from high school (<http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/programs/servicelearning/>). Maryland residents make up 75.9% of the total undergraduate population at the University of Maryland; therefore the undergraduate population of the University of Maryland alone contributed more than one million hours of service during their high school career.

## Procedures

*Sampling.* Expert nominators who served as informants and purposeful sampling were used to obtain information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). Twenty-three faculty and administrators whom we knew to have reputations for working closely with undergraduate students were sent letters describing the purpose of the study and asked to nominate Maryland undergraduate students from Maryland public high schools. Nominators represented a variety of functional areas within the university (e.g., residence life, campus programs, student judicial programs, academic honoraries and clubs, living learning programs, programs for underrepresented groups, student employment, faculty in scholars programs). We indicated to nominators that

we were seeking a wide range of perspectives and experiences and that we were not only looking for undergraduate students who were involved on Maryland's campus, either in community service or other activities, but those less involved on campus or involved in their home communities. We also indicated that we were seeking participants from around the state of Maryland (e.g., rural, suburban, urban), various school sizes (e.g., small, medium, large), and representing diversity in social group membership (e.g., race, ethnicity, social class).

The invitation to nominate student participants resulted in 209 nominations, with 9 out of the 209 duplicate names. We then sent email invitations to each of these 200 students, letting them know they had been nominated for participation and inviting them to participate. This resulted in 54 affirmative responses. Of these 54, 10 were ineligible because they either attended a private Maryland high school or an out-of-state public high school. We then sent to the 44 eligible participants an interest form to complete which asked questions about their high school, how they met their service-learning requirement, when during high school they completed their hours, where their high school was located, college involvements and affiliations, as well as demographic questions related to racial-ethnic background, class year, religion, and age. Forty-three students returned interest forms and then, based on our sampling criteria (e.g., county of high school, racial-ethnic diversity, variety in college involvement), we selected 28 students to interview. Upon selecting these 28 students, we sent email messages to schedule interviews. Nineteen students responded to these requests to schedule interviews.

*Participants.* The sample included 9 men and 10 women; racial-ethnic background consisted of 5 Asian American (1 Pakistani, 1 Korean, 1 Vietnamese, 1 Filipino, 1 Asian American), 2 Biracial, 4 African American/Black, and 8 white; from 10 different counties in the state; and 4 first-year students, 1 sophomore, 9 juniors, and 5 seniors. High school enrollment ranged from 300 to 3000; three high schools were categorized as rural, four as urban, and 12 as suburban. Students' college involvement covered a wide range, from not involved at all to highly involved. Examples of involvement included student government, community service related living and learning programs, various advisory councils, honor societies, and curricular and co-curricular student organizations. All names used are pseudonyms chosen by each participant.

*Data collection.* Data were collected through two in-depth interviews with each participant. So as not to overwhelm participants with a team of three interviewers, we divided up participants so that each researcher individually interviewed a subset of par-

ticipants. Two interviews were conducted with each participant, and each participant had the same interviewer for both interviews so that rapport could be developed and a relationship established. Consistent with narrative inquiry, interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to elicit stories about service-learning experiences and how each participant understood those experiences (Chase, 2005; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The protocol for the first interview was pilot tested with three students who met the study sampling criteria and was revised based upon their feedback and our experiences with the protocol. The same protocol was used for each participant. The first interview focused on students' experiences meeting the high school service-learning requirement, their perceptions of the requirement, and the meaning they made of these. Consistent with narrative inquiry, we asked participants questions such as "Tell me about your high school experience;" "How did you fulfill your high school requirement?" and "Can you tell me a story that you remember from your high school service-learning experience that you still think about today?" The second interview was utilized as an initial member check with emerging themes and to focus on how the state of Maryland describes the service-learning experience. Each participant was shown a copy of "Maryland's Best Practices" and the statement that "all service-learning experiences should meet *all* [emphasis in original] of the Maryland's Best Practices for Service-Learning" (Maryland State Department of Education, 2005, p. 6) and asked to respond to these practices in light of their own experiences.

*Data analysis.* Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006, Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with attention to the content of the narratives, using a categorical content approach (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) which enabled us both to study the individual stories of each participant, but also to look across the stories for themes. Each researcher independently read and coded every interview and generated themes. We then came together to compare our codes and themes and to generate the patterns within and across all the narratives. We were careful to maintain the "voices within each narrative" (Chase, 2005, p. 663) as well as to listen for the themes that emerged across the interviews. This process led to a continuous process of returning to the interviews themselves to refine the themes and to assure that the themes generated remained close to the words and meanings of all participants. The themes were further revised as we moved from more descriptive categories to analytical and interpretive themes generated to tell the story of these participants.

### Trustworthiness

To assure that our interpretive narrative, or re-storying of participants' narrations, was recognizable to our participants, we conducted member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as a strategy to assure the trustworthiness of findings. We recognized that interpreting others' stories brings with it an ethical responsibility to stay close to participants' meanings (Abes & Jones, 2004; Jones, 2002). To this end we used the second interview as a member check with each participant, reviewing emerging themes with them. As our data analysis proceeded, we then sent each participant a narrative summary, a four-page interpretive re-telling of their stories, presented as one story, and asked them to review this to assure that it accurately captured their experiences and individual story. Out of the 19 participants, 13 responded to this essay and affirmed what they read by stating "this sounds like me." Trustworthiness was also enhanced by the presence of three researchers and our independent coding and analysis.

### Findings

The focus of this study was on the narratives of service associated with meeting a high school service-learning graduation requirement and particularly, the meaning college students made of their experiences. We found participants were very eager to discuss their perceptions of the requirement itself, their experiences meeting it, and their ideas about how their high school activities influenced their college experience. However, we were struck by the absence of a "transformative" (e.g., this changed my life) narrative so often found in the service-learning literature, largely due to the way in which the requirement was structured in the high schools. We found that to illuminate the perceived connection between the high school service-learning requirement and college involvement, the high school story needed to be told. We present here what our participants perceived to be "storyworthy" (Chase, 2005, p. 661) about their experiences in the form of three narratives: perceptions on the connection between high school and college (a (dis) serving narrative), their high school experiences (an acquiescent narrative), and a retrospective look back on the requirement (a tenuous narrative).

#### *A(Dis) Serving Narrative: The Connection between the High School Service-Learning Requirement and College Involvement*

Few students expressed any connection between their high school requirement and their college experience, often because they did not learn much from their high school experience. Many either noted that they had not ever considered the possibility of a connection

between their high school service-learning experience and college or they indicated that they needed to "take a break" from service. For example, Frank commented, "I don't think my high school service-learning requirement influenced my experiences in college. I never look at anything and say, 'oh, that's because of those 75 hours I did.'" Even those participants who were involved in college, including community service related activities, did not attribute their college participation to their high school experiences meeting the service-learning requirement. For example, Mackenzie commented that she didn't "think that my high school service-learning requirement has influenced my college experience at all. I didn't learn anything from the requirement." Upon reflection, L-B realized "I guess it would be more accurate to say is what I didn't learn is what's impacted me. It's made me want to learn more because I felt like I got cheated in high school in some ways." Others attributed their disinterest in college involvement, including community service-related activities, to the need to "move on" from high school service and "take a break from service," particularly given what they saw as an absence of available time in college.

The one area that many participants commented on in relation to a connection between high school and college was what they perceived as the development of job-related skills through their service-learning activities. These included learning time management, getting along with others, and dealing with difficult people. Karen noted, "I never really worked before and developed a good work ethic, even though I was not getting paid. It taught me how to be professional...how to deal with difficult people and work with a diverse group of peers." Most acknowledged their interpersonal gains came from working with people in their home town communities and indeed, for several participants, service became one vehicle for staying connected. For example, James described his service as "It kind of gives me a reason to go back home. I got from that [the requirement] the interest in still doing it [coaching middle school basketball] and staying rooted in the community where I'm from."

Whether a result of a mismatch between intended outcomes and the actual experience or not, participants' stories suggested the requirement itself had little to do with promoting continued service, civic engagement, or intrinsically driven community participation. To understand why this disconnect between high school and college exists, we turn to their high school experiences.

#### *An Acquiescent Narrative: High School Experiences with the Requirement*

Nearly all of our participants could recall how it is they learned of their high school service-learning

requirement and went about meeting it. There was little enthusiasm in their voices as they relayed this information to us. Instead, they approached this requirement reluctantly and with little active protest, focusing on what they needed to do to “get it done.” This narrative of acquiescence illuminates how participants became aware of the requirement and their perceptions of its purpose, how they met the requirement, and the high school’s role in assisting.

*“Look to your left and look to your right:” Becoming aware of the requirement.* Participants conveyed a diversity of approaches used by their high schools in making them aware of the service-learning graduation requirement. However, all felt the burden of knowing that they would not graduate without meeting the requirement. Keith described in great detail his freshmen year assembly, during which a senior administrator introduced the requirement by stating,

‘Look to your left, look to your right, I guarantee one of you won’t graduate because of the community service requirement...you can be a 4.0 student and get in to any college you want, but you won’t graduate because of the community service requirement,’ and I was like ‘whoa.’

Perhaps because of the way the requirement was typically presented in the schools, many students perceived it as a burden, that was, as Veronikah noted, something administrators “hang over your head.” Kyle lamented, “It’s just what I have to do to graduate.”

Stephanie recalled being told about the requirement in 9th grade and “that it was best to get it out of the way your freshmen year because you wouldn’t get a diploma without it.” Similarly, Frank was told in middle school “Get it done or you can’t graduate.” Whether meeting the requirement in middle school or high school, clearly the focus was on getting the requisite hours-this was a prevailing theme among all participants.

*“It is all about the hours.”* Several participants noted awareness of the requirement as Nick stated:

I guess when you were in the 9th grade they talked to you about it in English classes and said you had to have this many hours. It was not something that they pushed or that they announced or advertised very much. It was something that I guess you were expected to just do...I think most students could have gone through high school being totally unaware of it.

Amanda indicated that she was aware of the requirement but could not recall any of the details about how it is she came to know.

Despite knowledge of the graduation requirement, considered by some such as Bob as “common knowledge,” there was quite a bit of ambiguity about what

the requirement entailed (e.g., number of hours) and how to meet the requirement (what kind of service activity “counted”); and virtually no mention about why such a requirement existed in the first place. Instead, the focus of students’ attention was on accumulating enough hours to meet the requirement. Although the Maryland State Department of Education Code of Regulations clearly specifies 75 hours of student service to meet the requirement, participants were less clear about what was expected. The range of responses to inquiries about their understanding of the requirement included several (3-5 participants) indicating a 60 hour commitment, several noting 36 hours, and several more only aware that they received 30 hours for graduating from middle school. For example, Eric reported, “It was automatic that whatever activities we took part in middle school, as soon as we graduated from the 8th grade, we would automatically get 30 community service hours. By high school I knew I only had to do 30 more hours.” Mackenzie declared that her requirement was for “some random big number of hours.” A few participants indicated that they were not sure how many hours they needed because it was unclear where their hours were coming from, but they kept appearing on their report cards. For example, several realized that participation in student honoraries and clubs, like National Honor Society (NHS) and the Gifted and Talented Program, brought automatic hours for them. Amelia, in commenting about her awareness of accruing hours, stated, “It was odd, because I kept on receiving credit, through my classes, and I didn’t really know what I was receiving credit for. They kept just giving it for the AP classes, every year it would just keep on increasing and then you’re done!”

*What is it called?: “You can serve anything.”* The Maryland State Department of Education (2005) requirement is clearly identified as service-learning and is defined in their guidelines:

Service-learning is a teaching method that combines meaningful service to the community with curriculum-based learning. Students improve their academic skills by applying what they learn in school to the real world; they then reflect on their experience to reinforce the link between their service and their learning. (p. 3)

Participants had very different definitions of service-learning and clearly, no common understanding. Much of how they defined service-learning was in relation to the requirement itself and for many, in opposition to the requirement. For instance, Karen captured the sentiment reflected in many of the participants stating that “service-learning” was “the official name” and “the way you meet the high school graduation requirement.” Community service, how-

ever, was what you do when you are involved in the community and helping others.

B-E believed that “community service means you actually go out in to the community itself. Service-learning means to me you don’t necessarily have to help the community, but it means that you are learning while you are serving something, but you can be serving anything.”

James described the distinction in his view as “The difference is that in community service you can go into something once and pat yourself on the back when you leave the door. Community service is more personal service. Service-learning builds the perception that we are supposed to be learning and getting involved with what we are doing.” For L-B, the distinction between service-learning and community service had to do with the bureaucratic steps associated with meeting the service-learning requirement, which were in place presumably to prompt learning. He stated, “I think the difference is that with service-learning there is something attached to it like a paper or an action statement. Community service you can learn nothing, you can just go out there and do something and not even think about it ten minutes later.” Similarly to James, L-B reported earning his service-learning hours by participating in a car wash for the Bea Gaddy Foundation and by looking up Web sites related to cancer and writing them down for a teacher. Kelli’s requirement was called “student service hours-or something like that. It was service-learning because we had to fill out the form.”

Sara’s requirement was called community service but she found

it was more service-learning because I think that community service is interacting with people and bettering the community. Service-learning is like doing community service and learning from it, but we never really did community service. We were just learning about [emphasis added] the people we were supposed to be helping.

Sara’s school organized “Homeless Days” for all students in a particular science class to meet the requirement. The focus of their service was to find the best way to insulate a cup for homeless people. Sara’s reaction to this was the following:

It was really weird...It was called community service, and we never really did anything besides make these insulated cups. Then there was this box outside and they were trying to tell us how people lived in boxes. I didn’t see how this fulfilled the requirement, but it did.. We had no interaction with anyone at all. We just insulated cups, and looked at boxes that they could live in.

Although these varying definitions reflect students trying to make sense of their experiences, all indicate confusion about service-learning and a mismatch between students’ perceptions and the clear definition of service-learning provided by the Maryland State Department of Education.

*What counts as service: How the requirement was met.* Participants met their service-learning requirement in a great variety of ways. We generated a long list of activities through which participants garnered hours for service-learning credit in high school. A sampling of these activities included babysitting at participant’s synagogue, teaching dance class at school, tutoring, recycling at the school, adopt-a-highway program, working for teachers, working in the attendance and guidance offices, Teen Court, through a number of student clubs and organizations, pie sales, planning a senior citizen prom, chorus, vacation bible school, working in soup kitchen at participant’s church, donating blood, junior member of volunteer fire department, nursing home volunteer, park clean up, horse rescue farm, camp counselor, collecting eye glasses for the blind in Spain, and building houses for a week in Mexico. Although many of the students were quite proud of their involvement in these activities, it was striking how passively they were described to us and what little claim on them personally these activities seemed to make.

Many participants received hours for their participation in school sponsored or school-based activities such as Band, theatre stage crew, working in the guidance or attendance offices, picking up trash around the school, and assisting teachers with filing. In a nuanced interpretation, Crimson explained “there was some talk about service-learning. When I got hours for being in the band it was called community service, but when I got hours for working in the attendance office, it was service-learning. The two titles shifted depending on what you were doing.” Both, apparently, qualified for meeting the service-learning requirement. In fact, much of their service was actually conducted in and around their schools and in the service of school improvement. For example, Bob explained, “So with service-learning, I could do things, not just volunteer work out in the community, but other things like being involved with school and doing stuff like that. It was all learning that revolved around service.” Many of Bob’s hours were accrued by helping the advisor (“typing things up for her”) to a student organization at the school. Mackenzie noted “I was under the impression that service-learning was community hours that I had to do and I would have to go into the community and help. But it wasn’t really like that.” Most of Mackenzie’s hours were met in English classes each year and included activities such as making books

“for kids in underprivileged schools” or donating cans of food. However, it bothered Mackenzie that “I never found out what happened to the books we made and who they went to.”

*School as service brokerage:* “*They made it easy for us.*” Many participants expressed surprise and a bit of skepticism when describing how they received service hours for tasks that defied categorization. School personnel appeared to stretch the boundaries defining service beyond students’ imagination. Participants shared example after example of earning their hours by completing tasks within the school, which they perceived as of primary benefit to the teachers and guidance counselors. Batika commented, “I also worked in the guidance office, helping out and answering the phones-it was fun and yeah, I got credit for that too.” She went on to further illustrate “how helpful” the teachers were by sharing, “Some students even went up to teachers and said, ‘Hey, I really need hours’ and...teachers would just sign even if students didn’t do anything.” Bob relayed his experience, “There was assistance [for getting service hours], people would help out, a teacher would be like, ‘ok well, why don’t you stay after school a couple of days a week and like help me do this or that and then you can get some service hours.’” In the examples noted with regard to hours through band, the band director played an active role in facilitating the process for students involved, including waiving the reflection component. Crimson referred to this as “kind of unofficial under the table sort of thing. My band director would award people who were in the band...and just give you all of your hours.”

Participants recognized this helpfulness as the schools’ interest in assuring that students graduated, more so than necessarily advancing service-learning. As a result, they noted that often “real community service doesn’t count” and observed the ways in which their peers “got around” the requirement. Participants were creative in their use of euphemisms to describe how students were able to meet their community service requirement. For example, Veronikah referred to the “things you could swing around to get hours” to describe activities that weren’t clearly acceptable by the school’s definition of what counted. According to her, students routinely exaggerated their hours because they “hated it and needed to get it done.” As a result, Crimson mentioned that “you find a lot of stressed out seniors doing some oddball things just to get their hours.” Mackenzie referred to this as “skating by without doing anything” and Frank discussed “fudging a few hours” and getting away with this, as did his peers. Several participants extended this “fudging” to describe what appeared to us as outright cheating to meet the requirement. This took the form of submit-

ting hours for service that was never performed or getting credit for far more hours than the activity actually took. As Mackenzie explained, she received five service hours “for something that took 10 minutes to do.”

#### *A Tenuous Narrative of Required Service and Participation: A “Double-Edged Sword”*

As college students looking back on their experiences meeting the service-learning graduation requirement, nearly all participants acknowledged the possibilities of such mandated service. They were able to see that benefits could be gained and recognized that they and their peers probably would not have been engaged in “service” through their schools had it not been for the requirement. However, the “forced” nature of service and the way in which they and their peers met the requirement rubbed them the wrong way. Several of them used the exact same phrase to capture this dilemma: “a double edged sword.” Amelia conveyed this idea precisely:

It is kind of like a doubled-edged sword, because it is positive, should help the student and the community as well; but the bad side, it is a requirement and reduces feelings of being altruistic, kind and loving, because it is seen just as a mandate that I’ll just get done and it will be over with. This cuts down motivation to want to go out and help others and get excited about a great opportunity to go out and help. These benefits aren’t highlighted.

Nearly every participant validated the benefits of serving others and the importance of making a contribution to the community, however, the mandated nature of their high school requirement left them cold. For example, L-B emphasized, “I’m very passionate about service in general. I don’t know about it being forced upon you, especially in the way the high school does.” Keith went further in suggesting, “It is a sense of duty, you can only give yourself, it can’t be forced.” They also recognized that the requirement, “lame” as it was and something “I hated along with everyone else because it was forced,” brought about good activities, for which they were proud, and that without the requirement they would not have been involved in these ways. As Frank noted, “It [the requirement] may seem like a burden at first, but it is a good thing.”

Related to this idea of the “double-edged sword,” nearly all the participants had difficulty identifying the outcomes and benefits of the requirement to them as individuals. When prompted, they could articulate the larger goals and ideals they thought service-learning could accomplish, but this was not tied to their own experience. In fact, they were apologetic for this



inability to come up with a compelling story related to their service. For example, when trying to identify personal outcomes associated with his service, L-B said, "Nothing overly meaningful, I'm sorry."

Several participants did share that their service experience helped them to feel good about themselves and more interested in "helping others." Others related their service to developing a work ethic, becoming more responsible, and learning to work with others. Karen, for example, noted, "I never really worked before. [You] learn so much about yourself as a worker." Others took pride in what they had accomplished through their service-learning experience and felt special and "more well-rounded" as a result; although this mostly had to do with exceeding the number of hours required and pride in giving back to their own communities (which included their high schools).

Despite their ambivalent impressions of the service-learning requirement based largely on their own experiences meeting it, nearly all participants could see the requirement doing more and communicated an interest in the possibilities. None would argue with the intended objectives of a service-learning requirement, but all thought the implementation could be improved upon greatly. In fact, when presented with the list of "Maryland's Best Practices for Service-Learning," several exclaimed "Wow, where did you get this? This is cool," and suggested that if their high schools had actually followed the guidelines, their experiences would have been much improved.

## Discussion and Implications

We set out in this study to elicit the narratives of service associated with students meeting their high school graduation requirement for service-learning. We were also interested in how their high school experiences influenced their college involvement. In nearly all of our interviews with participants we were struck by what seemed to us an absence of the compelling narrative so often found in the service-learning literature. The rich description of their high school experiences acquiescing to the requirement, the narrow focus on completing their hours, and the diverse array of activities, mostly in-school, in which they engaged and counted to meet the requirement do provide a compelling story of a high school service-learning graduation requirement and what graduates are bringing with them to the college context. The results also suggest, consistent with several other studies, that the question is not simply about required versus voluntary service, but more so, how required service is structured in the school setting and the types of service in which students are involved (Jones & Hill, 2003; McLellan & Youniss, 2003).

Our participants were resisting what they perceived as the forced nature of the requirement, not the idea of service-learning or community service. However, their stories reveal that the resistance may have been less about the requirement per se and more so related to the ways in which it was structured in the schools and their ability to meet the requirement by engaging in activities that made very little claim on them psychologically, cognitively, or civically. Indeed, these activities were not congruent with definitions, including Maryland's own, of service-learning and focused more so on service to the schools and led to a tenuous connection between their high school requirement and continued service in college.

The results of this study contribute to what is often described as "mixed results" regarding the efficacy of required service in relation to both outcomes and promoting continued civic participation. Indeed, the very notion of the "double edged sword," as coined by several of our participants, captures the inability to lay claim to one position or the other. Although the goal of qualitative inquiry is not generalizability, the results of this study hold the potential to influence policy and practice. As both high schools and colleges continue to promote service-learning and students convey their interest in and intent to volunteer as members of the "9/11 generation" and the "Katrina generation," the results of this study provide several suggestions for closing the gap between what schools and colleges intend as outcomes and what students actually experience.

First, the array of activities in which students engaged to meet the requirement was dizzying. The majority of these activities took place in the school and with seemingly very little direction from school personnel. The integration of service into the curriculum as a pedagogical tool, consistent with many definitions of service-learning, was virtually absent. So too, was any mention of reflection. Only when prompted did students talk about reflection and always connected to the forms they needed to complete to get credit for their hours. This finding reinforces the importance of meaningful service and the quality of the placement, emphasized in definitions of service-learning and in the research on outcomes associated with service-learning (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jacoby, 1996). Also, noted by McLellan and Youniss (2003), "It should not be surprising that these different types of service might produce variable effects" (p. 48). Further, as queried by Chapman (2002), "Does a student who learns that almost anything counts toward the service requirement—so long as he doesn't get paid—develop a keen sense of civil calling? Or does he hone his skill at gaming the system?" (p. 12). Unfortunately, our data suggest the latter may be the case. A more intentional effort to

link intended outcomes and activities designed to produce those outcomes is sorely needed.

Second, and related, our results are consistent with those studies that reinforce the importance of structured service as high quality. Despite the occasional good teacher, or parents and churches, most of the participants in this study reported the need to figure out the service requirement on their own. Although not the focus of this study, we suspect that many schools are under-staffed and -resourced such that responding to this legislative mandate is challenging. Hence, they respond in ways to assure that students satisfy their graduation requirements by “making it easy” for students. Research does suggest however, that well designed service-learning makes a difference in producing desired outcomes (e.g., Eyer & Giles, 1999).

The Youth Volunteering and Engagement survey (Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006) examined the benefits of “high quality” service-learning in K-12 education. High quality was defined by three elements: (1) students assist in the planning of the service activity, (2) students participate in regular service for a semester or longer, and (3) students reflect on their service experiences in class. Results found that 77% of all school-based service experiences had a least one of these elements, but only 10% had all three; and that students who participated in programs with all three elements were more than twice as likely as those with none of the quality elements to report that their service experience had a positive impact on them. In addition, as the research by McLellan and Youniss (2003) suggested, “when left to their own devices for fulfilling credit requirements...students tended to choose functionary work, which probably demanded little physical, cognitive, or emotional investment compared, say, with social service” (p. 56). Had students been engaged in high quality service-learning, the stories we heard may have sounded quite different.

In addition, this phenomenon of leaving the service choice and arrangements to the students led to a very narrow view of service-learning by students as only those activities connected to the requirement. In fact, a number of students were engaged in community service through their churches, families, or community organizations, but none of them talked about these activities as service-learning or in relation to the requirement. Tapping in to these familial, social, and community networks may help schools not only help students meet the service-learning requirement, but also, because service connected with these networks does tend to be more consistent with activities that require cognitive and emotional investment from students (McLellan & Youniss, 2003), to promote social responsibility and continued civic participation.

Finally, the relationship between the high school

requirement and related service activities and college involvement was tenuous at best. This is consistent with the research that demonstrates that encouraged and high quality service, rather than required service, is more likely to contribute to continued service in college (Jones & Hill, 2003; Marks & Jones, 2004). Because of their emphasis on the required nature of service, several of our participants came to the university setting ready to “take a break” from service. This, and other experiences meeting the requirement, provides several cautions and implications for college educators interested in promoting service-learning and civic responsibility. First, students were not at all clear about what service-learning is and how it differs, if at all, from community service. College educators may need to help reframe students’ misconceptions of service-learning and cannot presume that students will come to them with exposure to social issues through service or a commitment to civic engagement.

Because of these misconceptions, and their perspective that a service requirement is a “double-edged sword,” engaging students who attended high schools with a service requirement may take extra effort and new strategies. Traditional recruitment methods (e.g., if I market it, they will come) may not work. These students may need to be approached more directly and by engaging them in meaningful service that draws them in. They also may not have the skills of reflection required for high quality service-learning, as reflection was not often a part of their high school experiences. Although absent from most of their high school experiences, research has shown that the most compelling service-learning, even when required, occurs when identity development is involved (Hart et al., 2007; Jones & Abes, 2004; Jones & Hill, 2003; McLellan & Youniss, 2003; Youniss & Yates, 1997). When service is connected to a student’s evolving sense of self, then the motivation to engage in service becomes an internal one and a greater likelihood for continued involvement emerges because service becomes integral to identity construction.

### *Limitations*

The results of this study must be considered in light of a few limitations. Although consistent with narrative inquiry, our sample of 19 is relatively small given that we invited 200 to participate and received 44 affirmative responses from those who met sampling criteria. We also included representation from a number of different counties across the state, but to provide a more comprehensive narrative, we did not analyze the data county by county. Because our focus was on students’ stories, we are only able to comment on their perceptions and the nature of the ser-

vice-learning requirement from their perspectives. We therefore, don't know much about the high school environments, except what the participants recalled. We can only speculate that if we interviewed high school teachers, for example, the story would shift. We also did not formerly assess students' general propensity for involvement in high school. Rounding out the picture is important and provides several areas for future research. Finally, as narrators of this story, we were very aware of our own stories as they intersected with the participants. As we noted, the absence of compelling stories from our participants caught our attention. Did this mean we missed the mark, or that our notion of what was "storyworthy" (Chase, 2005, p. 661) was not theirs? The presence of three researchers helped us to monitor our own subjectivity, but nonetheless we were aware of its presence.

Despite these limitations, this study provides compelling evidence about students' perceptions of and experiences with a high school service-learning graduation requirement. It is clear that the requirement alone does not automatically produce outcomes such as civic responsibility, commitment to one's community or social issues, or continued community service involvement. Students resisted the required nature of their community service; however, this was largely due to the way in which it was implemented in their schools. Had the schools been more actively involved in structuring the requirement and assuring meaningful service, it is reasonable to speculate that the outcomes for students would have looked quite different. None of them resisted service and giving back to the community; indeed, many of them were engaged in this kind of service outside of the requirement. The presence of the "double-edged sword" captures this dynamic and serves as an impetus for service-learning educators to sharpen the educational experience for students to produce intended outcomes. Indeed, as McLellan and Youniss (2003) urged, "service needs to be crafted as assiduously as science laboratories or writing seminars" (p. 56). Such a commitment will increase the likelihood that students experience more efficacious service-learning rather than simply "what I do to meet the requirement."

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