

Justice-Learning: Exploring the Efficacy with Low-Income, First-Generation College Students

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Higher education continues to wrestle with the challenge of engaging and retaining traditionally marginalized populations, particularly first-generation college students of color from low-income backgrounds. The typical North American campus, as a privileged space, has failed to successfully address or dismantle systems of power and difference that continue to influence national retention and graduation rates for many low-income, first-generation college students. This study presents findings from a qualitative research inquiry which indicates that a “justice-learning” curriculum, as a first-year seminar experience, can influence academic and civic engagement for students who identify as low-income, first-generation college students.

Educators often grapple with the concept of “difference” and conditions that lead to power and privilege in contemporary society. To reach an understanding that difference is socially constructed and privilege and oppression are intimately connected to this cultural process is to challenge some foundational, if often unacknowledged, aspects of modern life. One related, and often painful, real-world complexity that begs for critical review is the measurable gap between college attendance and graduation rates for white, middle class, traditional-aged students and these same rates for low-income, traditional-aged students, particularly those of color (Carey, 2005; Spenner, Buchmann, & Landerman, 2005; Teagle Foundation, 2006).

Another challenge facing every institution of higher learning is to find effective ways to help students become responsible citizens. A national culture emphasizing individualism and materialism, coupled with increasing pressures to prepare professionals for a technocratic world, tends to diminish a prevailing sense of social responsibility. Yet, the future of democracy rests on an informed and socially engaged citizenry. Recognizing a perceived need for transformative methods that inspire students to work for the “common good” and help de-privilege institutions of higher learning, this study explores the efficacy of a “justice-learning” pedagogy designed to enhance academic and civic engagement for first-generation female college students from low-income, urban neighborhoods using a uniquely situated community-based approach.

The researchers conducting this study examined a semester-long, first-year seminar program, “Leadership for Social Justice,” held at an urban

satellite campus enrolling only first-generation college students from low-income urban areas. This course combined a social justice-oriented curriculum with service-learning to simultaneously confront and destabilize—essentially reframe—students’ initial views of privilege, power, and difference. The findings suggest that this combined pedagogy afforded students opportunities to openly examine unacknowledged binaries guiding much of their day-to-day thinking as well as to reflectively and experientially explore how these same binaries are open to contestation and reconstruction. This critical process, in turn, enabled students to re-vision their own agency within the campus and wider communities because they had the opportunity to redefine their own relationships to privilege, power, and difference.

Literature Review

Higher education continually attempts to identify effective means for engaging and retaining traditionally marginalized populations, particularly first-generation college students of color from low-income backgrounds. Family income appears to influence students’ likelihood of entering and completing college, despite academic ability or achievement (Akerheilm, Berger, Hooker, & Wise, 1998; Ottinger, 1991; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2007). Additionally, first-generation college students, coming from families of origin where neither parent has earned a bachelor’s degree, are also at greater risk for educational attainment beyond high school. Confirming that first-generation students are less likely to persist in college than their non-first generation peers, Thayer explains:

The transition to the college campus can be particularly difficult for first generation students...Entering the university means not only that they must leave home for an unfamiliar academic setting, but that they must also enter an alien physical and social environment that they, their family, and their peers have never experienced. They are faced with leaving a certain world in which they fit for an uncertain world where they already know they do not fit. In fact, first generation students may find themselves "on the margin" of two cultures and must often renegotiate relationships at college and at home to manage the tension between the two. (p. 4-5)

The dilemmas that first-generation college students face are profound and complex, for they are often "caught between two worlds" with no obvious way to reconcile this polarized existence.

More notably, when a student of color is from a low-income, first-generation background, the obstacles to completing a college degree are compounded, for most college campuses expect minority students to adapt successfully on their own to this new, often bewildering, and generally more alienating cultural environment (Buck, 2001).

Additional research is needed to identify strategies that can measurably mitigate the feelings of marginalization and inadequacy certain students encounter as they try to reconcile previous life experiences with life as a college student. One strategy that deserves further attention involves finding ways to help these students "bridge" their communities of origin with their academic communities. We believe that "justice-learning," as a pedagogy that combines a justice-oriented curriculum with community-based learning, may be one particularly effective way to help low-income, first-generation students forge meaningful connections between these two disparate worlds.

A theoretical framework for "justice-learning" can be found at the intersection of justice-oriented education and service-learning pedagogy (Bell, 1997; Butin, 2007; Morton, 1995; Swaminathan, 2007). Justice-oriented curriculums view education as a key tool for interpreting, if not overturning, hierarchical and discriminatory practices in schools and within our larger society (Butin; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2004). Community service learning linked to a justice-oriented curriculum uses a framework of respect, reciprocity, relevance, and ongoing reflection to connect academic work with civic engagement (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Butin, 2003; Morton). Researchers continue to acknowledge that capacity building for greater civic involvement at the postsecondary level requires reflective teaching, intentional efforts to incite passion and emotion, and perhaps, most importantly, realistic engagement with the challenges of

real-world policy and practice (Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Community-based learning designed to foster social awareness and commitment must strive to achieve a kind of "deep and authentic" engagement with the real complexities of contemporary life (Jones, Gilbride-Brown, & Gasiorski, 2005). For low-income, first-generation college students, intimately familiar with many real-world challenges, any attempt to foster social awareness and commitment must first critically engage these students in an examination of power, privilege, and difference. To do so means to specifically address the very cultural conflicts, tensions, or marginality most of these students are certain to experience upon entering college.

The overarching philosophy of justice-learning encompasses a critical examination of power, privilege, and difference in contemporary society by utilizing a "de-centering" approach that strives, through sustained classroom inquiry and collaborative community-based activities, to foster doubt about operant cultural categories that initially seem stable and fixed. As a distinct form of experiential learning, justice-learning combines specific forms of classroom reflection with community immersion to create a new space for questioning contemporary social conditions. Some educators believe that "justice-learning" can work to dismantle the oppressive binaries that often undermine typical service-learning experiences or limit the impact of social justice-oriented curriculums implemented solely within a classroom environment (Butin, 2007). A typical service outing, for example, can foster hierarchical binaries as students fail to fully question their views of "us versus them." At the same time, a justice-oriented curriculum unaccompanied by a simultaneous community-based experience can be criticized for fostering a myopic "ivory tower" view of the world. Justice-learning seeks to destabilize these artificial divisions by establishing a more open-ended and multi-faceted, if not more critical, review of present social conditions. As "justice-learning" provokes specific questions related to power, privilege, and difference in contemporary society, it can potentially provide a space that recognizes new forms of agency and engagement for traditionally marginalized students both within the privileged site of higher education and within their local communities.

This study presents findings indicating that a "justice-learning" curriculum, as a first-year seminar experience, can influence academic and civic engagement for students of color who identify as low-income, first-generation college students.

Method

Study Site

Midwest Women's College¹ is a small, urban liberal arts college founded by a women's religious order

in the Upper Midwest. The mission and vision of the college are to “encourage leadership, integrity, and a deep sense of social justice” to empower its students to “transform the world.” The total number of students enrolled in the college’s graduate and undergraduate programs during the time of this study reached approximately 1,680. Demographics for this student population, estimated by student self-reporting, was as follows: White (69%), Black (17%), Latina (5%), Asian Pacific Islander (4%), American Indian, (<1%), and Other (5%). Traditional-age, first-year students enrolled for fall of 2007 totaled 136 female students. Of this total, 52 students (38%) self-identified as students of color and 114 students (84%) reported annual household family incomes below \$100,000. In this study we examine a small subset of students who participated in a special program designed for low-income, first-generation students at the college’s “Central City” satellite location.

An Urban Satellite Campus and its “Typical” Students

This study was conducted at a “Central City” satellite campus affiliated with Midwest Women’s College. Established in 2004 and situated within an economically distressed urban area of Central City, this satellite location occupies the second floor of a local YWCA. One full-time administrator and one part-time administrative assistant manage a cohort of approximately 50 students per academic year at this site. Approximately eight faculty members, including this study’s researchers, commute from the Main Campus to this satellite campus each semester to conduct classes. Demographics for the female population enrolled at the Central City location during the fall semester of 2007 were: 29 African American students (75%), 8 Latina students (17%), 2 Southeast Asian American students (5%), and 1 Caucasian student (3%). Each and every one of the students enrolled during this time reported household incomes for families of origin below \$50,000. Several unique features are offered at the satellite campus including: (1) a cohort model focused on building camaraderie among young women pursuing similar educational aims; (2) a seven-week Summer Bridge Program providing academic and social support prior to the start of the academic year; and (3) block scheduling of courses into 8-week quarters, with two quarters per semester. The students who attend the satellite campus also receive a full scholarship, reflecting Midwest Women’s College’s attempts to engage and retain a targeted population of low-income, first-generation students from the surrounding urban area. The location of the satellite campus and its targeted population, as well as the college’s specific mission and vision, provided a unique opportunity for

researchers to examine the efficacy of a justice-oriented, community-based pedagogy.

Participants

Research subjects included five female students of color enrolled in the Leadership for Social Justice Seminar during the fall semester of 2007. Throughout the study, the Leadership Seminar had a roster of five female students. All were low-income, first-generation college students of color and self-identified according to the following categories: African American (2) and Latina (3). The researchers selected three of these women, one African American student and two Latina students, as participants for this study. A complete archive of qualitative data was available for these three students and not for the two remaining students, who missed three class sessions due to reported illnesses, transportation difficulties, and work conflicts. Given that pre- and post-survey results for the remaining two students did not qualitatively vary from those of the three participants discussed in this study, the researchers decided to utilize a sample of three rather than five students.

The Leadership for Social Justice Seminar met for three hours on a weekly basis for 14 weeks. In addition to completing three classroom hours per week, participants also completed 10 hours of service-learning. Students were able to choose from individual placements or group service outings, and all community experiences were conducted within 10 miles of the classroom site.

Analysis

To inform our understanding of how a “justice-learning” curriculum might influence academic and civic engagement, the seminar students were closely studied throughout the semester. The three participants selected for this study represented what Patton (1990) calls “information-rich cases” which provided researchers with an opportunity to “learn a great deal about issues of central importance” to their inquiry (p. 169). Analyses began with a provisional start list of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which reflected those coding categories rooted in the project’s conceptual framework. Throughout the coding process, researchers generated analytic memos (Strauss, 1987) to foster the inductive development of additional codes and used the constant comparison method to refine codes, thereby improving the specificity of, and differences between, categories.

Within-case and across-case analyses were also used to identify themes. Within-case analysis allowed researchers to capture change over time in each participants’ sense of agency and engagement within the campus community and their larger urban environment. By continuing to examine several types

of data at particular points in time, the researchers were able to identify overarching themes and trends related to agency and engagement. Both case-based and variable-based matrices were developed to compare and contrast these themes and trends across the various types of data collected.

Data Sources

Data was collected in fall 2007. The collected archive includes (1) individual surveys of background characteristics; (2) informal interviews occurring at least three times per semester per participant; (3) formal, semi-structured group interviews which occurred twice during the semester; (4) observations of participants in their service placements; (5) a full collection of artifacts including course assignments/projects, related email correspondence, individual pre- and post-survey forms, journal entries, and other items the participants volunteered (class notes, assignment drafts, completed exams). Before discussing the findings, we briefly introduce the informants and describe the Leadership for Social Justice Seminar.

Amelia

Amelia, a heavy-set young woman with brown eyes and lank shoulder-length brown hair, often wore a hairstyle that hid portions of her face. Amelia appeared every week for class in the same, worn navy blue wool coat with jeans and tennis shoes, but did not generally remove her coat during the three-hour class. She did not wear makeup or jewelry and rarely engaged in eye contact or conversation with any member of the class, including the instructor. Amelia always arrived well before her classmates, usually at least one-half hour before class, and she always took the seat closest to the door. At the start of the semester she rarely smiled, but would say "hello" when greeted by the instructor. Extremely self-effacing, Amelia remained the quietest member of the Leadership Seminar.

The youngest daughter of a family that had recently immigrated from Mexico, she attended a large urban high school on the south side of Central City where she played volleyball, was a member of the National Honor Society, and enjoyed most of her classes, but noted that she did not have to study to do well. She lived with her mother, father, and two brothers, but they worked long hours and she was often transported to class by her elderly grandmother. She chose Midwest Women's College over the local public university because she felt she needed a "smaller environment" to succeed in college.

In addition to her full-time status as a student, Amelia worked 20-30 hours a week as a cashier for a large grocery chain. Her hours were generally 3pm to

11pm, three to four nights per week, including almost every Friday and Saturday evening. She noted occasionally when asked that she did not like work, but was happy to have the income. Amelia did not have a home computer and did not routinely have access to a cell phone.

Amelia never missed a class for the Leadership Seminar, but she was not active in any co-curricular activities on campus and did not avail herself of any additional campus resources during her time in the Leadership Seminar, including the Academic Resource Center. She did not have any close friends in the Central City cohort, but could occasionally be found in the Main Campus Library. She did not pose questions on her own initiative during class, but would often nod if asked whether she would like to discuss a topic in greater detail. During breaks, she would generally stay in the classroom and review her reading materials.

Mika

A short African-American woman with a thin, trim build, Mika had large, beautiful eyes and an engaging smile she rarely shared. During the first half of the semester she generally slouched in her chair or rested her head in hands during class. She dressed in colorful sweatshirts or t-shirts and wore large earrings with tight-fitting jeans, but sported different hair styles throughout the semester. Initially her short, black straightened hair had red streaks, but gradually over the semester this gave way to blond streaks before returning to black. She did not participate in any college sports or co-curricular activities and felt ambivalent about being a student at Midwest Women's College. She noted during one of the first class sessions that she did not "need" to be attending the urban satellite campus and resented the fact that she had not been mainstreamed into the Main Campus program. She was very guarded regarding her personal circumstances throughout the Leadership Seminar and initially exhibited some hostility and resentment with respect to the curriculum. For the first half of the semester, she generally came to class unprepared and did not willingly participate in any class discussions. After mid-semester, she became the most vocal class member, often asked the instructor questions related to the readings, did not slouch, and rarely appeared with a flat or disengaged expression.

In addition to her full-time status as a student at Midwest College, Mika worked 20-30 hours per week at a local fast food restaurant where she took orders and helped as a short order cook. She generally worked eight hour shifts, three to four days per week. With the money she made at this minimum wage job, Mika hoped to save enough money to

attend a public university in the Southeast, where a friend from high school seemed to be thriving. She did not have any close friends in the Central City cohort and did not usually talk with the other students during class breaks. She did not have access to a home computer or a working cell phone. She missed class on two occasions and explained that she was sick, but had no way to contact the instructor or the Central City Coordinator.

Mika carefully evaded any questions regarding her family and failed to complete assignments which asked her to incorporate information about any aspect of her home life. After attending one of the group service outings scheduled on a Saturday in late November, she insisted that the instructor drop her at a bus stop “near” work, and was adamant that she not be given a ride home, despite the inclement weather. We surmise that she did not want the instructor or her classmates to see where she lived.

Lena

Slight and petite with curly, shoulder length brown hair, Lena had a light brown complexion and sported a small diamond-like earring in the skin above her right upper lip. One warm day in September she wore an armless, low-cut t-shirt and the instructor was able to observe that Lena had a large human hand tattooed in black ink on each of her shoulders, just below her neckline. Extremely quiet and soft-spoken, Lena lived with her mother and daughter in a Latino/Latina neighborhood, but had her own transportation and worked 20 hours per week in addition to attending school on a full-time basis. Lena’s mother, despite some substantial mental health issues, seemed to be the primary caretaker for Lena’s 18 month-old daughter, and the baby’s father did not have a primary role in the baby’s life. Lena had her own car and cell phone, but she did not have access to a home computer. She made an effort to participate in several co-curricular activities on the Main Campus, bringing her mother and daughter on one occasion to attend a public lecture on hunger awareness. She was the hardest working member of the class, often revising and resubmitting her assigned work for a higher grade.

Lena missed one day of class when she was struck in her car on the way to class. She worked diligently to make up the work she missed and called several times from the hospital to make sure the instructor knew she would be absent. Lena did not often ask questions in class, but listened intently and took notes consistently. She had one close friend in the class that she often carpooled with and they were often seen on campus in each other’s company. At the end of the semester she asked the primary instructor to write a letter of recommendation in support of her applica-

tion for a full campus scholarship program which would require her to engage in 360 hours of community service per year.

The Leadership for Social Justice Seminar

Leadership for Social Justice is a three-credit seminar introducing students to the depth of critical thinking called for in a college environment through a detailed examination of social justice and the mission and values of Midwest Women’s College. In addition to completing three classroom hours per week, participants also engaged in service-learning activities specifically linked to their academic work using a framework of respect, reciprocity, relevance, and ongoing reflection. The college first offered the Leadership Seminar in 2001 to address concerns that a former one-credit orientation course did not adequately address the complex needs of traditional-age, first-year students. The course aimed to give students rich academic content designed to engage them in the intellectual life and mission of the college, and not just orient them to campus life. Current research indicates that structured academic first-year programs can enrich student persistence and increase student connectedness to the college experience, particularly for low-income, first-generation students (Muraskin & Lee, 2004; Thayer, 2000).

The fall 2007 course content focused on leadership and social justice issues within a global context as seen through the perspectives of race, gender, and class. Class readings included the following justice-oriented texts: “We See from Where We Stand” by David Diggs, “The Limits of Charity” by David Hilfiker, “Power, Privilege, Difference, and Us” by Allan G. Johnson, “A Revolution of Values” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Making Our Lives Count” by Paul Loeb, “White Privilege” by Peggy McIntosh, and “What is Christian Social Justice?” by Ronald Rolheiser. The researchers chose to expand this curriculum with additional texts on gender and violence by Jean Kilbourne and Bob Herbert, articles on class inequities and globalization by Barbara Ehrenreich, a film produced by the National Labor Committee entitled “The Hidden Face of Globalization,” a slideshow essay on racial advertising by David Segal, an Andean myth recorded by Peruvian author José María Arguedas entitled “The Pongo’s Dream,” Jamaica Kincaid’s short story, “Girl,” and copies of a Race Relations Report published by a local foundation in 2006.

A 10-hour service-learning component further enabled students to learn experientially about social justice in collaboration with a diverse range of community partners. While this 10-hour requirement is low by most contemporary standards for service-learning, students attending school full-time, work-

ing 20-30 hours each week, and meeting additional family responsibilities were not realistically able to engage in community-based activities for more than 10 hours during the semester. Efforts by Leadership instructors to implement higher time requirements had been met with student resistance in previous semesters.

In addition to its justice-oriented curriculum and service-learning programming, the Leadership Seminar aimed to introduce students to the mission and vision of Midwest Women's College. As mentioned earlier, the mission and vision of the College are to "encourage leadership, integrity, and a deep sense of social justice" to empower its students to "transform the world." Consequently, the Leadership Seminar also emphasized the need for students to learn to assume leadership roles in everyday situations to promote a more just world. The course openly explored what it meant to be a responsible citizen within local, national, and global contexts. Curricular activities such as readings, guest speakers, extensive reflective writing, in-depth discussion, and small group work initiated throughout the semester-long course were designed to help students become aware of power structures that disadvantage groups of people; explore the systemic nature of socioeconomic inequities; learn about organizations working for social justice; and develop a personal sense of responsibility for social justice as well as strengthen the attendant skills needed to move from understanding and awareness to action.

Findings and Discussion

Self-Positioning and Justice-Based Inquiry

Social justice education is both a process and a goal. It originates with lived experience and works to foster a critical perspective by contextualizing seemingly individual oppression within hegemonic structures, both societal and cultural (Young, 1990). To effectively implement a justice-oriented curriculum, instructors must encourage students to critically situate themselves in contemporary society. The Leadership for Social Justice Seminar provided numerous opportunities for participants to explore and reflect upon their own social positioning and their relationship to the concept of civic engagement. The following paragraphs outline each participant's initial self-perceptions and how they identified or addressed issues of public concern, without prompting, as a measure of their initial commitment to civic engagement.

On the first day of class students were asked to identify in writing, and then discuss, their greatest accomplishments and challenges. All but one student participated in this activity. Each participant identi-

fied her greatest achievement as graduating from high school and attending college. Not all students were able to articulate what they saw as their greatest challenge, but four students identified working, in addition to attending college, as a significant challenge. (Further into the semester we found that all the students were working 20-30 hours per week in addition to their academic responsibilities.) One student, Lena, identified raising her 18 month-old daughter as an additional challenge:

Amelia: My biggest accomplishment so far is being the second person in my family to graduate high school and go to college. My biggest challenge right now is doing work, and school, balancing the two.

Mika: [Mika chose not to complete this activity]

Lena: Graduating from high school and being the first in my family to go to college are my greatest accomplishments. My greatest challenges are to raise my daughter, go to school, and work.

During the ensuing class discussion participants acknowledged their privileged status as college students, but failed to identify or clearly articulate the tension between being a full-time college student and the need to work extensively (at minimum-wage jobs with no benefits) to support themselves, despite receiving "full" scholarships for their education through the Central City satellite program. Nor did any student mention a lack of the necessary tools or skills to succeed in an academic environment. No one mentioned that they did not have access to a home computer and no one noted that academic support services were not always offered at the Central City location. A limited number of academic tutors were available by appointment at the Main Campus, but they did not consistently hold office hours at the satellite campus.

In addition to participating in these preliminary conversations and "journal jotting" about achievements and challenges, researchers also asked study participants to fill out an initial assessment form. The primary purpose of this form was to collect data about learning outcomes, but it also captured students' initial views regarding their ability to succeed in the college environment and their initial orientation to civic engagement. The assessment form asked students to list three goals for their time in college and three professional goals upon completing college. While assessment forms completed on the first day of class reflect a high degree of desire to succeed within a college environment, a sense of civic engagement is completely absent from most of these initial responses:

Amelia: My three goals for my time in college include participating in school activities, to do all work for every class as good (sic) as I can, and to graduate. My three professional goals are to get a good job, to get a job I like, and to be good at what I do.

Mika: My three goals for my time in college include to complete college, focus, and stay true to myself. My three professional goals are to run my own (medical) practice, become a nurse, stay in school.

Lena: My three goals for my time in college are to keep a GPA average of 3.0 or higher, to get a full scholarship, and to become a stronger woman. My three professional goals are to become a nurse, get a high-paying job, and impact the lives of others.

Many of these statements reflecting a desire to succeed academically should be viewed within the context of the exercise (described above) where the majority of participants simultaneously listed attending or completing college as their greatest challenge. Despite initially positive responses to being within a college environment, the researchers believed that a true sense of efficacy and realistic knowledge regarding the individual skills and the institutional support needed to succeed in an academic environment would still need to be developed for all of the study participants throughout the semester. In fact, a more nuanced understanding of developmental readiness for learning seemed to be emerging for some of the study participants during the second half of the semester. For instance, on her mid-semester self-evaluation form, Mika wrote: "I am not a good writer, and sometimes the reading material takes me a little longer to understand," while Amelia noted on this same mid-semester form that "In the discussions it takes me a while to get what I want to say together, sometimes I just say pieces of what I want." Both students seemed to recognize that successful academic engagement required a skill set that they still needed to develop.

With respect to civic engagement, researchers noted that only one student seemed to initially touch upon this topic without prompting despite the seminar course title (Leadership for Social Justice). Only Lena mentioned in her initial assessment form that as one of her professional goals she would "like to impact the lives of others." When asked to elaborate on this sentiment, Lena shrugged and said softly that she was not sure what she meant by this statement. Researchers believed the community service learning component of the seminar would help Lena, and others, articulate what a desire to "impact the lives of others" could more realistically encompass.

Service-Learning and Reflection

The researchers designed the service-learning opportunities for Leadership for Social Justice Seminar to deepen students' understanding of foundational course concepts such that each student would be able to develop and practice leadership skills, enhance their understanding of systemic inequities, and explore important distinctions between charity and justice. Students in the Central City Leadership Seminar could choose to participate in two group service outings organized for all students enrolled in Leadership (at the Central City location or at the Main Campus) or arrange for an individual placement at 1 of 30 community sites available through the college's Service-Learning Program. Given their extensive work schedules and their shared lack of access to timely transportation, all five study subjects chose to join the group service outings which occurred on weekends and provided van service, rather than arrange for individual service placements that often required a weekly commitment at sites located a considerable distance from campus. However, Lena also independently arranged to run a poetry workshop at a private, bi-lingual middle school for Latina girls in her neighborhood. The group service outings occurred on two fall Saturdays. Students were given the outing dates on the first day of class so as to have ample time to make arrangements for time off of work, child care, and transportation.

These service outings were sequential in nature and designed initially to help participants understand the difference between charity and justice. With the second outing it was hoped that students would begin to experience moments of cognitive dissonance and wrestle specifically with the myth of meritocracy, as well as more closely examine the extensive nature of privilege and systemic inequity in contemporary society.

During the first service outing students met at the college's Main Campus and traveled by van to a meal site on Central City's near south side, commonly identified as a largely Latino/a part of town. Students prepared and served 355 meals and then returned to the Main Campus for reflection and de-briefing to discuss how this outing represented what is typically viewed as direct service or "charity." The outing lasted four hours. All three study participants noted that they "enjoyed" this activity and "liked waiting on the people," but generally found the experience to be unremarkable and not related to their lives in any obvious way. During the debriefing, none of the students were able to personally identify with the meal-site guests, even though one student, a study non-participant, reported that she felt uncomfortable when she encountered a fellow church member at the meal site and

shared with her peers that she “did not know that he was struggling.” The researchers noted, however, that this student did not acknowledge her acquaintance during the service outing. Without specifically challenging any one student, the researchers tried to focus all of the students’ attention on the impersonal nature of this service site and the systemic inequities that such a service site might perpetuate.

For the second service outing students met at the Main Campus to have breakfast and watch a video about homelessness and then made approximately 100 bag lunches to deliver to a day shelter for the homeless located in the central downtown area. Students drove together to the day shelter, participated in a community meeting which occurs at this site every Saturday morning, and join in a “shopping” simulation staged for shelter guests needing clothes, shoes, coats, blankets, and hygienic supplies. In the early afternoon, students joined an encounter session led by four shelter guests. After this encounter session, students returned to the Main Campus and participated in a discussion group held in the Student Lounge. This community experience lasted six hours.

The nature of this second outing in November differed significantly from the earlier outing in October. Researchers specifically tried to design the first outing as a traditional service activity, while the second outing in November was designed to be more of a justice-oriented, community-immersion experience. The researchers worked carefully with the shelter staff to create an activity that would build common relationships rather than simply perpetuate service hierarchies. As instructors, we wanted the students to experience the community-building, grass-roots organizing nature of the urban day shelter and simultaneously engage in a meaningful dialogue with (other) marginalized members of society.

To this end, students participated in a community transportation hearing held at the day shelter, sat in on a group “house” meeting, listened to a gospel choir with shelter guests, and ate with shelter residents as everyone shared food made for a common noon meal. After dining, students adjourned with four shelter guests to the shelter lounge area, and were asked to join a discussion circle. Each shelter guest proceeded to share their “personal journey” and subsequently asked each student to share her own life story. This sharing led to profound, emotional moments of interpersonal connection, including one exchange where a shelter guest told Mika he “knew she was in great pain, and (he) hoped she would be able to let it out,” and other moments where almost everyone in the circle found themselves articulating what it meant to engage in significant, daily struggles. Amelia discussed the alienation she experienced as an American citizen who is frequently

assumed to be an “illegal,” and Mika later shared that she is often unable to find appropriate channels for the frustration and anger her lack of resources can provoke. Two of the shelter guests, as women of color, noted how they felt it was important for women of color to complete college. As they openly discussed painful obstacles they faced to even attain access to college, there were many tears and many hugs during this powerful exchange.

After the second outing, researchers asked study participants to re-examine their community-based experience (as assigned journal entries) so as to reflect more critically upon their own biases and assumptions regarding the difference between charity and justice, the myth of meritocracy, as well as the existence of privilege and systemic inequity. At the start of the semester several students had identified their service interests as charity work for the semester. Amelia noted that she wanted to “be at places where there are kids, or people that need to be cheered up.” Mika stated that she “would like to help serve somewhere...and contribute to any work that is needed.” In contrast, the following comments were received from each study informant as they completed service-learning assessment forms after a semester of ongoing discussion and reflection related to their two community-based experiences:

Amelia: It was a great experience ...it taught me a lot, I learned to appreciate what I have, and how to help others...I learned that people are all the same, they just need a little help. People shouldn't be treated like criminals or looked at a certain way just because they are in a bad situation...It showed me that if you want change, you have to work for it.

Mika: I had a certain prototype for homeless people, I assumed they were just beggars (sic) who didn't try to do anything, but they weren't always that way, there was always something to bring them down right when they got on their feet...the people at the (day shelter) weren't looking for handouts, they wanted help like education and job opportunities to move forward...I learned that in some communities people actually do stick together and help each other out.

Lena: Homelessness could happen to anyone...the government overlooks (the homeless) and they need to be noticed...the service learning experience opened my eyes to the things that I couldn't see before and made me appreciate the little that I have now...It helped me develop leadership skills because it shows you don't need to through (sic) money around to help someone, it just takes time, determination and hope.

A justice-based inquiry combined with a critical review of two community-based experiences seemed to prompt each study participant to examine some of the unacknowledged binaries that had guided their earlier understanding of contemporary society and traditional notions of community service. Amanda recognized that the dignity of the homeless goes unnoticed and they are often wrongly labeled as criminals. Mika realized that homeless individuals are not “beggars” and that they have complex social needs, including access to education and meaningful job opportunities. Lena articulated a perception that the homeless are generally overlooked and she poignantly referenced that service-learning had also allowed her to appreciate “the little” she had.

Not only did each study informant seem to reassess their understanding of social constructions of difference and the conditions that lead to power and privilege in contemporary society, this process of justice-based, community-based learning seemed to influence thinking about privilege, power, and difference in their own lives. Shortly after the second group service outing, Amelia exercised more agency and began to speak up in class. She became much more animated during several group discussions. She smiled infrequently and made a point of speaking to the instructor with questions and comments as every class concluded. During one of the last class periods of the semester, with the discussion centered upon the essay, “A Revolution of Values” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Amelia mentioned that her cousin had served one tour in Iraq and would be returning shortly to his unit. She was clearly disturbed by the associations she was drawing between King’s discussions of Vietnam and her cousin’s war-zone experiences, which she noted she had never discussed with him.

On one occasion in mid-October Mika asserted that she did not feel we needed to be studying the concept of white privilege or racism, because “back in the day that may have been a problem, but we don’t have to deal with that stuff any more.” However, her sentiments began to change as she progressed through the course and completed her service-learning hours. By late October Mika sat attentively throughout class and often stayed during breaks to talk with the instructor about the readings or recent community events. In early November, she recommended that the class spend some time examining the “Jena 6” case and the racism she felt it highlighted. The following week she brought in some national and local news articles on the “Jena 6” case to share with her fellow classmates.

Lena’s own “sweet” and rather passive classroom affectation began to shift subtly throughout the semester as well. On a day in late October when she could not secure adequate day care for her young

daughter, she unapologetically brought her to class stating she was “determined not to miss” any aspect of the discussion. Lena observed during several class discussions in October and November that women in her family were not treated with the respect that they deserved. Lena also initiated a discussion about the general perception that the Central City satellite campus was a “second-class” or marginalized space within the Midwest College community. She sought to engage her peers in a discussion about their fears and concerns related to their upcoming transition to the Main Campus in January, recognizing that the cohort model had provided important social and academic support for her and may not be available once they registered for classes at the college’s larger, suburban location.

In addition to participating in two group service outings, Lena also arranged on her own initiative to establish a poetry workshop for middle school girls in her Latina/Latino neighborhood. In her final exam essay she noted, “I learned to be a leader it takes a lot of heart. For example, at Southside Middle School I learned how much of an impact I have on other people’s lives; that I can help teach others to become independent leaders as well.”

Self-Positioning after Justice-Learning

While several noteworthy studies examine intersections between socioeconomic class, justice-based curriculums and service-learning, there is little, if any, research addressing the impact of justice-learning undertaken by students of color (Dacheux, 2005; Henry, 2005). Post-assessment survey answers for the three study participants reflected a greater sense of agency and efficacy within academic and civic settings, and generally reflected a newfound concern for social issues and systemic change:

Amelia: My three goals for my time in college include to learn all that I can, to learn how to empower myself and others, and to graduate. My three professional goals include helping others realize what they can do, to help social justice change, to make a difference with something in the world.

Mika: My three goals for my time in college include encountering new experiences, getting good grades, having an open mind to new possibilities. My three professional goals include becoming a successful doctor, be knowledgeable of my own career, one day open my own hospital.

Lena: My three goals for my time in college include getting more involved in charitable events to make a long-term difference in social justice, to complete all my classes and gradu-

ate, to teach others about social justice. My three professional goals include becoming an RN, living comfortably, and to maybe get a degree in art therapy.

When asked to identify what each participant learned about themselves through the course, participants provided the following answers:

Amelia: The Leadership for Social Justice Class has really changed my way of thinking...I really did not know that much about justice issues and I did not really understand what was going on in the world. I did not pay attention to things like slave labor, human trafficking and I thought community service was all right if you just donated money...Talking about social justice and issues concerning the world really helped me to better understand people around me...This course has taught me how to be a great leader, and how to actually make a difference. I learned a lot about myself, the world around me, and other people.

Mika: Through out (sic) this course I have learned a lot about myself. I have always knew (sic) and had a general sense of who I am but as far as talking about social justice and learning to express myself didn't come easy. I really feel I have grown and matured a little more because of this class and I am also aware of what is going on in today's society which makes me want to stand up and make a change.

Lena: My personal awareness changed from being one of those individuals who stood back and watched things happen, to an educated individual determined to make a change.

In each of these statements the participants indicate a shift in their perspective regarding social justice and issues of equity. We see each student articulating an interest in social issues and envisioning themselves as leaders in the public arena. Researchers believe the justice-oriented curriculum framed community-based learning experiences (though limited) in an authentic and complex way, which allowed each student to deepen their understanding of justice-oriented endeavors. This is made evident by Lena's simple but eloquent quote, in which she identifies her evolution from "one of those individuals who stood back and watched things happen to an educated individual determined to make a change."

Study Limitations

The researchers fully acknowledge the difficulty drawing conclusions from a study with a sample size of three. Certainly more work is needed to assess whether this kind of pedagogy is effective when implemented in larger and often more impersonal

classroom settings. In addition, the seminar model in this study aimed to introduce students to the mission and vision of Midwest Women's College, and connections amongst the College's mission and vision, its gendered classrooms (as an all women's college), and the true effectiveness of a justice-learning pedagogy, making this a unique course unlikely to be replicated elsewhere. Moreover, even though the researchers not only used multiple data sources and observed physical and behavioral changes in all three research participants during the semester, the research design does not completely preclude potential participant bias in their written materials and/or researcher bias in their interpretation thereof. Finally, the community-based learning component involved two extended Saturday outings, rather than semester-long community placements.

Directions for Further Research

Additional research is needed to determine if this seminar model would work for low-income, first-generation college students who are not students of color. In addition, what differences would we find if the justice-learning pedagogy involved semester-long community placements? Would we see the same results in different kinds of higher education institutions? And will the changes documented in the students in this study persist over time? Many questions remain. The role various service-learning models can play in the learning and development as well as retention and persistence for low-income, first-generation college students is fertile research territory.

These questions are particularly relevant for higher education institutions which have been slow to address systems of power and difference that continue to influence national retention and graduation rates for many low-income, first-generation college students. This study indicates that "justice-learning" may hold some promise as a successful pedagogy for engaging low-income, first-generation college students within the world of higher education. Using this pedagogy, the researchers, as educators, were able to transcend several geospatial and cultural constraints found within most traditional classroom environments and develop a more meaningful dialogue with students regarding the deeper complexities of contemporary society.

Some of the more striking findings indicate that study participants believed, upon completion of the seminar, that they could succeed in a college environment. Additionally, all of the study participants indicated an interest in continuing activities that would encompass efforts to address "the common good" within their local community and further indicated they planned to approach these undertakings with an enhanced sense of efficacy and a more nuanced

understanding of the need for systemic change.

While this study suggests one possible way to provide low-income, first-generation college students with an ability to re-vision their own agency within the campus and larger community, it does not attempt to comprehensively address the true breadth of support services required to assist low-income, first-generation college students. The complexities they face must be addressed in a comprehensive fashion, including support with adequate financial, academic (e.g., computers, study space), and logistical (e.g., accessible and timely transportation to and from school) resources to succeed in college. Emotional and psychosocial needs resulting from feeling “twice marginalized” and ways to realistically address the cultural alienation and tension that inevitably occurs for these students must also be recognized and meaningfully addressed.

Notes

¹ Midwest Women’s College is a pseudonym, as are the names of people and other places mentioned in this article, used to protect identities.

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