

The Undergraduate Community Service Experience: Changing Perceptions of Diversity

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Abstract

Previous research has documented many positive effects of community service on student learning. Although a few studies have discovered that community service increases student's cultural awareness, little research has addressed concrete changes in students' conceptualization of diversity. The current study investigates how community service participation changes the complexity of students' attitudes toward and perceptions of diversity. One hundred and six students participated in community service as a requirement for classes in Small Group Communication. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis of pre and post-community service surveys revealed that (1) community service significantly increased students' level of comfort in interacting with populations different from their own, and (2) community service facilitated a shift of students' conceptualization of diversity from simple categorical divisions to both similarity and difference as dynamic principles of identity.

As the relevance of multiculturalism became increasingly critical at the university level, faculty began incorporating unique learning opportunities into their courses that allowed students to explore and reflect upon multicultural issues across multiple contexts (O'Brien, 1993). In recent years, community service-based pedagogy has gained much attention as one of those opportunities that could potentially bring positive impact on students' learning about diversity.

Existing scholarship highlights the impact of community service on a variety of aspects of students' learning, including their sense of social responsibility and personal efficacy, the development of important life skills, and an enhanced sense of political, social, and cultural awareness. While previous research findings provide strong evidence supporting the significance of community service-based learning, few studies have focused specifically on learning associated with diversity.

Several studies have shown that community service helped students raise cultural awareness (Jahoda, 1992; Jones & Hill, 2001; Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 2006; Primavera, 1999; Simons & Cleary, 2006). However, their findings are still challenged in terms of their substantive integration and methodological rigor. Specifically, while the improvement of cultural awareness has been well documented, the content of "awareness" and how students' conceptualizations of diversity develop over time as a function of community service experience are unknown. Methodologically, many studies have used either longitudinal observations pre- and post-community service activities (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Simons & Cleary, 2006), control groups (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997) and quantitative

(Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 1998) or qualitative analyses (Jones & Hill, 2001). However, few studies integrated multiple methodologies to address the impact of community service on diversity in a more comprehensive manner.

This study investigates changes in the complexity of students' conceptualizations of diversity in small group communication courses. We begin with a discussion of the historical and contemporary "crisis of community" that provides a context for current models for diversity, difference, and service-learning. Next, we discuss the impact of community service-learning models in higher education for increasing cultural awareness, social responsibility, and life skills. We also discuss the relevance for increasing these areas for the learning outcomes in small group communication courses. Next, we adopt integrative methodologies, using a quantitative methodology, to explore how short-term community service participation plays a role in changing student attitudes toward diversity, and a qualitative approach to examine how such change manifests itself in resultant conceptualizations of diversity. We end with a discussion of our findings that demonstrate a link between students experiencing a service-learning component in their small group communication courses and developing an increased sense of cultural awareness and social responsibility as evidenced through their evolved understanding of diversity.

A Crisis of Community: Diversity, Difference, and Service-Learning

Community service is an integral part of American life. According to Morton and Saltmarsh (1997) the emergence of contemporary models of community service and service-learning is the

result of cultural responses to “individual and social dilemmas that emerged from the crisis of community at the turn of the last century” (p. 137). This early crisis of community is described as a fragmentation of a unified American culture by the combined forces of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, and by the increasing centralization of political and economic power in the hands of private, industrial elite. U.S. American culture has focused relentlessly on the idea that individuals are self-interest maximizers and that private accumulation and private pleasures are the only measurable public goods. Capitalism requires us to be consumers rather than citizens.

Putnam (2000) describes a more contemporary version of the crisis of community. While the earlier one was a result of urbanization and the industrial revolution, Putnam looks at the increased individualization and separation as a result of suburbanization caused by middle-class urban flight and facilitated by the mobility of the automobile and reinforced by increased usage of technology such as the internet. Given these cultural changes, he argues that models of civic engagement and social connectedness have substantially declined. Those groups that he claims have grown in membership, such as Sierra Club and NOW, are primarily tertiary associations, meaning that the members do not actually gather in groups and build any relationships among themselves. For Putnam, the current crisis of community reflects a loss in “social capital” or the “features of a social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 2).

So, while community groups are increasingly more homogeneous and tertiary, we know from a number of different projections, our community and institutional associations are increasingly becoming more diverse. One study estimates that by the year 2030, Asians, blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities will account for one-third of the U.S. population (Allen, 2004). Also, there are increasing demands by social identity groups for equal rights and recognition. Therefore, issues of social justice involving race, class, language, socioeconomic status, cultural sensitivity, and privilege pervade most activities we associate with community service.

The historical and contemporary crises of community demonstrate the need to consider definitions and experiences of diversity and difference. As we know from theories of social construction and social identity, the individual self is forged through our interactions with others (Allen, 2004; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Therefore,

engaging in service to communities raises complex issues that go beyond the acts of teaching a child to read, feeding the homeless, or tutoring English to a newly arrived immigrant—it exposes students to experiences of difference. Allen (2004) describes the important distinction between diversity and difference. Diversity is the word most frequently used to describe set categories of race, class, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, etc. Difference, on the other hand, “signifies how we tend to view identity (ours and others’)” (Allen, p. 4). While diversity tends to almost exclusively focus on the categorical divisions of others, difference focuses on both similarity and difference as dynamic principles of identity. Allen continues, “This perspective allows us to recognize that no two persons are either totally different or totally similar” (p. 4).

One clear way that students can experience difference is through service to others. In fact, Morton and Saltmarsh (1997) describe the shift in models from charity to service that form the basis of most service-learning models of engagement. This is more than a simple name change. Charity fundamentally requires an unequal social system; there must, by definition, exist a giver and a receiver; the donor and the needy.

A service model, on the other hand, is not about giving money or resources that might maintain a diversity gap; students learn about the similarities and the differences among themselves and others. In the next section, we turn to previous research that adopted this service model and review how service-learning methods influence students’ social responsibility, life skills, and cultural awareness.

Impact of Community Service Learning

Stafford, Boyd and Lindner (2003) describe service learning as a method through which students learn by participating in meaningful, organized community activities.

Rooted in the educational pragmatism of John Dewey (1938), the structured community service experiences of undergraduate students that are often required and parallel classroom instruction, have been the focus of considerable scholarly attention. Much of the research indicates that service-learning contributes to increased awareness and understanding of the values, knowledge, skills, efficacy, and commitment that underlie effective citizenship (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Mobley, 2007).

Students develop a heightened sense of social responsibility through their community service contributions. Giles and Eyler (1994) demonstrated that community service contributes to feelings of

civic involvement, a sense of social obligation and a belief that service facilitates sustainable outcomes in community life—by sharing resources with other members in the society. Similarly, Scales and Blythe (1997) argue that student service contributions often stimulate a sense of citizenship on the part of student participants. Moely et al. (2002) and Wilson et al. (2008) found that service-learning correlates with increased plans for civic action and future community involvement.

In addition to social responsibility, scholars have substantiated the sense of efficacy students experience as a result of their community service. According to Pleasants, Stephans, and Selph (2004), community service not only stimulates interest in community involvement, but also provides students with opportunities to discover how they can make a difference in the community and subsequently leaves them believing that they can be that difference. Youniss and Yates (1997) provide an apt description of this quality, arguing that students do not become paralyzed by the challenges they encounter, but rather often experience a sense of agency and a feeling of responsibility to the forces for social change.

Scholars have also carefully documented a cross section of “life skills” students acquire via participation in community service activities. Primavera (1999) discovered that 65% of the students surveyed experienced feelings of increased competence, heightened self-esteem and personal growth. Similarly, Scales and Blythe (1997) reported that students experienced intellectual growth and heightened feelings of autonomy. Astin and Sax (1998) discovered increases in self confidence and a greater willingness to assume leadership roles. And in complementary research, Pleasants et al. (2004) argued that community service not only provides students with challenging opportunities to lead, but to do so while simultaneously building their self confidence and ability to work outside of their comfort zones.

Community service participation can also impact students’ political, social, and cultural awareness. Politically, community service can provide students with an opportunity to discover the relationship between civic responsibility, participation in the community, and the attainment of meaningful outcomes for multiple communities involved (Astin & Sax, 1998; Mobley, 2007; Moely et al., 2002). Community service participation provides often opportunities for students to observe first hand unequal opportunities, as well as inequitable distributions of resources between social groups – inequities that provide a rationale for both political

action and civic involvement (Primavera, 1999).

Socially, students can gain insight into issues affecting the lives of other social groups in the society (Pleasants et al, 2004). Students become aware of both the extent and depth of social problems including poverty, discrimination and violence (Youniss & Yates, 1997). But perhaps most importantly, Giles and Eyler (1994) found that after participating in community service activities, students became more likely to make situational attributions than personal attributions when it comes to socioeconomic and political disparities across social classes. In other words, community involvement helped students identify the lack of equal opportunities to all groups and its impact on the disparity between groups.

Participation in community service also impacts upon the student’s cultural awareness. Research suggests that student attitudes toward diversity shift as a result of their participation. Jahoda (1992) as cited in Youniss and Yates (1997) argues that community service brings students into contact with people who are different and who the students might not have previously known about. Jahoda (1992) argues that such exposure contributes to a “discovery of the other” (p. 87), and a process whereby those previously known through stereotypes, become real to the student volunteers. Giles, Eyler, and Braxton (1997) argue that such exposure contributes to not only a reduction of stereotyping, but furthermore greater empathy toward others. Some students even acknowledge the inaccuracy and unfairness of stereotyping. This is consistent with Osbourne, Hammerich and Hensley’s (1998) findings about positive changes of cognitive complexity. Cognitive complexity refers to “the degree to which a person feels or she seeks out multiple explanations for the behavior of others” (p. 7). In their study, service learning participants showed significantly higher ratings on the cognitive complexity assessment than non-service learning participants. Primavera (1999) discovered that students displayed a greater appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism following their community service participation, and perhaps most interestingly a heightened awareness of similarities among people of different cultural backgrounds—a result also supported by the research of Simons and Cleary (2006).

Finally, service-learning influences the degree to which students learn about and experience cultures they assume to be unlike their own. In a qualitative investigation, Jones and Hill (2004) discovered that community service contributes to cultural learning, the negotiation of individuality and the crossing of boundaries between cultures. Through

cultural learning students become familiar with the day to day lives of AIDS patients for example, and acquire a broader understanding of the disease. Through the negotiation of individuality, students discovered that those of different races, social classes, sexual orientation or even HIV status face and deal with some of the same day to day issues as the students themselves and their own family members. Additionally, by crossing boundaries, Jones and Hill (2004) argue that students actively work to circumvent the barriers that are imposed by community service itself and subsequently discover what life is like “on the other side (p. 210).”

Eyler and Giles (1999) reported a similar finding in saying that “students’ report that their service-learning contributes to a sense that the people they work with are ‘like me’ and demonstrate their growing appreciation for other cultures” (p. 54). Moely et al. (2002) and Hunt (2007) also found that students with more community service-learning experience demonstrated reduced stereotyping and a greater understanding of other cultures. Dunlap (1998) examined the reflection journals of undergraduate students involved in multicultural service sites. She used the students’ own voices to demonstrate the ways service-learning works to influence how students express, experience, and negotiate multicultural or race-related incidents. Other work has offered recommendations for how to teach and talk about issues of diversity and difference in a service-learning classroom. Green (2001), for example, writes about the critical importance of discussing race when engaging in service-learning. Dunlap, Scoggin, Green, and Davi (2007) provide a useful theoretical model for framing the ways white students experience issues of privilege and socioeconomic disparities through their service-learning courses.

As the literature suggests, researchers have discovered a positive relationship between community service and cultural awareness. Community service participation allowed a heightened sense of others, greater appreciation and awareness of diversity, and increased knowledge of multi-cultural groups that strengthen cross-cultural relationships with those they serve. What remains unclear is how, within the context of the increased awareness that other scholars have demonstrated, student sensitivity to diversity actually changes through community service participation and how such change manifests itself in subsequent conceptualizations of diversity. In attempting to explicate how student sensitivity to diversity actually changes, we anticipate that after completing a community based service learning experience

students will first, have a better understanding of diversity, second, feel more comfortable interacting with people who are different from themselves, and third, feel more comfortable working with those representing different cultures. These potential changes will first be explored quantitatively and then qualitatively.

The Small Group Communication Course

Communication is an excellent discipline in which to explore the relationship between service-learning and cultural and social diversity. While interdisciplinary in nature, much of communication studies focuses on the area of “praxis,” or the interrelationship between theory and practical experience. Applegate and Morreale (1999) claim, “There is a special relationship between the study of communication as the means for constructing social reality and service-learning as a pedagogy designed to enhance social life and communities” (p. xii).

More specifically, the learning goals associated with many small group communication courses are further enhanced with service-learning pedagogies. Most small group communication courses include a core curriculum, including the study of group dynamics such as teamwork, collaboration, conflict, and diversity, as well as group processes, such as decision making and problem solving. Most small group communication scholars agree that more can be learned by studying “real” groups in “real” situations (Putnam & Stohl, 1994). Similarly, students can learn more about small group dynamics and processes by experiencing “real” lived group experiences. In a study of service learning in a small group class, Foreman (1996) noted: “It is difficult for a student to understand small group communication and the role communication plays in making the experience a positive or negative one until he or she is actually involved in a small group experience” (p. 1).

Yelsma (1999) agrees that service-learning is a critical component to furthering the goals of small group communication courses. He states that small group classes typically have two fundamental goals: 1) to encourage students to learn about more effective ways of interacting with others in group settings, and 2) to reflect on their own values and attitudes when interacting with others (often those similar to themselves). Service-learning, however, allows an opportunity for students to “learn more about attitudes and values of people different from themselves” (Yelsma, p. 88; Hammond, 1994).

Yet, support for these claims is scant, as the majority of research on small group communication and service-learning has focused on the process

of group problem solving, not understandings of cultural awareness and diversity.

Method Overview

This study was conducted at DePaul University, chosen for the study for several important characteristics relating to service-learning and diversity. For six straight years, 2002–2008, *U.S. News and World Report* (DePaul University Newsroom, 2010) has recognized DePaul for its top-25 service-learning program, and the *Princeton Review* has recognized DePaul for its top-10 diverse student population (DePaul University Newsroom, 2010). For our investigation, we conducted surveys with students who were participating in a community-based service project as part of the requirements for the Small Group Communication class. We conducted surveys with them at two different points in time: one before they started the community service for the class and the other after the service. The surveys asked the participants to report their perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge about diversity and to define what constitutes diversity. These pre- and post-service reports in both Likert scale and open-ended formats allowed us to measure the impact of community service on student sensitivity to diversity.

Participants

Eighty-one undergraduate students enrolled in small group communication classes participated in the study. Although 81 participants participated, only 57 completed both surveys; hence the quantitative analysis is based on the responses of those 57 only.

Procedures and Context

Students enrolled in three small group communication classes during the fall 2006, winter 2007, and spring 2007 terms were invited to participate in the study. The participation was voluntary, and no reward was offered. Each survey took approximately 15 minutes. These classes required community service in their course work. To fulfill their requirement, all students chose a specific service location and worked in the location as a group of 5-6 members for 5 weeks. Individually each worked a minimum of 15 hours. See Table 1 for a description of community service sites and student service responsibilities. Each site closely mirrored the diversity of its surrounding neighborhood in demographic composition—providing students with opportunities to work with adolescents, teenagers, and adults (including senior citizens), representing primarily African American, Hispanic, and Asian populations.

Upon completion of their community

service, the students produced a group paper and presentation. The assignment required that students assess both the positive and negative consequences of community-service learning from the perspective of their field experiences and to draw upon course content in offering an assessment of the relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the communication processes operative at each site.

The first survey was conducted two weeks after the students were first divided into groups and before they started their community service. The second survey was conducted one week after they finished the community service. The participants indicated in the survey the extent of their agreement (1-5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree) with the following statements: (1) I can make difference in the community, (2) I have interacted with populations different from me extensively, (3) I feel comfortable interacting with populations different from my own, and (4) I'm very knowledgeable about diversity. The participants were also asked to define diversity in an open-ended format. The same set of questions was asked in the second survey.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method tested the statistical significance of the difference between pre- and post-test ratings related to participant perceptions and attitudes toward diversity. The qualitative analysis examined similarities and differences in terms of the participants' conceptions of diversity over time by looking at how they defined diversity in narratives before and after they engaged in community service activities. Established qualitative procedures were used in analyzing student narrative responses (Berg, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The second author first conducted a line-by-line analysis of both pre- and post-test narratives. This analysis allowed the conceptual labeling of thematic contents that emerged from the data. Then, the second author grouped the responses in thematically discreet clusters that were identified from the line-by-line analysis. The third author then reviewed the clusters in order to ensure discreetness of content (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results: Quantitative Difference between Pre and Post Community Service

The repeated measure of ANOVA was conducted with pre- and post-community service ratings as between-subject factors and various outcome measures as within-subject factors. The

Table 1. Description of Community Service Sites and Student Responsibilities

Site	Description	Student Responsibilities
Alternatives	Alternatives is a not-for-profit youth service agency that provides comprehensive services that advance personal development	Provided tutoring services for elementary and secondary students.
Pilsen Neighbors	Pilsen Neighbors works on issues such as education, health care, housing, and civil rights of immigrants.	Provided tutoring services for elementary and secondary students.
Winfield Moody	Winfield Moody provides educational tutoring services especially in reading to disadvantaged students.	Provided tutoring services for elementary and secondary students.
Sunlight African	Sunlight African Community Centers aids and assistant immigrant young in all aspects of community development and empowerment.	Provided tutoring services for elementary and secondary students.
Young Life	Young Life provides services to youth in an effort to model the attributes of trust, respect and responsibility—focusing particularly on issues relevant to teens.	Provided tutoring as well as social support services to teenagers.
Japanese American Service Committee	Japanese American Service Committee promotes the physical and spiritual well-being of elderly Japanese American citizens.	Provided social support and facilitated recreational activities

mean ratings of pre- and post-community service surveys are reported in Table 2.

As shown in the table, participants showed significant improvements over time in terms of their perceptions of their ability to make a difference in the community. The improvement in terms of the extent of interacting with different populations was not statistically significant, but was in the expected direction. These results indicate that students gained confidence in their ability to improve their communities, added to their knowledge about diversity, and felt more comfortable working with culturally diverse populations because of their community service.

Qualitative Differences Between Before and After Community Service

When comparisons were made between

pre- and post-test narrative responses, interesting thematic distinctions emerged. The distinctions may be grouped into three categories: (1) responses suggesting the positive acceptance of diversity; (2) responses suggesting the importance of interaction and convergence; and (3) responses suggesting the presence of similarity between the students themselves and the diverse populations with whom they interacted. In the pre-test responses 80% of the students consistently offered straightforward demographic reflections on what constitutes diversity. Consider an example; one student defined diversity in the following manner: “The differences people may have between them. These differences could include race, age, culture, religious views, etc.” Demographic descriptions of this sort were typical of most pre-test narrative responses. In the post-test responses, 30% of those surveyed provided

Table 2. Mean Ratings on Perceptions, Attitudes, and Knowledge about Diversity

	Pre-Community Service Mean & Standard Deviation	Post-Community Service Mean & Standard Deviation
1) I can make a difference in the community.	4.00 (.82)	4.21 (.74)*
2) I have interacted with populations different from me extensively.	3.75 (.85)	3.91 (.85)
3) I have extensive knowledge about diversity.	3.75 (.93)	4.08 (.78)**
4) I feel comfortable interacting with different populations from me.	3.98 (.79)	4.19 (.74)*
1) $F(1, 56) = 4.49, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07$ 3) $F(1, 56) = 7.28, p < .01, \eta^2 = .12$ 4) $F(1, 56) = 3.98, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$		
*Indicates difference between the two means in the same row significant at the .05 level. **Indicates difference between the two means in the same row significant at the .01 level. N=57		

the same demographic descriptions, but these denotative observations were followed by one of the three connotative descriptors referenced above—acceptance, interaction or similarity. Consider each thematic distinction and examples in Table 3.

Acceptance. In the first category, post-test definitions of diversity include not only a reflection on what constitutes diversity, but the suggestion that diversity creates a positive dynamic within a group context. In the sample responses, notice in particular the phrases “positive combination,” “positive atmosphere,” and “success as a whole.” Between the pre- and post-tests one can discern a shift from a definitional effort alone to making positive attribution within the context of each student’s perception of diversity.

Interaction. The second category of narrative responses allows us further insight into the development of student perceptions of diversity. Here the post-test responses, once again, went beyond the initial pre-test effort to define diversity, suggesting that the concept of diversity includes members of diverse groups interacting with one another. Notice in particular the phrases, “interacting with one another,” “interacting in one environment,” and “including and engaging.” Again, the denotative suggestion that diversity includes the behavioral dimension of interaction within the context of difference is meaningful.

Similarities. Finally, recall the arguments of Primavera (1999) and Simons and Cleary (2006) that community service facilitates perceived similarities between student volunteers and diverse community members. In our third category, student narrative responses clearly support earlier research efforts. Post-test definitions of diversity reference the presence of “similarity” in the midst of difference. Consider the phrases “having common similarity,” as well as “similarities and differences” present in student narrative responses. Narrative responses thus suggest a perceptual shift from definitions

that stop at descriptions of difference alone, to definitions including the more proactive denotative themes of positive acceptance of, interaction among, and similarity or affiliation with members of diverse groups.

These themes reflect an important movement on the part of student definitions and understanding of diversity to difference. As noted earlier, while diversity tends to focus almost exclusively on the categorical divisions of others, difference focuses on both similarity and difference as dynamic principles of identity. The shift from conceptualizations of diversity to difference is an important one as students begin to recognize that no two persons are entirely different or entirely similar (Allen, 2004). These themes did not emerge in the narrative responses offered in the pre-test definitions.

Discussion

Scholars have clearly demonstrated the relationship between community service participation and the increased cultural awareness that occurs among student participants in community service education. This investigation unpacks the notion of increased cultural awareness and allows further understanding pertaining to what increased sensitivity to diversity means from the point of view of a student volunteer.

One of the contributions of our study is a broader application of the concept of diversity to the literature of community-service learning. Previous research on diversity and community service-learning considered diversity primarily in terms of distinctions in racial, ethnic or socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., Jones & Hill, 2001). However, this investigation attempted to adopt a more comprehensive approach by conceptualizing diversity more broadly as “difference” (Allen, 2004). Our student participants were exposed to not only diverse ethnic groups in their service activities, but also different age groups (e.g., adolescents and seniors), physically challenged

Table 3. Pre- and Post-test Narrative Responses: Definitions of Diversity

	PRE-TEST	POST-TEST
Positive Acceptance	"Differences and likenesses coming together to form a whole."	"A positive combination of different individuals with different backgrounds and traits that come together effectively."
	"Mixture of people from different ethnicities and cultures."	"Diversity is the mix of races, classes, and people to create a positive atmosphere in the society."
	"A wide range of people from different backgrounds."	"Diversity is a broad selection of the population within a group. The group is different in race, sex, age, opinion, and religious views, but still works to succeed as a whole."
Interaction	"The communication of varying groups of people coming from different social/ economic backgrounds."	"People of different backgrounds interacting with one another."
	"Main component: race, ethnicity, nationality; leads often to different economic status."	"Different background, race, ethnicity, interacting in one environment."
	"A mixture of values, beliefs, traditions, cultures, religions, educational backgrounds, and social/political/ economic status."	"Diversity is the concept of including and engaging with a range of ethnic, social, economic, cultural, and political backgrounds."
Similarity	"The idea of different people with different backgrounds living/being in one community."	"Diversity is the difference between the many people born into a world. Diversity is having common similarity... ."
	"Differences between people, whether it be sex, race/ethnicity, social class, age."	"Diversity is the many types of ethnicities/races there are. It is also the differences and similarities between age groups, socio/economic groups, race, religion, etc."
	"Differences among people—anything from race to religion to hair color."	"Differences and similarities between people, whether race, nationality, religion, sex, etc."

populations, and different residential environments. Given that our participants reported significant change in their attitude toward populations different from their own and more complex conceptualizations of diversity, the application of our results may be extended beyond racial or ethnic diversity.

Pre- and post-test survey responses suggested that participants experienced significant changes over time. Significant improvements occurred with regard to the volunteers' perceived knowledge

about diversity, their perceived capacity to make a difference in the community, and their increased level of comfort interacting with diverse populations.

While previous research demonstrates increased knowledge of diversity, and perceived similarities with diverse groups, the narrative responses in this investigation provide a heuristic complement to those conclusions—providing even further insight into what actually constitutes a change in terms of cultural sensitivity. The heightened knowledge

of diversity reported by student volunteers could arguably influence the perceptions of similarity and positive acceptance of diversity reported in the narrative responses. But perhaps most importantly, by acknowledging that diversity includes the dynamic dimension of interaction and engagement within the context of their definitions, the narrative responses are also suggesting an interesting relationship between an attitudinal shift toward diversity and the potential for a behavioral shift as well.

Our study has a few limitations that need to be considered for generalizations of the results. First, student participants' reports on their community service experiences were based on only 15 hours of their participation in one designated community service site. Although the logistical constraints are inevitable when the service-learning components are folded into course requirements, the short-term involvement in one specific service site certainly presents limitations in generalizing our findings to longer-term and more diverse service experiences. We speculate that a longer period of exposure to multiple communities may magnify the findings of the current study and may also reveal more nuanced or different types of conceptual changes about diversity besides "acceptance," "interactions," and "similarities" that we identified in this study.

Second, our study addressed only conceptual changes about diversity influenced by community involvement as part of a course requirement. Therefore, extending these findings to behavioral changes outside the classroom would be problematic. Conceptual changes about diversity would be more meaningful when they are directly linked to behavioral shifts in the future interactions with diverse populations. Future research needs to assess the impact of the conceptual shift on student willingness to participate in community service activities following required involvements in the classroom. Such research would provide not only further insights into what constitutes cultural sensitivity but also evidence to suggest the actual ways in which conceptual changes in cultural sensitivity are demonstrated by participants' behavior in community service activities.

We are living in a contemporary "crisis of community" (Allen, 2004; Morton & Saltmarsh, 1997; Putnam, 2000). Service-learning affords the opportunity for experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together. More specifically, service-learning in contexts such as these small group communication courses can provide a context for students to shift their thinking about diversity and

difference and to set the stage for building a stronger democracy through acceptance, interaction, and a focus on similarities beyond the classroom.

Service-learning and teaching are not the only academic functions that can benefit from civic engagement (Barker, 2004). There has been increased interdisciplinary attention paid, both in theory and practice, to the role of civic engagement as scholarship (Boyer, 1996; Barker, 2004; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Engaged scholarship is often defined as a collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and community practitioners are said to "coproduce knowledge" to solve complex and compelling civic and community problems (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 803). In doing so, engaged scholarship does not follow a standard, social scientific model for academic knowledge; it invites (and ultimately requires) a reciprocal relationship between civic practices and the production of knowledge. As Barker (2004) puts it, "the scholarship of engagement suggests a set of practices that cuts across all aspects of the traditional functions of higher education" (p. 126). Therefore, as engaged scholarship with a focus on service-learning and diversity, this work provides an important intersection among the often disparate academic areas of teaching and research with the practical and complex components of participating in a civic society.

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