Service-Learning and Persistence of Low-Income, First-Generation College Students: An Exploratory Study

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Low-income students who are the first in their family to attend college continue to drop out at alarmingly high rates. Previous studies have shown that service-learning can have a positive influence on student retention. However, little research exists to explore how low-income, first-generation (LIFG) college students experience service-learning, and how it might impact their persistence in higher education. This article presents findings from a qualitative study of the service-learning experiences of six LIFG students, with the aim of generating an in-depth understanding of how these experiences may have contributed to the students' persistence in college. Implications for future research are discussed.

"If I hadn't started working with this program, I wouldn't be here right now. I woulda dropped out a long time ago." --José

At the time he made this statement, José was a junior at one of the most selective private universities in the United States. But unlike many of his fellow students, José's parents are agricultural workers who barely finished middle school and whose annual family income is less than the cost of one year's tuition at his college. During the summer after his first year in college, José got involved in a university service-learning program, working with local high school students in a low-income neighborhood. By his own admission, his involvement with this program was one of the main reasons he graduated with a college degree from this institution, rather than dropping out and going back home.

Having a college degree has grown considerably more important over the last several decades, as society shifts from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy and as the earnings gap between high school and college graduates grows (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007). Yet attrition remains a critical problem for colleges and universities, as roughly 50 percent of students who enter postsecondary education do not complete a degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Of particular concern, *low-income first-generation students* (LIFG) – whose parents are not affluent and did not go to college – consistently drop out of postsecondary institutions at higher rates than middle- to upper-income students with college-educated parents (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). For example, first-generation students at 4-year institutions are twice as likely as students whose parents had a bachelor's degree to drop

out of college before their second year. Even accounting for factors such as working full-time, financial aid status, gender, and race/ethnicity, first-generation status is still a significant predictor of a student leaving before his or her second year (Chen, 2005).

Retention, Persistence, and LIFG Students

Over the last several decades, numerous studies have explored factors impacting the college persistence of LIFG students. Reasons cited for the disparity in educational attainment range from academic underpreparation, discrimination, feelings of alienation, and difficulty adjusting to campus culture, to work and family responsibilities, financial and structural barriers, and lack of support (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Accordingly, educators search for strategies to address these obstacles, which invariably lead to educational and societal inequity.

While many statistics are available on the characteristics and lower success rates of LIFG students as well as the barriers they face, fewer studies examine the factors and strategies that contribute to their college success (Pike & Kuh, 2005). One early study (Richardson & Skinner, 1992) identified student strategies for postsecondary achievement that involved "scaling down" the physical, social, and psychological dimensions of going to college by finding comfortable spaces on campus, developing peer and faculty/staff support networks, and centering their experience around a particular program or department. Leadership experience, ability to cope with racism, and demonstrated community service were also found to be positive predictors of GPA for first-generation students of color (Ting, 2003).

Especially interesting, the influence that a particular experience has on an academic or cognitive outcome appears to differ for first-generation versus other students. For instance, first-generation students benefited more from engaging in peer interactions and participation in academic/classroom and extracurricular activities than other students, in terms of their critical thinking, degree plans, internal locus of attribution for academic success, learning for self-understanding, and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). This assertion in particular supports the need for examining the way that experiences such as service-learning uniquely impact LIFG students.

Service-Learning and Retention

Service-learning courses and programs have been positively linked to students' personal development, racial and cultural understanding, civic engagement, academic learning, and many other outcomes (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Billig, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997). In particular, this type of educational experience might positively affect academic persistence and retention in college (Garlough, 2003; Tinto, 2003; Vogelgesang, Ikeda, Gilmartin, & Keup, 2002). Yet, while past findings suggest a relationship between service-learning participation and college persistence, relatively few studies directly investigate this connection (Mundy & Eyler, 2002). Moreover, most research examining this relationship reports the retention rates of *all* students, rather than those from underrepresented backgrounds (Axsom & Piland, 1999; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Keup, 2005). A few studies specifically focus on first-generation students with respect to faculty interactions (McKay & Estrella, 2008) as well as leadership development (Williams & Perrine, 2008). However, these studies concentrate on particular subsets of retention theory, leaving unexamined the broader picture of how service-learning involvement might influence persistence.

Although a majority of service-learning studies investigate white middle-class students working with populations racially and economically different from themselves, another line of inquiry explores how service-learning influences students of color (Chesler & Scalera, 2000; Coles, 1999; Green, 2001; McCollum, 2003; Shadduck-Hernandez, 2005) and how social class mediates students' experiences with service-learning (Henry, 2005; Lee, 2005), but does not directly examine retention. Only one study addresses community service involvement (to be distinguished from service-learning) and the retention of students of color (Roose et al., 1997), but the connections between service-learning and the persistence of LIFG college students are still unknown.

Similarly, mainstream retention theories (e.g., Tinto, 1993) have been widely critiqued as culturally inappropriate or irrelevant for underrepresented student populations. However, Tinto (2006) has recently advocated future research on the retention of low-income college students in particular, and the factors and strategies that enhance their education and graduation prospects. He also argues for more studies on the influence that innovative classroom practices, such as service-learning, have on college retention.

To that end, this research explored these areas by studying the service-learning experiences of low-income, first-generation college students, and their relationship with the students' overall college experiences. Specific questions included: (a) In what ways does service-learning participation impact LIFG students?; (b) What kinds of skills, knowledge, or coping strategies might LIFG students develop as a result of participating in service-learning?; and (c) How does service-learning participation influence college persistence for LIFG students?

Conceptual Framework

The literatures on retention and persistence, social and cultural capital, and critical service-learning help to shed light on the connections between service-learning and the persistence of LIFG college students. Thus, I have drawn upon these theories to develop the conceptual framework fotr this study. A clear understanding of variables contributing to college persistence suggests ways that service-learning might influence such factors.

Retention/Persistence

A widely studied issue in higher education over the last 50 years, student persistence has been examined from sociological as well as psychological perspectives, which respectively focus on the institutional and individual factors associated with leaving college (Yorke & Longden, 2004).

Tinto's (1993) longitudinal interactionalist model is the most widely utilized sociological framework for understanding the issues behind college student departure. Based on anthropological theories of social withdrawal, this model asserts that academic and social integration are crucial to the process of student adaptation to college. Students who fail to adapt to their new situation, academically or socially, feel disconnected from the college and thus leave early. Conversely, the more academically and socially integrated students feel, the more likely they will be to persist.

Approaching student attrition from a psychological perspective, Bean and Eaton (2001) identify three concepts that can be helpful in thinking about the process of integration: self-efficacy, coping behavior,

and attributional style. Of particular interest, the authors identified service-learning as an approach that could teach students new coping strategies by enhancing their cognitive skills, build students' sense of internal control by highlighting their ability to make a difference, and provide opportunities for students to develop academic and social self-efficacy through positive interactions with faculty and peers.

Social and Cultural Capital

The concepts of cultural and social capital are being used more widely to understand college access and retention, by underscoring the knowledge and culture necessary to succeed in higher education (McDonough, 1997; Pascarella et al., 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Theories of capital can be especially useful for analyzing how the knowledge and skills of LIFG students are transformed through service-learning, and how this knowledge then influences student persistence. 'Cultural capital' refers to a person's cultural knowledge, skills and/or goods, which can vary significantly by social class, while 'social capital' describes the types and amount of resources one can access as a member of a group or social network (Bourdieu, 1986). Students from low-income backgrounds whose parents never attended college are less likely to possess the kinds of cultural and social capital valued in higher education institutions, and thus will encounter greater barriers to academic achievement and success (MacLeod, 1987; McDonough, 1997).

Critical Perspectives on Retention, Capital, and Service-Learning

Because Tinto's (1993) model is based on the experiences of traditional-aged, White, middle-class students attending private residential institutions, it does not adequately address the issues marginalized student populations face (Metz, 2004; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 2000). An alternative, critical perspective on retention theory emphasizes student empowerment and institutional transformation (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). Based in theories of cultural capital, collectivism, and social praxis, these authors propose three components that are important for the persistence of students of color: (a) developing knowledge, skills, and social networks; (b) building community ties and commitments, and (c) challenging social and institutional norms.

While recognizing the importance of certain types of cultural and social capital in contributing to educational success, Maldonado et al. (2005) point out that simply acquiring this capital will only result in maintaining the status quo. Instead, a compromise is possible, by adopting the forms of capital needed to

perform academically while also maintaining one's own cultural identity. Thereby, marginalized students "may simultaneously promote the practice of both dominant and transformative forms of cultural and social capital to achieve academic success" (p. 633).

As a unique form of experiential education, service-learning is sometimes associated with critical pedagogy and the Freireian (1970) concepts of empowering, "problem-posing" education which are highlighted in critical approaches to retention (Clark & Young, 2005; Cone & Harris, 1996; Mitchell, 2007; Rhoads, 1997). This interpretation can be particularly accurate when projects encourage students to work alongside community members to address community-defined needs, or when the students themselves come from similar communities (Hayes & Cuban, 1997; Shadduck-Hernandez, 2005). As Myers-Lipton (2002) writes, "critical theory and service-learning are both interested in the development of a curriculum and pedagogy that transform school into an agent of social change. [It assumes] that students should actively question the power relationships in society, and that through this questioning transformational change of the student and society is possible" (p.204).

Such an analysis is useful for this study in two ways. First, because Maldonado et al.'s (2005) model was created for underrepresented populations, many components are applicable to the socioeconomically and educationally marginalized students that were the focus of this study. Secondly, service-learning programs may provide many of the benefits described in the above retention model. For example, new skills and networks acquired through service-learning could add to students' cultural capital and strengthen their cultural identity simultaneously. By participating in culturally validating service projects with communities similar to their own, students may even be inspired to engage in their community and use their education as a tool for social change.

Using a number of concepts derived from the traditional as well as critical retention theories described above, this study explored how service-learning might influence student persistence. The theoretical premise is that service-learning experiences enable students to develop certain types of cultural and social capital that in turn will lead to academic, social, and psychological integration as well as acquire culturally empowering and affirming skills and networks that will help them succeed in college.

Method

This research examined the experiences of LIFG students participating in university-level, academic

and co-curricular service-learning programs. A key objective was to develop a better understanding of the ways service-learning participation can influence student knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, and in turn impact student persistence. Yorke and Longden (2004) suggest that qualitative approaches are best suited for understanding the process of college departure and success, while Shumer (2000) asserts that qualitative, interpretive, and critical research approaches match well with the philosophy of service-learning. In addition, given the nature of my research questions, I determined that general interpretive qualitative research was the most appropriate method for this study. I employed a variety of data-gathering techniques to collect a wide range of information and allow for triangulation of data (Furco, 2003; Merriam, 1998). As such, the data consist of participant and program director interviews, observations of service-learning program and service site participation, and analysis of relevant documents.

Participant and Program Sample

The purpose of this study was not to generalize to the population of LIFG students who have participated in service-learning, but was instead a theory-building exercise meant to generate an in-depth understanding of the service-learning experience for LIFG students. Following this tradition of qualitative inquiry, I used a small, purposively chosen sample to bracket a range of variation in LIFG students' experiences, and to mine those experiences for insights that would help build a strong theoretical picture of the service-learning phenomenon for this group of students (Patton, 2002).

Identifying student participants for this study involved purposeful sampling at three levels: (a) the institution (college or university), (b) the service-learning office or program, and (c) the individual student participants (Merriam, 1998). To gather information on a range of service-learning experiences, this study was conducted at two institutions. Because I examined issues involving student retention and LIFG students, I identified two colleges that were moderately selective, which attracted students from a wide range of academic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and were reputed to have at least a medium degree of academic rigor. The first institution was a medium-sized, private university and the second was a large, public university. Both were located in urban settings. I contacted three service-learning practitioners at each institution and asked them to recommend students who would provide information-rich cases of significant service-learning experiences (Patton, 2002). Based on this criteria, they sent emails to first-generation college students who were either current-ly participating in or had recently completed intensive service-learning programs, to inform them about the study. Students who were interested in participating contacted me directly.

Participants. Ten students expressed interest in participating but four were not eligible due to family income or parent education level. Thus, six students were interviewed for the final study. Basic principles of theoretical sampling suggest that this case sample was sufficient for exploratory purposes (Creswell, 2007). To achieve gender balance, three men and three women were selected. All participants were people of color, although race and ethnicity were not part of the selection criteria. All were traditional-aged college students (18-24 years old), and first-generation students (defined as students whose parents have not completed a baccalaureate degree). All were from low to lower-middle income backgrounds, based on self-report and participants' financial aid status, and had to work a significant amount of time (30+ hours a week at one time or another) to pay for college, with the exception of one who had received a full athletic scholarship. Four of the students attended under-resourced high schools in low-income communities while the other two students attended middle-class, suburban high schools.

Of the six students interviewed, three were still actively involved with a service-learning program at the time of the study. The staff directors of these programs were interviewed to gather additional information on program goals and activities, as well as general insights and observations. Another program director, who was advising the fourth student on a follow-up, individual service-learning project, was interviewed as well. The other two participants were not currently involved in any service-learning activities, as they had already graduated or were preparing to graduate; thus I was not able to identify staff members to interview regarding these students. In total, four program directors were interviewed.

Service-learning participation. Using Eyler and Giles' (1999) definition of service-learning, I considered academic course-based experiences as well as co-curricular programs with specific learning goals and a reflection component. Five students had been involved in multiple types of service-learning and volunteer programs throughout their time in college, and one student was intensively involved in one program over several years. Three participated in service-learning as part of a university-based tutoring or leadership program (defined as co-curricular service-learning), four through coursework (defined as academic service-learning), and four through one-time immersion trips. All of the students continued to be involved with at least one of the organizations they had worked with after their formal service-learning

experience ended, or chose to extend their service-learning involvement into multiple years.

Data Collection

Interviews. Two students were interviewed in a pilot study to refine the interview protocol; their data were not included in the study. One semi-structured, 90-minute interview was conducted with each of the student participants. Questions focused primarily on participant educational background, feelings and thoughts about college, and experiences with service-learning. Interviews were structured according to an interview guide (see Appendix A for interview protocol) to ensure consistent lines of inquiry were pursued, while allowing for flexibility in probing and further questioning (Seidman, 1998). I also interviewed each program director once, to gather information on program goals and objectives, program design, and observations about the students they have worked with in general as well as the study participants in particular.

Documents. I reviewed program brochures, Web pages, participant documents (e.g., course papers and projects), and course syllabi for contextual and triangulation data. These documents provided additional information on the type and content of academic material intended to inform the service experience. They also listed the learning goals and objectives of the programs, and described the various program activities in which the students were expected to participate.

Observations. Three of the six participants were actively enrolled in a service-learning course or structured program at the time, and for those students, I conducted observations of one meeting or class session and/or one visit to the service site. In program sessions, I focused on gathering information about the topics and issues that arose in discussion as well as on interactions and exchanges between students in the program (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Site observations enabled me to see the types of experiences students encountered during their service and how they engaged in the service experience.

Data Analysis

After transcribing and reviewing each interview, I developed initial codes, drawing upon my proposed research questions and framing concepts (Emerson et al., 1995). I then used the constant comparison technique to examine the variation in responses across different participants (Merriam, 1998). These comparisons allowed me to develop more focused codes across the data, and through extensive memo-writing, I constructed broader categories based on the recurring patterns that began to saturate the developing theoretical picture (Charmaz, 2001). I also examined

my observation notes and collected documents for triangulation with the interview data, and incorporated these notes into the coding scheme. By sorting the categories into grids or data displays, I was eventually able to synthesize these categories into four themes, which are described in the findings (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Positionality

Particularly with qualitative research, it is important to identify the researcher's position in relation to the topic under study (Creswell, 2003). In this case, I am familiar with service-learning practice through my prior employment experience. Over the course of several years, I witnessed how this pedagogical approach impacted participating students. Thus, I could be seen as an "insider" with respect to the types of programs I studied, which provided me with a baseline understanding of their structure and mission. On the other hand, I also was able to maintain an "outsider" perspective because I had no prior connection with these particular students or programs. Since I had no supervisory or evaluative role with the participants, they may have been more forthcoming and less inhibited with their responses.

Findings

The main purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of low-income, first-generation students, and thus the findings focus on student interpretations of their service-learning experiences rather than the structure and implementation of the service-learning programs. While the students brought varied life experiences with them and participated in multiple and different service-learning experiences from each other, they all reported that their service-learning involvement was a vital part of their college experience. Four major themes emerged from the data analysis, with respect to the impact and outcomes of their service-learning participation: (1) Building skills and understanding, (2) Developing resilience, (3) Finding personal meaning, and (4) Developing critical consciousness. Roughly speaking, with respect to the conceptual framework presented earlier, Theme One represents notions of cultural and social capital, Theme Two is consistent with components of traditional retention theories, and Theme Four aligns with aspects of critical retention theory. However, Theme Three does not necessarily correspond with any of the concepts in the original framework, and represents an addition to the theoretical framework. These connections are examined further in the discussion section.

Building Skills and Understanding

As noted earlier, some of the students participated

in service-learning activities that were directly connected with a particular course, while others were involved in co-curricular programs. In both cases, students' service-learning experiences enhanced their knowledge and learning in the classroom, enabled them to further develop academic skills, and linked them to new educational opportunities.

Bringing academic knowledge to life. A number of the participants reported that their service-learning experiences helped to bring their academic studies "to life" by enabling them to personalize theories and concepts. In reflecting on his 'Issues in Poverty' course and service experience at a transitional housing agency, Miguel explained:

> [Service-learning] put a face on the systems we were learning about. We learned a lot about the systems that are in place that prevent people from moving up from the lower social levels, and that's all fine and good. But once you see the effects on the face of a four year-old kid, it solidifies it for you.

Miguel found that he was able to evaluate the merit of abstract proposals and theories by testing them out in the field and applying them in different settings. Students also described how their service-learning experiences enhanced their understanding of course material and enabled them to apply their knowledge in class discussions. Daphne, a public policy major involved in numerous service-learning projects through a year-long leadership program, shared, "It's definitely affected my academic experiences in the sense that, I feel like when I'm talking in class, I actually know what I'm talking about." For other students, service-learning generated an excitement about learning in ways that they had never experienced before. Alex, an African-American student who traveled to South Africa, altered his outlook on education and turned his grades around as a result of his service-learning course.

Building skills to engage academic work. Participants also developed skills necessary to succeed in college, including the ability to talk to professors, seek out academic assistance and resources, improve their time management, and hone their critical thinking skills. For example, Daphne observed that through discussions with her peers in the public service leadership program, "being exposed to different people has really enabled my critical thinking skills to just step up." Another student designed and implemented a year-long curriculum for preschool children in a Head Start program, which required her to draw upon very sophisticated problem-solving and analytical skills. Several students reported gaining academic self-confidence as a result of their experiences, and eventually felt more comfortable talking with professors about concepts and ideas that came up in class.

Service-learning participation also enhanced leadership and networking skills through activities such as organizing and leading events and projects, public speaking, and collaborating with community members. A student who was in charge of the Alternative Spring Break trip described how she and her co-leader were responsible for everything from arranging service sites and lodging to planning meals and recruiting volunteers. Guadalupe, who worked with Head Start, also had the chance to blossom as a leader in ways related and unrelated to her original service-learning experience:

> Because I was involved in the Youth and Education program, I got to speak at the freshman convocation and…I talked to all the honors students at Honors Orientation. And when the [new] Provost first started here, I showed her everything that was going on on campus…I got to meet [our U.S. senator] and then she came to my class and talked to me about [the Head Start program], and I was representing the university.

Discovering non-traditional learning opportunities. In addition to gaining new skills, students were also introduced to many educational opportunities that they might not have been exposed to otherwise. For first-generation college students who are less familiar with university resources, these connections could prove valuable to their personal development as well as future career pursuits. For example, one student talked about how he was "introduced to a different world that really allowed me to tap in [to a different part of myself]." Other students learned about study abroad programs and undergraduate research opportunities as a result of their service-learning work. In some cases, these opportunities may have altered the path of students' experiences. One of the program directors shared the story of a particular student:

> I think that she was at high risk of leaving the campus. But having been in the CollegeAccess program – that has guided her to the Public Service Leaders program. It will add an entirely different dimension to her experience in college that she probably was not going to have.

Arguably, these alternative kinds of experiences are highly valued among educators and employers because they can highlight subjective characteristics such as well-roundedness, flexibility, and initiative. Thus, students engaged with their education in different ways than to which they were accustomed, and also gained experiences that would be useful to them in the future when seeking employment or further education.

Developing Resilience

Study participants were able to strengthen their resilience to difficult and stressful situations through experiences that strengthened their own sense of self-efficacy, taught them new coping skills, and introduced them to communities of supportive relationships and networks.

Gaining self-efficacy through helping others. Participating in long-term service-learning projects required these students to develop a sense of commitment and responsibility to a person or group of people whom they cared about. For example, Guadalupe talked about how she adjusted her lifestyle to get up early in the morning because she knew that the preschool children were waiting for her. Through these relationships, the students were also able to see that they already possessed valuable knowledge and could serve as a resource to others. Jackie talked about her work with a program that matches first-generation college students with high school students from similar backgrounds, describing how "it's just really great to be able to be there to provide them with advice." In designing and implementing their own projects, students proved to themselves that they had the ability to successfully accomplish their goals and contribute to a community in meaningful ways. These kinds of positive and affirming experiences led to greater self-confidence and academic success.

Developing coping skills. With respect to coping strategies, students explained how going to their service-learning sites served as a "de-stressor" by allowing them to step back from the immediate issues they faced at school. In addition, their experiences instilled them with hope and motivated them to keep going in college. Like many other students who participate in service-learning, Jackie was sometimes discouraged by the problems she encountered in her work. However, she attributed much of her change in outlook to her involvement with the Alternative Spring Break program:

At the end of that experience I felt more hopeful. Before I used to feel like, "What can I do? It seems like such a big problem -- of course you can't help everybody." But now I think there are more things I could do like, be more hopeful about our situation and our community, and everything around us.

Sometimes, students could even be compensated for their service-learning work, which is a critical factor for low-income students. Several students were able to earn work-study funds for their service-learning experiences, and thus could continue to work with the same program over multiple years.

Finding a home on campus. Participants were able to create a community for themselves by developing supportive relationships with faculty and staff, as well as peers and community members. With respect

to retention, one program director explained, "Sometimes, it's not necessarily the act of doing service that helps keep a struggling student in, but rather the community that is formed around that service." Daphne was drawn to the supportive environment in the service-learning office, and began treating it like her second home. She shared, "If I'm not working or doing homework, then I'm kinda just…like I'm really in here a lot! I feel like I'm so close to [the staff], it's been like hanging out with friends."

By engaging in projects that built their self-confidence, finding ways to cope with the stresses of college, and developing support networks with people with whom they felt comfortable, the students were empowered to choose strategies that worked for them and validated their own needs, interests, and identities.

Finding Personal Meaning

Service-learning activities, by definition, involve some level of exploration and self-reflection. All of the participants were exposed to new kinds of experiences, and reflection on these activities led them to examine their values and motivations, instilled a desire for self-improvement, and inspired them on multiple levels.

Growing through exploration. Many of the students described how their service-learning experiences helped them to learn about themselves and served as a turning point in their education. Several students switched to policy or social service majors as a result of their service-learning involvement. Jackie felt that it provided an avenue for her to explore her future options, sharing, "I think [participating in service-learning] does make me who I am and…what I wanna do and how I wanna impact our [world]." Alex, who struggled in high school and barely made it to college, found his experience in South Africa to be life-changing. The following year, he enrolled in the course again, and brought his spouse with him. Eventually, they even adopted a child from South Africa. He shared,

> I wasn't academically inclined at all. Actually I couldn't stand school -- it wasn't an outlet to me at all…After I came back, I was like, "I HAVE to go back!"…The more that you're exposed to and the more you pour yourself into it, the more you'll allow yourself to grow and to really figure out what your purpose is…So basically I was able to discover an academic passion. And that was something I never experienced before…And so it evolved from me just kinda doing this community service-learning project within the community to developing this relationship [with this group of students], and then it became my life.

Clarifying personal values. The reflection compo-

nent of service-learning was also critical to the quality and outcomes of the students' experiences. Through discussing and thinking about the issues and situations they encountered, they were compelled to examine their own values and motivations. Tomás described a service-learning course he took last year:

> We just finished Ivan Illich, the author who wrote the article about the tensions about, you know, Americans shouldn't do service abroad...And so I think that's probably where I learned the most about myself…you have to really question your motivations and reflect on what you're doing and why you're doing it…So that really opened that up for me, all those questions that I still ask myself.

In facing these kinds of questions, some students struggled to reconcile different aspects of their identities. Alex was a talented athlete who was in college on a Division I football scholarship, and he went through a difficult period of questioning and criticizing himself about his future goals. As a result of this self-conflict, he felt strongly about the power of combining education and service to transform people's lives, explaining, "The best way to figure out who you are is by serving others...Hopefully we can get back to the root of what academics are supposed to serve in people's lives -- not just a way to get a great job but a way to self-discovery." For other students like Miguel, who is now in medical school, reflection confirmed their commitment or "calling" to help others as a profession.

Finding motivation and inspiration. In many instances, service-learning activities were appealing to students who were motivated to give back to those who came from a similar background as themselves. A CollegeAccess staff member described a student participant in his service-learning program:

> She came from a low-income, non-English speaking family, and she enrolled in a program much like ours, and she credits that completely with her getting into college. So when she heard about this program she wanted to be a volunteer and she has been one of our best in terms of connecting with students.

These students often felt a sense of connection to the populations with whom they were working, and felt passionately about their involvement. Ultimately, the study participants were inspired in their search for personal meaning as well as their examination of how their educational pursuits fit into their larger purpose in life.

Developing Critical Consciousness

The Freirean (1993) concept of critical consciousness refers to a process of learning about socioeconomic, historical, and political situations that are oppressive, and subsequently questioning and taking action to change these conditions. Even though the first-generation students in this study came from lower-income backgrounds, and in some cases grew up in impoverished conditions, most of them did not realize that they fell in this socioeconomic category, and were not aware of the extreme levels of economic disparity between populations in the U.S. and around the globe. Through service-learning, the students in this study were immersed in various environments that increased their awareness of societal inequalities, and in some cases, led them to critique and search for solutions to these issues.

Developing awareness of societal inequities. Each of the students described how their "eye-opening experiences" exposed them to new ideas and moved them to broaden their worldview. Even for first-generation students who shared similar educational and economic backgrounds with many of the populations they worked with, many of their experiences were new and unfamiliar encounters with "the other." For Daphne, who grew up in Guam and first came to the mainland to attend college, "It was only when I came out here and I went on that [alternative break] trip where it really opened up my eyes. …[For example], homelessness is a big thing out here. Back at home you do not see that." By acquiring the tools to examine issues of poverty and inequity through broader theoretical lenses, some students developed a greater appreciation of the opportunities they had been given. Alex shared:

> It was an experience that really changed my perspective towards academics… When I was [in South Africa,] seeing how there was an oppressive system put in place to purposely not allow them to take advantage of the knowledge for a reason, understanding how they were able to control those individuals with their lack of knowledge…It helped me reflect on my position and how I wasn't taking advantage of my opportunities.

Students also saw the value in becoming more engaged citizens, and examining their role in society. For example, Jackie appreciated the fact that her service-learning experiences forced her to look outside of her "own little bubble" and confront difficult issues.

Questioning and critiquing societal structures. Some of the students began to question and critique societal structures, and develop a more sophisticated understanding of oppression and injustice in their own lives, their own communities, and around the world. Miguel, whose father immigrated to the U.S.

from Peru, talked about an immersion trip he took to Mexico:

> When we were in Tijuana we were taken to the border and we got to see the border from a Mexican's perspective. Being raised as an American and seeing illegal immigration in a certain light and then all of sudden switching roles and seeing it from the opposite perspective was very difficult, because it is very apparent that there is no easy answer.

At a deeper level, Alex explained how his experiences in South Africa helped him to better understand his heritage and identity as an African-American, and enabled him to critically analyze the mechanisms of oppression that had been used against his community. In such instances, these jarring revelations motivated students to empower themselves and their communities in the pursuit of social change.

In each case, students felt much more aware and knowledgeable about ways that local, national, and global policies affected people at the individual level, and came out of their service-learning experiences espousing a life-long commitment to helping others. Having developed new lenses through which to criti-

cally examine their world, some even emerged transformed and passionately dedicated to creating social and political change.

Discussion

The four themes that emerged point to areas of growth or development for the students in the study, specifically around four dimensions, as depicted in Figure 1: 1) academic, 2) psychosocial, 3) personal and spiritual, and 4) sociocultural/sociopolitical. The framework implies that service-learning participation can facilitate growth in each of the four areas shown, which are tied to broader theoretical concepts that interact with and influence each other, and can in turn positively impact the persistence of LIFG college students. These areas are described in further detail below.

The academic growth described in Theme One, *building skills and understanding*, can be associated with Bourdieu's (1986) forms of cultural and social capital. For example, the renewed and enhanced interest in academics, as well as the writing, analytical, and leadership skills that students acquired represent academic competencies necessary for success

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework
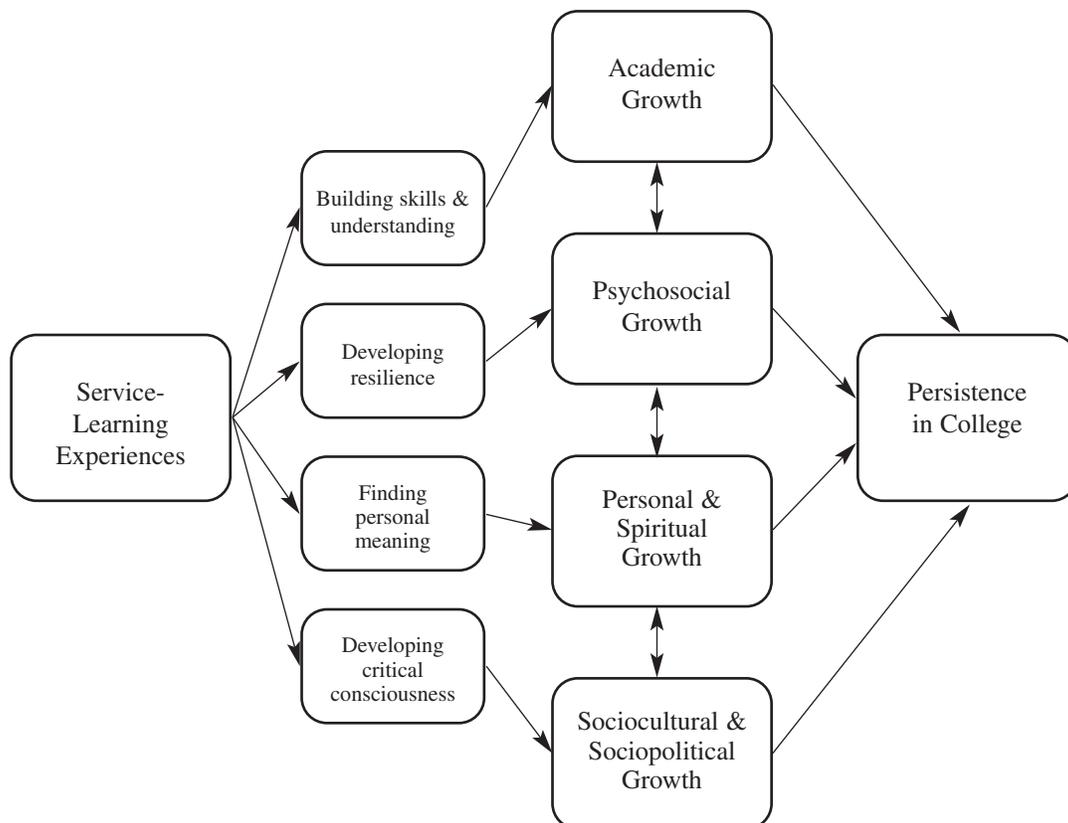
in college. Additionally, the new educational opportunities that students discovered all resulted from the networks, or social capital, that they developed through their service-learninginvolvement. In revisiting the distinction between dominant versus transformative forms of capital discussed earlier, it could be argued that the forms of capital these students gained are valued by the dominant culture, and thus simply promote assimilation and social reproduction. However, the contexts within which this capital was acquired – namely, through service-learning programs – made it much less likely that the students would passively embrace the dominant culture. In other words, the act of working with disenfranchised communities and learning about the systems that affect them necessitates, at minimum, the awareness that dominant and subordinate cultures exist. MacLeod (1987) describes his vision of an emancipatory education as one "that fosters a critical understanding of social problems and their structural causes" and helps students develop "tools of social analysis" (p. 264). Similarly, service-learning promoted the students' academic integration through the acquisition of relevant cultural and social capital, thus enabling them to be more successful in college and in the mainstream culture, and thereby improving their chances of persistence. Yet, it was simultaneously liberatory and empowering, because it gave many of them the tools to critique the structural inequalities within that very same culture.

Theme Two, *developing resilience*, encompasses several forms of psychosocial growth that can be tied to theories of resilience as well as psychological approaches to retention. Findings from this study support research suggesting that service-learning can promote resilience that leads to positive educational outcomes (Kraft & Wheeler, 2003). Educational resilience commonly refers to the ability to succeed in school despite difficult or adverse circumstances, often through the presence or development of protective factors (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003). It is most often used in conjunction with the concept of 'risk' as it applies to young children and adolescents, but could also be useful for examining individual factors that might help LIFG students persist in postsecondary education. For example, Benard (1993) identifies four characteristics of resilient children: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future. These qualities correspond directly and indirectly with the self-efficacy, effective coping behaviors, and internal locus of control that Bean & Eaton (2001) highlight as important for college student persistence. Results from this study suggest that service-learning empowered these students to develop self-efficacy and autonomy by providing opportunities to engage in self-defined and self-directed projects, serve as a resource to others, and see that they can make a difference. Students also developed effective coping behaviors and problem-solving skills, sometimes using their service-learning involvement as a way of buffering other stressors in their lives. Finally, the support networks that students cultivated with faculty, staff and peers can bolster social competence, as well as academic and social integration into the university.

The literature on meaning-making and spirituality illuminates some of the findings in Theme Three, *finding personal meaning*. As much of the research on service-learning confirms, the students in this study reported that their experiences propelled them to examine their values and purpose in life. In the field of higher education, the processes of making meaning of one's experiences, examining one's values, and searching for one's purpose in life are often associated with spirituality and spiritual development (Astin, 2004; Love & Talbot, 1999; Parks, 2000). Although spirituality has been identified as a critical component in student development and psychological well-being, it remains virtually unexamined in the literature on college retention and persistence, with the exception of two studies on minority students in Education programs (Clark et al., 2006; Holt, Mahowald, & DeVore, 2002) and one study on Native American college students (Runner & Marshall, 2003). However, Tisdell (2007) argues that incorporating spirituality into the postsecondary educational experience can serve as a "transformative and culturally responsive approach" to teaching diverse populations (p. 534). Moreover, spirituality does appear as a significant positive factor in the psychological health and resilience of low-income and culturally diverse populations (Constantine, 1999; Rouse, Bamaca-Gomez, Newman, & Newman, 2001), suggesting that it plays an important role in the lives of college students from these backgrounds and should be examined more closely in relation to retention and persistence theories. To the extent that clarifying one's sense of purpose has a positive effect on college persistence, service-learning serves as a potent mechanism for promoting this kind of personal/spiritual exploration and growth, and in turn impacting retention.

Because of its focus on action and reflection, service-learning pedagogy often has been viewed as a mechanism for implementing a Freirean approach to education (Cooks, Scharrer, & Paredes, 2004; Hayes & Cuban, 1997; Rhoads, 1997; Rosenberger, 2000). Theme Four, *developing critical consciousness*, draws directly from Freire's (1993) concept of *conscientization*. Critical consciousness is comprised of a two-part process described by Rosenberger (2000): (a) perceiving one's place in reality, and (b) perceiving one's capability as an agent of change. The two outcomes

that arose in Theme Four, which involve awareness and critique of societal inequities, correspond with this process. For example, the new experiences and awareness encountered through service-learning led the majority of participants to a more critical understanding of societal issues, as well as their own place in that society. As Rosenberger puts it, "oppression creates in people a blindness to their own oppression" (p. 35). While a number of the students, at the time of the interviews, were not necessarily fully aware of their own oppression, they seemed to be in the process of moving toward this kind of discovery. For the other students who had already come to this realization, they had previously established that they could serve as social change agents and were in various stages of deciding how they wanted to make change. It is important to consider that, based on the nature of their comments, each of the students was situated at a different level of critical consciousness. This may have been a factor of their age and years of school completed (some were sophomores while others had graduated several years ago), a factor of the type of service-learning experience that they engaged in (some practitioners distinguish between more traditional forms of service-learning versus critical service-learning), and/or a factor of the students' socioeconomic level (some students were raised in more impoverished conditions than others). Irrespective of one's location along the continuum of consciousness, I have categorized this conscientization process within the broader context of sociocultural/sociopolitical growth because a significant proportion of the students' comments focused either on culture in the context of oppressed populations as well as in their own lives, or on the political mechanisms and processes used to oppress but that could also be used to make change. Similar to the construct of spirituality, while there are obvious and implicit connections between sociocultural/sociopolitical awareness and the educational empowerment of socioeconomically disenfranchised populations, this dimension has been minimally examined with respect to the persistence of LIFG and underrepresented college students (Maldonado et al., 2005).

Implications and Conclusion

The central objective of this study was to develop a better understanding of the way LIFG students view their service-learning experiences, and to examine these experiences through the lens of college retention and persistence theory. The above themes point to several patterns regarding what some LIFG students take away from their service-learning experiences, and present implications for research on LIFG populations, retention, and service-learning.

Implications for Research

One potential direction to which these findings point is the expansion or modification of current retention and persistence theories. With respect to service-learning outcomes, the students in this study were able to develop many of the kinds of cultural and social capital valued in higher education, as well as the coping skills to persist despite difficult circumstances. In line with earlier research on service-learning, many of the themes in the first two dimensions, academic and psychosocial growth, correspond with previous findings on what students gain from their service-learning experiences (Eyler & Giles, 1999). More interestingly however, service-learning provided an avenue for study participants to explore meaning-making through civic participation and engage in the process of *conscientization*. This assertion speaks to the question presented earlier regarding the ways in which retention might be enhanced by critical engagement in one's community, however that community may be defined (Maldonado et al., 2005). Mainstream retention theories, such as those of Tinto (1993) and Bean and Eaton (2001), focus on more traditional academic and psychological variables and do not consider the constructs of spirituality or critical consciousness. However, these themes have been explored in other disciplines as positive factors in the well-being and development of LIFG and/or racially diverse students. In the context of this study, students who found a connection between their personal values and their academics were able to find greater meaning in their education, and became more motivated to succeed and finish college. This was also true with respect to those who had developed a more critical view of social issues – they spoke more passionately about the purpose behind their education, and what they hoped to do when they graduated. Certainly more research is necessary to determine whether these constructs are indeed beneficial to the retention of LIFG students. The model presented in Figure 1 suggests a set of hypotheses for future research on persistence theories, as well as on the impact of service-learning. For example, future studies could investigate whether the relationships described in the model hold for larger samples. Quantitative studies could use path analyses or modeling to determine the validity of the patterns described as well. To the extent that the model plays an important role in persistence, service-learning could be uniquely suited to improving the educational experiences and college completion rates of LIFG students in culturally relevant, empowering, and transformative ways.

Another body of research informed by this study is that of the work on first-generation college student populations. As mentioned earlier, many of the outcomes reported in this study have been found in ear-

lier studies of broader student populations. The significance of this study lies in the fact that LIFG students often have greater educational needs than non-LIFG college students, and could potentially benefit more significantly from service-learning participation. Although this study begins to explore this line of reasoning, it does not directly examine the differences between LIFG and non-LIFG students. Future research could deliberately contrast the experiences of LIFG and non-LIFG students to highlight the ways that service-learning uniquely impacts LIFG students. For example, subsequent inquiry might explore whether non-LIFG students benefit from these four growth areas in the same ways, or to the same degree, that LIFG students do. In other words, all students may experience academic and psychological growth, but perhaps LIFG students could benefit more from gaining the kinds of social and cultural capital that are valued in educational settings, as compared to students who may have come to college with such capital.

The findings also revealed that service-learning differentially impacted participants based on factors above and beyond a broadly-defined "low-income, first-generation" status, which include race/ethnicity, relative income level, geographic factors, and religious background, among others. For example, student levels of critical consciousness appeared to vary as a function of their family income level and geographic context. Based on the interviews, participants with slightly higher incomes and who were raised in predominantly White, suburban neighborhoods were seemingly not as far along the process of developing critical consciousness as the students from lower-income, minority neighborhoods. This point highlights the complexity of studying students who come from first-generation and low-income backgrounds. Because a large percentage of LIFG students also come from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity are often confounded in the literature, making it difficult to separate the research and theories that apply to students of color versus low-income or first-generation students. And because it is virtually impossible to isolate a person's multiple identities in the context of their experiences, these findings only substantiate the need for researchers to find better ways to study constructs such as class, race, and educational background. For example, future research could focus on narrower subsets of LIFG students, such as those from one particular racial or ethnic group, immigration status, or a more narrowly defined socioeconomic background, to develop a more complex picture of the LIFG experience. More specifically, it would be interesting to investigate the extent to which different subgroups of LIFG students experi-

ence growth in all four of the areas described earlier, and more specifically, whether they impact persistence in different ways for different populations.

Limitations

As noted earlier, the findings from this study are not generalizable to the larger LIFG population because they are based on a small number of (albeit information-rich) cases. In addition, there were several important issues that could not be addressed by the particular participant sample in this study. First, while variation in the participants' backgrounds (year in school, type of service-learning program, etc.) yielded information on a broad range of programs and perspectives, it also created some limitations. For example, I was able to observe those students who were currently engaged in service-learning, but not those who had already completed their service-learning courses or programs. Limiting the sample by one of these factors could address these data gaps and provide more detailed information on a particular subgroup of students or type of program. On the other hand, extending this research to a wider range of service-learning program types and participants could incrementally elaborate the theoretical picture presented here.

Secondly, sampling for positive service-learning experiences intentionally focused on their possible contributions to college persistence, but did not allow for gathering data on students who may have had negative service-learning experiences, or who did not graduate. Future studies could sample for both of these groups, to get a better sense of what works and what doesn't.

Finally, this study focused primarily on the outcomes, rather than the process, of service-learning. A longitudinal study design could closely examine a particular course or program from start to finish, or follow a group of students over several years, to shed light on the specific service-learning practices that contribute to LIFG students' success in college.

Implications for Institutional Practice and Social Betterment

In spite of these limitations, the portraits presented in this study yield insight into the efficacy of service-learning as a tool for improving college persistence, thereby contributing to discussions about the place of service-learning in the postsecondary educational experience. In particular, the four themes illuminate particular aspects of the service-learning experience and its potential impact, which can be used to inform efforts to recruit more LIFG students into service-learning courses, as well as enhance teaching and academic program development. Practitioners focused on retention issues can use these findings to

improve upon existing cocurricular programs, partner with service-learning offices, or refer students to appropriate service-learning programs and courses.

On a more systemic level, the promotion of empowering and transformative approaches to retention could also lead LIFG students to become change agents at their institution as well as in the wider community. The experiences of these students provide a glimpse into the ways that successful service-learning experiences can help to achieve the broader, more ambitious goals of enabling LIFG students to develop tools needed to be successful in their future pursuits, as well as envision and create a more democratic, equitable, and just society.

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Appendix A: Student Interview Protocol

1. Previous educational background
   - Could you tell me a little about where you grew up?
   - How would you describe your experiences in elementary, middle, and high school? [Prompts: what kinds of things excited you about school? Didn't excite you? How would you describe your overall education in K-12 in terms of its quality?
   - Could you describe the kinds of things you did when you weren't in school? (Work, extracurricular activities, sports, community service or volunteer activities?)

2. Family background (participants were reminded that they did not need to answer these questions if they did not want to)
   - What is the highest level of education that your parents or guardians completed?
   - What are their current occupations?
   - What kinds of messages did your parents send about education? How have those messages influenced you?
   - Do you have any siblings? Older or younger? What have their educational experiences been like so far?
   - How would you best describe the community where you grew up? Poor, working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, upper class?

3. College information
   - When and why did you decide to go to college?
   - Did you come as a freshman or transfer student? (What was your path like to get here?)
   - Why did you decide to come to (this college)?
   - Are you receiving any kind of financial aid?
   - What are you majoring in? How did you choose this major?
   - In what ways was your family involved in your college application or decision-making process around college?

4. College experiences
   - What has your college experience been like so far? Do you like it here?
   - How do you spend your time in college? What kinds of things do you do (and why)?
   - How do you feel you are doing in college?
   - How connected do you feel to (your university)?
   - If one of your friends from high school asked you, "what is your favorite thing about college," what would you tell them?
   - What about the biggest challenges that you have faced in college? (What would you tell them?)
   - What are some things you have done to cope with these issues?

5. Service experience
   - You are participating in/enrolled in (name of program or course). How long have you been participating? Why did you decide to participate?
   - Tell me a little bit about the structure or main components of the program/course.
     - ➢ Where are you doing your service?
     - ➢ How often do you go? What do you do there?
     - ➢ Did you have a choice about the service component – participation, site, etc.?
   - What has your experience in the program/course been like so far?
     - ➢ What have you enjoyed most?
     - ➢ What has been most challenging?
     - ➢ What have you learned?
   - What has your service experience been like so far?
     - ➢ What have you enjoyed most?
     - ➢ What has been most challenging?
     - ➢ What have you learned (about yourself, your values, others, the world)?
   - What aspects of the program have you found to be most valuable?
   - How has your service-learning experience affected the way that you view your college experience?
     - ➢ How has it impacted your academic experience, in particular? (Have you seen any connections with your academic coursework?)
     - ➢ How has it affected your career interests, or what you hope to do in the future?
     - ➢ How has it affected how you feel about (your college?)