

# **Psychological Sense of Community and University Mission as Predictors of Student Social Justice Engagement**

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## **Abstract**

Psychological sense of community (PSOC) is a construct that may facilitate social action in university students. Similarly, a social justice-focused university mission statement might also facilitate social action and interest. The current study investigated whether psychological sense of community, agreeing with the mission statement, and taking diversity courses or service-learning courses impacted university students' social justice attitudes and student activism. Results indicated that students with higher PSOC were more likely to agree with the university's social justice-related mission statement, and agreement with the mission was strongly associated with favorable social justice attitudes and activism. Taking service-learning courses was also associated with favorable social justice attitudes and a greater likelihood of engaging in activism.

## **Introduction**

Social activism is an important goal for social justice education. Given that social activism occurs in a social context on behalf of people from underserved social groups and can often involve collective action, it is possible that one's psychological sense of community within a setting might facilitate social justice engagement and social activism. The purpose of the current study was to examine whether university students' psychological sense of community, agreement with a university social justice mission, and previous coursework were associated with increased social justice engagement and social activism.

## **Social Justice in Higher Education**

Social justice has been defined as distributing societal resources, human rights, bargaining powers, obligations, and opportunities fairly and equitably across dominant and subordinate social groups in consideration of differential power, needs, abilities, and wishes (Cook, 1990; Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006; Prilleltensky, 2001; Torres-Harding, Siers, & Olson, 2012). Social justice has also been described

as the process of working toward societal equity and engaging societal members, especially those from subordinate social groups, as coparticipants in decision making around societal issues (*Fouad et al., 2006; Toporek & Williams, 2006*). Universities have frequently included a civic mission and civic engagement as important outcomes for their students (*Barnhardt, 2015; Reason, Ryder, & Kee, 2013*), and the goals of social justice fit well within traditional university missions to promote student civic engagement beyond graduation. Additionally, college campuses have been places where young people have taken a lead in developing social justice movements (*Rhoads, 2009*), so universities may have particular characteristics that facilitate student social engagement.

Universities' civic mission may include many key principles that can facilitate student social engagement. Universities can work to prepare students to actively engage in community life; to work across social groups in the community, including individuals from marginalized or disadvantaged groups; and to effectively address social issues in a multicultural society (*Reason et al., 2013*). Others have proposed that expanding individual and social knowledge about social policies; teaching social justice-related knowledge, skills, and attitudes; and encouraging students' self-efficacy and willingness to engage in society are important ways for universities to promote democratic participation and to help students engage as global citizens (*Bull, 2012; Rhoads, 2009; Storms, 2012*). Teaching civic-mindedness to university students often includes encouraging students to become involved in their communities; teaching contemporary social issues in local and global societies; and helping students develop listening skills, multicultural respect, self-efficacy, and sensitivity skills. It can also include encouraging a commitment to engage in community service and promote community wellness (*Bringle & Steinberg, 2010*). Thus, these goals of promoting student civic engagement overlap substantially with the social justice goal of working for a more fair, equitable, and just society.

Researchers have discussed several strategies to help students become more socially engaged. Critical pedagogies have been developed to enhance student empowerment and activism, with the ultimate goal of promoting social justice and social change (*McArthur, 2010*). Social justice-focused pedagogies include a strong emphasis on student participation and dialogue within the classroom (*Freire, 1970; Goodman, 2001; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Storms, 2012*). This is achieved through promoting a racial-cultural dialogue in the classroom that is inclusive and respectful of all students' lived experiences, diverse perspectives, and viewpoints (*Goodman,*

2001; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). Critical pedagogies emphasize the need to listen to and accept multiple voices and to embrace dissent and disagreement as important aspects of creating a productive dialogue and deepening interpersonal understanding and collaboration (Mayhew & DeLuca Fernández, 2007; McArthur, 2010). Diversity-related and social justice-related courses can help foster the ability to take on multiple perspectives and promote respect for diverse others, which ultimately can facilitate collective student action and student engagement (Barnhardt, 2015; Bringle & Steinberg, 2010; Mayhew & DeLuca Fernández, 2007; Storms, 2012).

Additionally, service-learning and training/development opportunities are important methods for helping students connect their academic studies to larger social problems (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Mayhew & DeLuca Fernández, 2007). Service-learning involves student engagement in structured activities outside the classroom within community organizations in a manner consistent with the course material. Students then reflect on their service work through class discussion and written assignments (Cuban & Anderson, 2007; Torres-Harding & Meyers, 2013). Service-learning approaches may help students meet social justice goals because they help promote student self-awareness of their own identity and perspectives; deepen knowledge about the worldviews, perspectives, and lives of diverse others; and actively address real needs in the community through university–community partnerships (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004). Service-learning courses therefore exemplify *praxis*, or putting theory into action (Prilleltensky, 2001). Thus, it might be expected that participating in service-learning courses could facilitate favorable student attitudes toward social justice and student social engagement.

## **Institutional-Level Impacts on Student Engagement**

Psychological sense of community (PSOC) might also be an important construct in understanding students' motivations to work for social justice. In recent years, researchers have focused on PSOC to find ways of bolstering individuals' sense of community in an effort to increase community members' responsibility to work on behalf of social justice ideals. PSOC is defined as a "feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). McMillan and Chavis described PSOC as including (a) membership, or an individual's feeling of belonging-

ness to a group; (b) influence, whereby the individual perceives a sense of bidirectional or mutual influence between the self and the group; (c) integration and fulfillment of needs, or the idea that an individual's association with the group is rewarding and beneficial; and (d) shared emotional connection, or the sense that the group members have a common history and shared experiences. Similarly, Lounsbury and DeNeui (1996) found that their construct of collegiate sense of community included "feelings of belongingness, togetherness, attachment, investment, commitment to the setting, positive affect, concern for the welfare of the community, and... an overall sense of community" (p. 390).

PSOC has been linked to many favorable outcomes for community members such as enhanced social well-being, social and community connectedness, and psychological well-being (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007; Nowell & Boyd, 2010; Sonn & Fisher, 1996). Some researchers have proposed that PSOC might also facilitate social justice work and social engagement. Members of a community can mutually influence each other in a number of ways, and this might include recruiting an individual to work for social justice or to become socially active. Someone with a strong sense of community might respond more empathically to members of their community who are also members of disempowered social groups (e.g., people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and people with disabilities). These individuals may also experience a sense of responsibility toward others and facilitate social justice efforts if they recognize that injustices affect their community. Likewise, a community that values social justice may provide a history, context, or rationale for encouraging members to work for social justice. Finally, the connectedness that individuals experience as community members may serve as an important resource for social justice work, as this connection with others may help provide rest, respite, or encouragement if one finds social action work draining, difficult, intensive, or demanding (Omoto & Malsch, 2005).

Many researchers have found that PSOC and community connectedness can facilitate volunteerism, helping others, or social and political action. PSOC has been linked with higher political and civic participation, activism, prosocial actions, volunteerism, favorable attitudes toward social justice, and stated intentions to engage in public service (Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Hellman, Hoppes, & Ellison, 2006; McAuliff, Williams, & Ferrari, 2013; Omoto & Malsch, 2005; Rosenthal, Feiring, & Lewis, 1998). Interestingly, Rosenthal, Feiring, and Lewis (1998) found that structural variables, such as belonging to organizations that emphasized prosocial actions, were

more important in predicting volunteerism in young adults than dispositional or developmental factors, which had relatively weak relationships to volunteerism. Similarly, Hellman, Hoppes, and Ellison (2006) found that in a sample of 403 students enrolled in a graduate health degree program at a public state university, community connectedness most strongly predicted intention to engage in public service.

Researchers have also found that related constructs, such as social support and community involvement, might also facilitate social justice interest and activism. Research suggests that embeddedness in formal social networks, such as belonging to university student organizations and being recruited by others for activism, impacts interest in activism, social justice, and individual and collective perceived efficacy around social activism (McAuliff et al., 2013; Passy & Giugni, 2001). However, others have found that social support might have a negative relationship with volunteerism duration (Omoto & Snyder, 1995). Although the results of research in this area have been mixed, these findings highlight the importance of examining how one's social and organizational context might impact social activism.

## **PSOC and University Values and Mission**

PSOC might be particularly helpful to facilitate social action in university settings that explicitly endorse social justice values. Individuals who have a strong sense of community might be more likely to endorse organizational values and goals. Often, an institution's purpose, objectives, expectations, and values are exemplified through a university mission statement (Ferrari, Cowman, Milner, Gutierrez, & Drake, 2009). Ferrari et al. (2009) examined the impact of sense of community on one's perceptions of the salience of the university's overall mission-driven activities and goals. Their sample included 901 university faculty and administrative staff. In their study, the mission of the university included values of innovativeness, inclusion and respect for all people, and an emphasis on religious values consistent with the university's Catholic heritage. They found that faculty and staff's sense of community was associated with their perception that the university was engaging in values-driven activities consistent with the university mission.

The university mission statement can be thought of as a values statement. It embodies the ultimate goals, values, and activities that are expected within the setting. It is possible that organizational or collective values, as embodied in the mission statement,

might facilitate social justice work if they include social justice-related values such as emphasis on diversity, service toward others, humanitarian concerns, and a universalistic or pluralistic perspective. A mission statement might serve as an important resource for an individual who holds congruent goals. The goals and values of a university's mission might be more likely to influence those students who have a strong sense of community (McAuliff et al., 2013). Thus, it is expected that a university mission statement that explicitly endorses social justice might also facilitate social action.

The current study examined whether PSOC, the organizational mission of a university setting, and the student's diversity or service-learning coursework were associated with social justice attitudes and social action. First, we hypothesized that students who reported a greater psychological sense of community, who agreed more fully with the university mission, and who had taken more service-learning and multicultural courses would also report more favorable attitudes toward social justice, more perceived control around social justice, more perceived community support around social justice issues, and a stronger intention or commitment to work for social justice in the future. Second, we hypothesized that students who reported a greater psychological sense of community, who agreed more fully with the university mission, and who had taken more service-learning and multicultural courses would also report having engaged in social action and be more likely to report integrating social justice issues into their everyday lives and career choices.

## Method

### Procedure

All study participants were recruited from a midsize private, secular university (Roosevelt University) in a large Midwestern city. Students were recruited into the study using the psychological research online subject pool website, which provided information about various research study opportunities, including this study, to students enrolled in psychology courses. Students who chose to complete the online study received either extra credit or course credit for their participation. The questionnaire was administered via an online survey link. Students read an implied consent statement and then completed the study questionnaires. Only students (full-time or part-time) attending the university were invited to participate in the survey. Completion of the surveys took approxi-

mately 20 minutes. All the responses were anonymous, with no direct link between an individual's study signup and participation record and the survey itself. All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

## Sample

A total of 213 students chose to participate in this study. Of these, 185 (86.9%) indicated that they were full-time students, and 27 (12.7%) were part-time students, with one student not indicating their student status. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 55, and the mean age of the entire sample was 23.78 years ( $SD = 5.99$ ). Regarding gender, 187 (87.8%) were female, and 25 (11.7%) were male (with one person not reporting gender). Regarding race/ethnicity, 112 students (52.6%) were Caucasian/European American; 35 (16.4%) were African American; 29 (13.6%) were Latino; 20 (9.4%) were Asian American, Middle Eastern, or South Asian; one (0.5%) was American Indian/Native American; and nine (4.2%) were multiracial (with seven students [3.3%] not indicating their ethnicity). Regarding sexual orientation, 21 (9.9%) students indicated that they identified as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning, and 187 (88.79%) identified as heterosexual (with five students preferring not to answer). Nine individuals (4.2%) identified as having a disability.

## Measures

**Demographic questionnaire.** All participants completed a demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire assessed the students' age, gender, sexual orientation status, disability status, race/ethnicity, religious preference, and student status (full-time or part-time student).

**Diversity courses and service-learning courses.** As part of the study survey, students were asked, "How many classes have you taken that focus on diversity or multicultural issues?" and "How many service learning or experiential learning courses have you taken?" Responses to each item were entered as separate variables (diversity courses and service-learning courses) in the study analysis.

**Social Justice Scale (SJS).** The Social Justice Scale (SJS; Torres-Harding *et al.*, 2012) includes 24 items that assess four components of social justice engagement: general attitudes toward social justice, perceived behavioral control for engaging in social justice activities, perceived social norms regarding social justice, and intentions

to engage in social justice work or activism. An example item from the attitudes toward social justice subscale is “I believe it is important to help individuals and groups to pursue their chosen goals in life.” An example item from the perceived behavioral control subscale is “I am certain that if I try, I can have a positive impact on my community.” An example item from the perceived social norms subscale is “Other people around me are supportive of efforts that promote social justice.” An example item from the intentions to engage in social justice work or activism subscale is “In the future, I intend to engage in activities that will promote social justice.” All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The subscales on this measure evidenced good internal consistency reliability as measured using Cronbach’s alpha: attitudes,  $\alpha = .95$ ; subjective norms,  $\alpha = .82$ ; perceived behavioral control,  $\alpha = .84$ ; and intentions,  $\alpha = .88$  (Torres-Harding et al., 2012).

**Collegiate Psychological Sense of Community Scale.** The Collegiate Psychological Sense of Community Scale (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996) measures psychological sense of community as experienced in a collegiate/university setting. This scale consists of 14 items (for example, “I feel very attached to this college”) answered using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Factor analyses using a principal components method found a single factor of PSOC, and the factor analysis was successfully replicated in a second sample of 98 students. The internal consistency of the scale was very good, as evidenced by high Cronbach’s alpha scores in both original standardization samples: .88 and .90, respectively.

**Social activism.** The degree of engagement in social justice-related activities was assessed in several ways. First, students were asked, “Are you currently doing anything to work for social justice, either now or in the past six months?” and answered either *yes* or *no*. This single item was entered as the *social activism* variable in the study analyses.

Next, participants were asked to rate the degree to which they engaged in everyday social justice or social activism-related activities. The following were the three items assessing everyday activism: “To what extent do you try to change the way friends, family members, and acquaintances feel about social or community injustices?”; “To what extent do you try to work for social change in your academic or workplace environment?”; and “Have social justice principles influenced your choice of profession/career or your future career plans?” Each item was answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *a lot*, 5 = *a*

great deal). The items were combined to create an *everyday activism* variable, as described below in the Preliminary Analysis section.

**University mission.** Participants were asked about their perceptions of the university mission. The Roosevelt University mission includes statements regarding goals of educating students to be socially conscious citizens and to take on leadership positions in their community and also emphasizes that the mission of the university is “guided by... core values that are grounded in social consciousness and action that create a just society, offer opportunity, and develop individuals” (*Roosevelt University, n.d., para. 5*). The mission statement of the university was reproduced in its entirety, and then students were asked to indicate (1) how familiar they were with the mission statement (10-point Likert-type scale where 1 = *no familiarity* and 10 = *very familiar*); (2) how much they agreed with the mission statement (10-point Likert-type scale where 1 = *no agreement* and 10 = *strongly agree with mission*); and (3) whether the mission statement influenced their initial decision to enroll in the university (10-point Likert-type scale where 1 = *no influence* and 10 = *strongly influenced enrollment decision*). The second question, which assessed how much the student agreed with the university mission, was entered into the study analysis as *agreement with the social justice mission*. Additionally, the question assessing whether social justice influenced their initial decision to enroll in the university was entered as a control variable, *preexisting social justice interest*, in the study analyses.

**The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale—Short Form.** The short form of the Social Desirability Scale (*Crowne & Marlowe, 1960*) was used to measure social desirability, the degree to which an individual engages in socially desirable responses. An example item from this scale is “I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone’s feelings.” Fischer and Fick (1993) tested six alternate short forms using structural equation modeling, and this specific short form, X1, evidenced very good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and was highly correlated with the original standard form. This scale included 10 items, answered dichotomously (*yes/no*). Results from this scale were summed to create a *social desirability* variable, which was entered as a control variable in subsequent analyses.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

**Everyday activism.** First, the three questions assessing how much individuals might integrate social justice work into their daily life activities were examined to determine whether these items could be combined into a single variable or scale. It was expected that these items might be associated with each other, since each measures a way that individuals integrate social justice into either their daily life or their work or academic career choices. These items were combined into a single scale in order to help reduce the possibility of Type 1 error in subsequent analyses. The internal reliability was computed using the Cronbach's alpha test, and the reliability of the three items was found to be very good,  $\alpha = .80$ . Therefore, these three items were combined in the subsequent analyses and were labeled *everyday activism*.

**Table 1. Pearson *r* Intercorrelation Coefficients for Study Variables**

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	10	11	12
1.	Collegiate Sense of Community	1.0										
2.	Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability--Short Form	.18**	1.0									
3.	Did social justice mission influence initial enrollment?	.32***	.06	1.0								
4.	Number social justice and diversity courses taken	.06	.05	.02	1.0							
5.	Number of service-learning courses taken	-.06	-.20**	.02	-.03	1.0						
6.	Agreement with university social justice mission	.36***	.10	.31***	-.10	.07	1.0					
7.	Social justice attitudes	.19**	.07	.12	.03	.12	.49***	1.0				
8.	Social justice perceived behavioral control	.34***	.16*	.10	-.02	.12	.48***	.64***	1.0			
9.	Social justice norms	.09	.03	.14*	-.03	.13	.30***	.42**	.43***			
10.	Social justice intentions	.30**	.11	.17*	.06	.13	.49***	.58***	.64***	.50***	1.0	
11.	Everyday activism	.19**	.11	.40***	.01	.26***	.44***	.30***	.38***	.28***	.47***	1.0
12.	Currently working for social justice?	.08	-.12	.24***	.04	.35***	.22**	.18**	.27***	.29***	.29***	

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Intercorrelations.** Next, correlational coefficients for the items were computed. The correlation matrix can be found in Table 1. These preliminary analyses indicated that PSOC was significantly associated with social justice attitudes, social justice perceived behavioral control, social justice intentions, everyday activism, social desirability, agreement with the social justice mission, and initial decision to enroll because of the social justice mission.

**Control variables.** The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Short Form subscale was entered into each of the study analyses in order to control for the potential effects of social desirability in responding. In addition, we included a control variable of whether the participant manifested preexisting social justice interest. This variable was taken from an item assessing the degree to which the university's social justice mission influenced the participant's decision to enroll in the university. We included this as a control variable because we anticipated that if an individual had social justice interest prior to coming to campus, then this individual might be very likely to become socially active regardless of the influence of the other environmental variables. Therefore, this variable was included to control for the effects of participants' preexisting social justice motivation.

## Main Analyses

**Hypothesis 1: Association between independent variables and social justice-related attitudes.** First, five separate linear regression analyses were conducted to test the influence of the independent variables on the four attitudinal social justice variables: social justice attitudes, social justice perceived behavioral control, social justice norms, and social justice intentions. In these analyses, the independent variables were psychological sense of community, agreement with the social justice mission, diversity courses, and service-learning courses taken. Social desirability and preexisting social justice interest were entered as covariates.

Through multiple regression analyses, the impact of the variables on social justice attitudes was found to be significant,  $F(6, 206) = 12.08, p < .001, R^2 = .26$ . In examining the main effects, only agreeing with the social justice mission was significant related to attitudes,  $t(206) = 7.44, p < .001$ . Individuals who agreed more strongly with the social justice mission were more likely to have favorable attitudes toward social justice.

The impact of the study variables on social justice norms was also significant,  $F(6, 206) = 4.10, p = .001, R^2 = .11$ . A significant

main effect was found for agreeing with the social justice mission,  $t(206) = 3.87, p < .001$ . This means that individuals who agreed more strongly with the social justice mission were more likely to perceive that people around them were supportive of social justice endeavors.

The effect of study variables on social justice perceived behavioral control was found to be statistically significant,  $F(6, 205) = 13.90, p < .001, R^2 = .29$ . In examining the main effects, service-learning courses ( $t[205] = 2.14, p = .03$ ), psychological sense of community ( $t[205] = 3.17, p = .001$ ), and agreeing with the social justice mission ( $t[205] = 6.23, p < .001$ ) were each uniquely associated with behavioral control. Individuals who reported a strong sense of community, agreed to a greater extent with the social justice mission, and had taken more service-learning courses were more likely to view themselves as capable of engaging in social justice work.

Next, the impact of the variables on social justice intentions was significant,  $F(6, 206) = 17.68, p < .001, R^2 = .28$ . In these analyses, agreeing with the social justice mission ( $t[206] = 6.70, p < .001$ ); psychological sense of community ( $t[206] = 2.10, p = .04$ ); and service-learning courses ( $t[206] = 2.10, p = .04$ ) were all associated with social justice intentions. Individuals who more strongly believed in the social justice mission, had a stronger sense of community, and took more service-learning courses were more likely to report a stated commitment to engaging in social justice work.

### **Hypothesis 2. Impact of study variables on social activism.**

Next, we ran a multiple regression with psychological sense of community, agreement with the social justice mission, diversity courses taken, and service-learning courses as the independent variables. Everyday activism, the degree to which students reported integrating social justice concerns into their everyday lives and career choices, was entered as the dependent variable. Social desirability and preexisting social justice interest were entered as covariates. These variables had significant effects,  $F[6, 206] = 17.65, p < .001; R^2 = .34$ . Main effects were found for service-learning courses ( $t[206] = 4.38, p < .001$ ) and agreeing with the social justice mission ( $t[206] = 5.38, p < .001$ ). This meant that individuals who agreed more strongly with the social justice mission and who had taken more service-learning courses were more likely to actively address social justice concerns in their interpersonal relationships, academic studies, and career-related choices.

Next, we conducted an analysis with psychological sense of community, agreement with the social justice mission, social justice/diversity courses taken, and service-learning courses as the independent variables, and self-reported social activism as the dependent variable. Social activism was a dichotomous variable; therefore, a logistic regression analysis was conducted. Social desirability and preexisting social justice interest were entered as covariates. The effects of these variables were found to be statistically significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 50.73, p < .000$ . In examining the main effects, number of service-learning courses (Wald  $\chi^2 [1] = 20.49, p < .000$ ) and agreeing with the social justice mission (Wald  $\chi^2 [1] = 7.00, p = .008$ ) was significantly related to whether someone was currently engaged in social justice-related work or activism.

## Supplementary Analyses

Next, we conducted several post hoc analyses to examine whether agreeing with the social justice mission mediated the relationship between PSOC and the social justice engagement variables. After examining correlation coefficients and the linear regression analyses from the main analyses, we suspected that agreement with the social justice mission might mediate the observed associations between sense of community and the social justice-related variables. To conduct these analyses, guidelines provided by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Frazier, Tix, and Barron (2004) were used. First, the predictor (psychological sense of community) must predict the presumed outcome variable (social justice attitudes and behavioral variables). Second, the predictor variable (psychological sense of community) should have a statistically significant relationship with the presumed mediator (agreeing with the social justice mission). Third, the presumed mediator (agreeing with the social justice mission) must predict the outcome variable (social justice attitudinal and behavioral variables). Finally, the analyses must demonstrate that the relationship between the predictor (psychological sense of community) and outcome (social justice attitudinal and behavioral variables) is nonsignificant/equivalent to zero when the mediator is added to the model (Frazier et al., 2004). As recommended by Frazier et al. (2004), the effects of additional variables were entered as covariates in order to control for their effects within the subsequent models and to isolate the potential mediational effects.

**Step 1.** First, we tested whether PSOC (the variable psychological sense of community) might predict any of the dependent variables, as suggested by the initial correlational analyses: social justice attitudes, social justice norms, social justice perceived

behavioral control, social justice intentions, everyday activism, and social activism. Six hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to regress these six variables onto PSOC. In these analyses, all covariates (preexisting social justice interest, social desirability, diversity courses, service-learning courses) were entered on Step 1, and PSOC was entered on Step 2. Because social activism is a dichotomous variable, this relationship was tested using a logistic regression analysis rather than a linear multiple regression analysis. We present the results of the omnibus *F*-test, followed by the *t*-test results for each variable. In these analyses, PSOC was significantly associated with social justice attitudes ( $F[5, 207] = 2.72, p = .021, R^2 = .062$ ; PSOC,  $t = 2.304, p = .022$ ). PSOC was also significantly related to perceived behavioral control ( $F[5, 206] = 7.42, p < .001, R^2 = .153$ ; PSOC,  $t = 4.775, p < .001$ ). Finally, PSOC was associated with social justice intentions ( $F[5, 207] = 5.951, p < .001, R^2 = .126$ ; PSOC,  $t = 3.813, p < .001$ ). In these analyses, PSOC was not significantly related to social norms, everyday activism, or social activism. Thus, only social justice attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and social justice intentions were considered in the subsequent analyses.

**Step 2.** Next, we regressed agreeing with the social justice mission onto PSOC, with the additional variables (preexisting social justice interest, social desirability, social justice coursework, service-learning courses) entered as covariates. The effect of this variable was significant,  $F[5, 207] = 9.817, p < .001, R^2 = .192$ . PSOC significantly related to agreeing with the social justice mission,  $t = 4.317, p < .001$ .

**Step 3.** Finally, for all of the variables with which PSOC had a significant relationship, we reran the analyses with agreeing with the social justice mission entered on a third step. The results are presented in Table 2. The statistical significance change ( $\Delta R^2$ ) for the addition of the final step for each variable was statistically significant, indicating that in each case, the full model accounted for a significant increase in the explained variance.

For social justice attitudes, the standardized beta weight of the PSOC variable decreased so that in the final step, this variable was no longer significant. This suggested that agreeing with the social justice mission was likely mediating the relationship between PSOC and social justice attitudes.

**Table 2. Linear Regression Analyses Examining the Conditional Effects of Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) and Meditational Effect of Social Justice Mission Agreement on the Social Justice Variables**

		Social Justice Attitudes				
		B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1.	Covariates				.038	
Step 2.					.062	.024*
	Sense of Community	.020	.009	.167*		
Step 3.					.260	.199***
	Sense of Community	.030	.008	.023		
	Social Justice Mission Agreement	4.17	.056	.496***		

  

		Social Justice Perceived Behavioral Control				
		B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1.	Covariates				.059	
Step 2.					.153	.094***
	Sense of Community	.037	.008	.329***		
Step 3					.289	.137***
	Sense of Community	.024	.007	.210**		
	Social Justice Mission Agreement	.334	.053	.412***		

  

		Social Justice Intentions				
		B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1.	Covariates				.046	
Step 2.					.105	.061***
	Sense of Community	.032	.008	.266***		
Step 3.					.261	.157***
	Sense of Community	.107	.008	.139*		
	Social Justice Mission Agreement	.375	.056	.440***		

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

For social justice perceived behavioral control, the standardized beta weight continued to be statistically significant in the final step, but this value decreased from Step 2 to Step 3. This suggests that agreeing with the social justice mission partially mediated the relationship between sense of community and social justice perceived behavioral control. The social justice agreement variable appeared to explain some of the variance that was initially

accounted for by the PSOC variable, but the PSOC variable continued to exert a unique influence on the social justice perceived behavioral control in the final model.

For social justice intentions, the standardized beta weight continued to be statistically significant, but the value of  $\beta$  decreased substantially. Even though it was statistically significant, the  $p$ -value increased to .037 in the final model. This suggests that the agreeing with the social justice mission variable partially and almost completely mediated the relationship between psychological sense of community and social justice intentions. With the addition of this final variable in Step 3, psychological sense of community continued to exert a small influence on the social justice intentions variable. However, given the small size of this remaining effect, the results suggest that agreeing with the mission is likely a full mediator of this relationship.

## Discussion

Social justice education strongly emphasizes the importance of critical awareness, and critical awareness is viewed by many social justice theorists and educators as a key process of empowerment and social action (Freire, 1970; Goodman, 2001; Prilleltensky, 2001). Similarly, Goodman (2001) and Prilleltensky (2001) contend that an examination and exploration of values relevant to social justice are key activities when working to promote social justice interest and social action. The results here are consistent with these assumptions. Agreeing with the social justice mission required that the individual develop an awareness of historical and social inequalities and acknowledge that we should work to help marginalized people, a values proposition. Agreement with the social justice mission was most strongly associated (with a medium effect size) with all of the social justice interest and behavioral measures, which suggests that the university can positively influence the development of these values in its students.

The purpose of the current study was to examine the impact of PSOC, agreement with the university social justice mission, diversity-related coursework, and service-learning courses on social justice attitudes and social activism. It appears that PSOC did have an impact on several dimensions of social justice attitudes. However, the results also suggest that PSOC may exert effects on social engagement largely through contributing to one's agreement with the larger university social justice mission. Participants with a stronger sense of community were more likely to endorse the

larger university mission of social justice. Endorsing the university mission, in turn, was related to having favorable social justice attitudes and stated intentions to engage in social activism. This fits with the idea that PSOC can enhance connectedness through shared or common values and that these shared values can serve as important resources for action (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Nowell & Boyd, 2010). These findings are consistent with those of McAuliff et al. (2013), who also found a relationship between PSOC and social justice attitudes in a sample of students attending a large, urban, faith-based university with a similar social justice mission.

Additionally, PSOC appeared to positively impact one's perceived behavioral control both directly and indirectly through agreement with the university social justice mission. Social justice perceived behavioral control describes the degree to which individuals believe they have the capability to work for social justice and positively impact larger social problems. It is possible PSOC might serve as an important resource because this community connection might positively impact self-efficacy, which is an important outcome for promoting civic engagement (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010). Perhaps feeling connected with others allows individuals to feel more confident in their abilities to engage in social activism.

In this study, the association between PSOC and social justice perceived behavioral control also appeared to be partially mediated by agreement with the social justice mission. This suggests that agreement with the social justice mission, which involves sharing common social justice values, was also important for increasing self-confidence and perceived ability to work for social justice. Thus, sense of community might have a positive impact both by serving as a resource or support for encouraging self-efficacy and by enhancing a sense of shared community values around social justice.

In contrast, PSOC did not display a direct or indirect impact on social justice norms nor on the social activism variables. This suggests that different pathways may exist when explaining social justice attitudes (self-reported interest, attitudes, and commitment toward social justice ideas) and actual behavioral performance of social justice activities or social action. In contrast, prior service-learning and social justice-related training opportunities were important for the performance of social action and activism. Even though service-learning activities vary in terms of the degree to which social justice concerns are integrated into the coursework and student reflection (Cuban & Anderson, 2007), these kinds of

activities may enhance interpersonal skill development across social groups.

The results indicate that intervention and interpersonal skill development may be particularly important for fostering ongoing social action outside the classroom. This connection is consistent with results obtained by Einfeld and Collins (2008) in their qualitative investigation of the perceptions and experiences of AmeriCorps volunteers regarding their own community service. They found that service engagement enhanced participants' understanding of social inequities and systemic inequalities. Additionally, engaging in service enhanced many participants' sense of empowerment and self-efficacy around being able to work for change. The participants also reported enhancement of their multicultural interpersonal skills and increased empathy, patience, attachment, trust, and respect for the individuals with whom they worked.

The results of this study show that service-learning courses may have advantages over diversity-related or more traditional courses. Students may have more opportunities to develop intervention skills and may have more hands-on interactions with individuals from traditionally marginalized groups, as opposed to simply reading about theory or engaging in class discussion or dialogue with peers. Developing more intervention and interpersonal skills within a community context may be key to facilitating commitment to working for social justice in the future as well as confidence in one's ability to work for social justice; further, development of such skills may facilitate their actual behavioral performance outside the classroom.

## **Study Implications**

This study has important implications for educators and university administrators who wish to promote social justice engagement in their students. The current study suggests that emphasizing or promoting a sense of community may enhance students' ability to recognize common, shared values of social justice as important within their university community. Promoting a sense of community may also serve as an important resource for students wishing to engage in social activism, as it may enhance their confidence or self-efficacy around whether they will actually be able to make a difference by engaging in social activism. However, given the importance of agreeing with the mission for predicting student engagement, results of the study suggest that educators and administrators should work to develop a strong university mission

and identity that emphasizes social justice as a shared collective institutional value. Universities might encourage this sharing of institutional values by explicitly posting this information on study websites, by including information about institutional values of service and social learning at student orientations, by developing community service activities that are implemented university-wide or “community service” days, or by encouraging faculty to integrate discussion of shared community or university values in class discussions and coursework. These strategies might all help promote a university climate that is favorable to students’ social justice interests and values.

Additionally, the results indicate that educators should develop and utilize service-learning courses, as this was consistently related to participants’ stated intentions to work for social justice and social activism. Service-learning courses can include action-oriented opportunities for students to gain real-world experience working on behalf of marginalized community members or opportunities to engage in political activism or social activism. This can be accomplished through assignments that require the student to go outside the classroom into community-based organizations that work on behalf of marginalized social groups. Ideally, these opportunities should move beyond “charity” models of helping without consideration of context, to social change models where students reflect on the political and social implications of their work and question existing societal inequities (*Cuban & Anderson, 2007*). Universities can encourage faculty to develop and teach these kinds of courses or may consider requiring a community learning or service-learning requirement in the curriculum. Universities might also develop community–university partnerships in order to facilitate opportunities for student engagement outside the classroom, and might work to develop pedagogical resources to assist with faculty development of such opportunities. Finally, universities might provide spaces and resources for campus activities and student organizations with a social justice focus, such as gay-straight alliances, Students for a Sensible Drug Policy, or student groups working on political issues that directly impact students, such as immigration reform or student loan regulations.

The study results also have important implications for future research in this area. Although much scholarship has focused on the impact of social justice education on social justice attitudes and commitment, relatively few researchers have examined what factors may predict the behavioral manifestations of student activism outside the classroom (*Rhoads, 2009*). This is particularly important

given that activism or social justice work may be difficult or challenging because it requires going against the status quo. Some have noted that physically intense or emotionally difficult work might cause otherwise motivated individuals to drop out from volunteering to help people from marginalized groups (Omoto & Malsch, 2005). Future research should be conducted to understand which specific components of service-learning courses (such as the development of specific intervention skills, direct contact with community members, or the opportunity to engage in self-reflection) might be more influential in promoting a strong commitment to working for social justice.

Additionally, this study examined the potential impact of only one type of university mission statement. Although this mission statement emphasized social justice as a main component, it is unclear whether the students might be responding to the social justice component or other components of the mission statement. Future research should examine what aspects of the mission statement might be most beneficial to the students to facilitate student activism or measure the extent to which students feel that the mission statement is relevant to their own social justice-related skill development.

## **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is that it was confined to one university setting with a specific mission of social justice. Although we attempted to control for other variables that may have also accounted for participants' social justice interest or engagement, such as preexisting social justice motivation, other variables unique to our setting may have accounted for the results. Therefore, generalizability of these results to other settings is unclear. In addition, the study was cross-sectional in nature, so the directionality of effects cannot be assumed. For instance, it is possible that engaging in social activism caused students to become more interested in the social justice mission or caused a student to be more likely to sign up for service-learning courses. Therefore, the validity of these results should be tested in other samples. Ideally, a longitudinal study assessing changes in attitudes and decisions to engage in social action would help determine whether differing levels of community connectedness and support might be more or less influential at different stages of a student's development. Also, use of a single item to measure agreement with the mission may be problematic in that reliability of this measure could not be established. Finally, we have assumed that agreement with the university

social justice mission, which so heavily emphasizes social justice, reflects the degree to which individuals endorse this organizational value. However, such assumed agreement may not reflect participants' actual values. Therefore, these results should be viewed as preliminary and in need of replication in other settings.

## Summary

In this study, agreeing with the university's social justice mission, a shared value, were most strongly associated with all of the social justice variables. This confirms the importance of organizational values in facilitating both social justice interest and social action. Additionally, the service-learning and experiential learning experiences were associated with commitment to engage in social justice, social action, and integrating social justice concerns into one's interpersonal and career experiences. This suggests that developing skills in social action and intervention is a critical component of facilitating social justice work. PSOC appeared to exert influence on social justice attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and intentions, but it appeared to do so largely through its ability to enhance one's agreement with the larger university mission of social justice. Additionally, PSOC may positively impact one's self-efficacy around social justice because the social connectedness and feeling of belonging may be an important resource for confidence in one's own intervention abilities. Educators and university administrators who wish to facilitate social justice awareness and action should explicitly emphasize collective goals and institutional values of social justice and action. Institutionalizing service-learning courses and direct skills training experience into educational efforts may also enhance student commitment, confidence, and knowledge of how to effectively engage in social action and social justice work.

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