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Service-Learning: A Powerful Pedagogy for Promoting Academic Success among Students of Color

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This article discusses a mixed-methods study that investigated the service-learning experiences of students of color at College of the Holy Cross to better understand how service-learning may be an effective pedagogical tool for reducing cultural dissonance and addressing related achievement gaps. Quantitative data were collected from over 1,500 students who had enrolled in 59 different service-learning classes. In addition, interviews were conducted with 13 students of color who had participated in service-learning. Findings indicated that students' service-learning experiences paralleled study participants' descriptions of how they learned most effectively. Furthermore, the findings suggest that service-learning may resonate for students of color because of the way in which (1) it enables students to integrate social responsibility with academics; (2) students of color can personally relate to the course content as well as the people and experiences encountered at service-learning sites; (3) service-learning reduces cultural dissonance by empowering students who are struggling to build confidence and feel that they belong in a highly selective, predominantly White college.

Keywords: service-learning, retention, students of color, academic success, cultural dissonance, persistence, achievement gap

American higher education has seen ever-increasing diversity of its student population in recent decades. Between 1976 and 2015, the proportion of White undergraduate students in the United States decreased from 83.4% to 56.5%, while the proportion of students of color increased from 16.6% to 43.5% (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2016a). At the same time, troubling disparities in graduation rates for students of color persist. For example, NCES (2016b) data indicated that 20.6% of African-American/Black students and 30.5% of Hispanic/Latinx students from the 2009 student cohort graduated from college in four years compared to 44% of White students.

Both equity and the economic vitality of society demand that these persistent achievement gaps be addressed. One promising avenue is the pedagogical method of service-learning (SL). As defined by Bringle and Hatcher (1996), SL is

a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 222)

Not only have studies found a relationship between SL and retention more generally (Bringle, Hatcher, & Muthiah, 2010; Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, & Carnes Stevens, 2010; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Keup, 2005; Reed, Rosenberg, Statham, & Rosing, 2015; Song, Furco, Lopez & Maruyama, 2017; Yue & Hart, 2017), but some have found that such a relationship also exists when disaggregating data by ethnicity, low-income, or first-generation status (Lockeman & Pelco, 2013; Mungo, 2017; Song et al., 2017; York, 2013). For example, Lockeman and Pelco (2013) found a statistically significant difference in graduation rates among students who had not taken SL classes and those who had. This difference was even more pronounced among students of color: 71% of students of color who had taken SL courses graduated in six years while only 29% who had not taken SL courses graduated. Song et al. (2017) found that participation in SL at one university was related to higher GPA, retention, and graduation rates for underrepresented students.

Studies have also pointed toward the value that students of color place on SL within courses. Christensen, Stritch, Kellough, and Brewer (2015) found that students of color (as well as female students) ranked the presence of SL in a course as a more important consideration in course selection than White students. In their study, Lockeman and Pelco (2013) found that Black/African-American and Asian students were more likely than White students to enroll in SL courses. Similarly, Kuh (2008) discovered that by their senior year students of color had participated in SL at a higher rate than White students.

While these studies have demonstrated a relationship between SL participation and college persistence as well as a preference for the inclusion of SL in courses among students of color, few studies have directly investigated why this might be. Song et al. (2017) suggested that SL helps to increase retention and graduation rates by facilitating higher levels of student involvement and a subsequent sense of belonging. Lockeman and Pelco (2013) hypothesized that the relationship between SL and the retention of students of color may have a basis in person-culture match.

The literature investigating academic success among students of color does indeed point toward the significance of cultural match (Guiffreda, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Kuh and Love (2000) proposed that the persistence of students of color is intertwined with the level of dissonance they experience between their pre-college culture and their college culture (i.e., the more dissonance, the less likely one is to persist). In their study investigating the validity of Kuh and Love's hypotheses, Museus and Quaye (2009) found that students of color at predominantly White campuses experienced cultural dissonance that increased "adjustment difficulty and [led] to thoughts about departure" (p. 82). Guiffreda, Kiyama, Waterman, and Museus (2012) pointed out that recognizing the distinction between the collectivist cultural backgrounds of so many students of color and the individualistic cultures of many predominantly White campuses can help explain ethnic disparities in college student success.

Numerous scholars have contended that cultural differences in learning preferences, in particular, are not adequately reflected in American educational systems (Darder, 1991; Goodman, 2011; hooks, 1994; Ibarra, 2001; Rendón, 2009). Rendón, (2009) explained that her educational experiences perpetuated marginalization and did not create space for her Mexican-American heritage. In his study exploring the higher education experiences of Latino students, Ibarra (2001) concluded that there was a mismatch between the cultural backgrounds of the students he interviewed and the culture of higher education. This incongruity was due, in part, to pedagogical methods that did not resonate with the students' preference for relational and contextual learning. Ibarra argued that, depending upon cultural background, students have varying needs of context and collaboration in order for effective learning to occur. Indeed, Joy and Kolb (2009) found distinctive cultural differences in preference for learning through abstract conceptualization or concrete experience, with Latinx cultures clearly preferring concrete experience. Because collaborative learning that is contextualized through concrete experience is central to the pedagogical method of SL, SL may be a particularly good cultural match for students of color.

Kuh and Love (2000) offered eight propositions for improving persistence among students of color. One of these propositions has direct relevance to prior research findings demonstrating increased academic success among students of color participating in SL: "The probability of persistence is inversely related to the cultural distance between a student's culture(s) of origin and the culture of immersion" (Kuh & Love, 2000, p. 201). This study sought to explore the SL experiences of students of color in order to better understand how and why SL might be an effective pedagogical means for narrowing the distance between "students' cultures of origin and culture of immersion" and for subsequently improving student success. The study focused on the following research questions: What do students of color who have participated in SL report is important to them in creating an effective learning experience? In what ways are these self-reported conditions for an effective learning experience consistent with the pedagogical method of SL?

Method

The research questions guiding this study were addressed through an explanatory sequential design that incorporated a qualitative phase to explain initial quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), "this design is most useful when the researcher wants to

assess trends and relationships with quantitative data but also be able to explain the mechanism or reasons behind the resultant trends” (p. 82). The qualitative strand of this study was developed after initial quantitative data analysis led researchers to notice trends in student responses to annual assessments. Quantitative results informed the development of questions that were explored during the qualitative phase to provide deeper understanding of initial quantitative findings.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase utilized assessment data collected regularly through SL classes at College of the Holy Cross from the spring of 2012 through the spring of 2017. The assessment instrument—which asks students to indicate their level of agreement (i.e., strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree) with 21 statements—was created for the purpose of better understanding student experiences with SL and the self-reported impact of SL. These surveys were distributed and collected by faculty in class during the final weeks of each semester between 2012 and 2017.

In total, 1,845 surveys were collected, and 1,521 of these included a response indicating a student’s specific ethnic background. The majority of respondents were White/Caucasian (77.1%), followed by Latinx (10.2%), Asian/Asian-American (5.5%), and Black/African-American (5.2%). All other ethnic groups were represented by less than one percent of the sample. Sixty-five percent of the respondents identified as female and 35% as male. Responses were collected from students in 59 different SL classes who had served at over 100 sites and who were taught by 53 different professors from the following academic disciplines: art history, American sign language and deaf studies, biology, classics, economics, English, gender, sexuality, and women’s studies, history, mathematics, philosophy, political science, psychology, religious studies, sociology, Spanish, and visual arts. Seventy-three percent of respondents did direct service for two to three hours per week throughout the semester (what is termed a placement at Holy Cross), while 27% were involved in SL projects that had wide variation in time, commitment, and scope.

Two of the 21 assessment indicators are particularly relevant to this study’s research questions investigating how students report learning most effectively: (1) “Including community-based learning (CBL)¹ in this course enabled me to learn more deeply than I otherwise would have”; (2) “I learn better when I apply classroom material to real experience.” As Ibarra (2001) and Rendón (2009) argued, traditional pedagogical methods are not always consistent with the learning preferences of students of color. Agreement level with these two statements illustrates whether study participants look favorably upon service-learning as a pedagogical method. SPSS was utilized to conduct a multiple regression analysis in order to determine if there were statistically significant differences in responses between White students and students of color in relation to either of these statements (Morgan, Griego, & Gloeckner, 2001). Analyses controlled for gender and whether students were doing direct service on a weekly basis (placement) or participating in an SL project.

Qualitative Phase

Semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998) were conducted in May of 2016. All 318 students who took an SL class during the spring semester of 2016 were invited (via e-mail and via the semester-end assessment survey) to take part in an interview. Additionally, a text message was sent to student leaders involved in Holy Cross’ Office of Multicultural Education inviting them to participate if they had prior SL experience. Informed consent was provided, and a one-on-one interview was then conducted with each of the 13 students of color who responded affirmatively to the invitation. Study participants were compensated for their time with a \$15 gift card.

¹ Service-learning is referred to as community-based learning (CBL) at College of the Holy Cross. Therefore, when citing survey questions, we use the term CBL. However, Bringle and Hatcher’s (1996) definition of service-learning is still applicable in all references to CBL.

Interviews ranged from 29 to 97 minutes, with most lasting about 35 to 45 minutes. Three interviewees were African-American (Zara, Brandon, and Alysha), three Asian (Taylor, Jeremy, and Sara), six Latinx (Erica, Mateo, Lucia, Jon, Sofia, and Nicole), and one (Kelly) was biracial (White and Latinx).² Nine of the interviewees were women and four were men. Four of the interviewees had at least one parent who had graduated from college; nine did not. Interviewees were from all class years, but the majority were either first-year students (six) or seniors (five). The interviewees represented eleven different academic majors, but psychology (five) and sociology (three) were the only majors that included more than one participant. The other students studied chemistry, economics, French, global health, history, international studies, philosophy, pre-business, and Spanish. Among them, the students had taken 26 SL classes representing 13 different course topics from nine different departments. They had served at 12 different SL sites (most of them at more than one). The majority of sites (nine) focused on education or mentoring with youth from ethnically diverse backgrounds; two of these educational sites worked solely with youth who were former refugees or unaccompanied immigrants. Two sites were long-term health care facilities for aging adults. One site supported men who were previously incarcerated.

Table 1. *Student Participant Characteristics*

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Racial Identity	Major	Number of SL Courses Taken
Zara	Female	African American	Sociology	4
Brandon	Male	African American	Spanish, Pre-Business	1
Alysha	Female	African American	Psychology	1
Taylor	Female	Asian	Chemistry	3
Jeremy	Male	Asian	Global Health	2
Sara	Female	Asian	Sociology, International Studies	2
Erica	Female	Latinx	History, French	1
Mateo	Male	Latinx	Economics, Psychology	3
Lucia	Female	Latinx	Psychology	1
Jon	Male	Latinx	Philosophy	1
Sofia	Female	Latinx	Psychology	4
Nicole	Female	Latinx	Sociology	1
Kelly	Female	Biracial (White and Latinx)	Psychology	2

An interview protocol was developed that included a list of open-ended questions to enable further explanation of the research questions and quantitative findings. During the interviews, students were asked to: share demographic information about themselves and their SL sites/classes; reflect upon the characteristics of prior academic experiences in which they believed they learned most effectively; reflect upon what they found valuable (if anything) about their SL experience(s); consider why they thought some SL assessment data differ by ethnic background; and reflect upon the ways in which their SL experiences

² Pseudonyms for study participants are used throughout.

made them feel more or less connected to their peers, their professors, Holy Cross, and/or the city of Worcester, Massachusetts.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researchers then used inductive data analysis and intercoder agreement to develop generalizations from specific observations (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). To begin data analysis, each of the two authors read the interview transcripts in full and separately developed a list of emerging codes by noting any recurring themes in interviewee responses. The two authors then compared initial notes on emerging codes with one another and used these notes to jointly refine codes in order to classify data contained in the interview transcripts. To increase reliability, each author analyzed transcripts and assigned these refined codes separately. Discrepancies in coding were discussed and decisions were jointly made about how to best assign final codes to data. Codes were then recorded, managed, and organized using NVivo software. The authors jointly analyzed NVivo summary results to combine codes into themes associated with the research questions. To increase validity, long-term observation, member checking, peer review, and triangulation were utilized (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the aggregation of data from many different classes did not account for differences in how extensively SL was integrated into each class. Similarly, the broad ethnic categorization of students did not adequately account for heterogeneity within specific ethnic groups. The data collected reflected students' perceptions of their own learning, not actual long-term gains in learning. Perceptions of learning may differ from the learning that occurred in reality (Gonyea, 2005). Data were not collected from students of color who had not taken SL classes; therefore, there was no way to compare results with the perspectives of students of color in non-SL courses. The fact that study participants in the qualitative phase of the study were self-selected may mean that their viewpoints were not representative of the wider population of students of color who took SL classes. Due to the anonymity of the assessment surveys, it was not possible to link qualitative and quantitative results directly to investigate this further. Finally, because Holy Cross is a highly selective, small, liberal arts, Jesuit institution that emphasizes teaching, the results of this study may not be reflective of student experiences in other types of educational settings.

Researcher Positionality

Both interviewers are highly educated, upper-middle-class, White women working in the field of SL. They both work at Holy Cross, and one attended the institution as an undergraduate. The researchers' positionality influenced the study design and may have influenced what interviewees chose to say or not say during conversations.

Findings

Quantitative Results

Responses to SL assessment questions illustrate that students of color generally responded more favorably than White students to the two statements assessing perceived learning through SL. While simultaneously accounting for the type of SL experience (direct weekly service or an SL project) as well as gender, findings indicate that students of color responded more positively than White students to the statement "Including CBL in this course enabled me to learn more deeply than I otherwise would have." The results of the regression indicated that the model explained 3.3% of the variance and that the model was a significant predictor of responses to the statement, $F(3,1510) = 17.36, p < .001$. Type of SL experience ($B = .262, p < .001$) and ethnicity ($B = .102, p < .05$) contributed significantly to the model, though gender did not ($B = .032, p = .388$; See Table 2.)

Table 2. Regression Analysis Summary for Type of SL Experience, Gender, Ethnicity Predicting Response to Statement, “Including CBL in This Course Enabled Me to Learn More Deeply than I Otherwise Would Have.”

Predictors	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	Sig.
	<i>B</i>	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	3.094	.042		74.499	.001
Type of SL Experience ^a	.262	.039	.170	6.705	.001
Gender ^b	.032	.036	.022	.864	.388
Ethnicity ^c	.102	.041	.062	2.464	.014

^a0 = Project, 1 = Placement (direct weekly service)

^b0 = Male Students, 1 = Female Students; (Open-ended response in which all students chose male, female, or left blank).

^c0 = White Students, 1 = Students of Color

While simultaneously accounting for the type of SL experience (direct weekly service or an SL project) as well as gender, findings indicate that students of color responded more positively than White students to the statement “I learn better when I apply class material to real experience.” The results of the regression indicated that the model explained 1.8% of the variance and that the model was a significant predictor of responses to the statement, $F(3,1506) = 9.44, p < .001$. Type of SL experience ($B = .149, p < .001$), gender ($B = .073, p < .05$), and ethnicity ($B = .096, p < .05$) contributed significantly to the model. (See Table 3.)

Table 3. Regression Analysis Summary for Type of SL Experience, Gender, Ethnicity Predicting Response to Statement, “I Learn Better When I Apply Class Material to Real Experience.”

Predictors	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	Sig.
	<i>B</i>	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	3.333	.039		86.091	.001
Type of SL Experience ^a	.149	.036	.105	4.103	.001
Gender ^b	.073	.034	.055	2.147	.032
Ethnicity ^c	.096	.039	.064	2.496	.013

^a1 = Placement (direct weekly service), 0 = Project

^b1 = Female Students, 0 = Male Students; (Open-ended response in which all students chose male, female, or left blank).

^c1 = Students of Color, 0 = White Students

While these two models explained a small percentage of overall variance in outcomes, they clearly indicated that ethnicity was a statistically significant predictor of responses to these assessment questions. The results of the quantitative analyses led to the development of questions explored in the qualitative phase of the study.

Qualitative Results

Similar to what was discovered through the quantitative findings, qualitative results demonstrated the value of SL to the students of color in this study. All interviewees referred to an SL course as being among their most valuable and memorable learning experiences. Sara proclaimed enthusiastically, “I think [SL] was a highlight of my college career.” Jon shared that the SL course content was not something he would “learn once and then forget about”; rather, it led to learning that he would “forever recognize” in future experiences. Brandon commented that he “really liked” SL and that his class learning would not have been the same without the SL component. Data analysis from the interviews pointed toward a number of themes that helped explain why students of color may have responded so favorably to SL experiences. Consistent throughout was the concept of students being valued for the assets they brought to their classrooms and service sites by integrating their cultural background and prior life experiences.

Parallels between Student Learning Preferences and SL Experiences

Interviewees were asked to describe prior academic experiences in which they had learned most effectively. It became clear from their responses that the characteristics of these experiences paralleled their descriptions of their SL classes. Specifically, interviewees explained that they learned most effectively when they could apply concepts from class to their real-life experiences and how valuable “hands-on” learning was to them. As Taylor put it, “I think I can understand it abstractly, but I feel like I won’t completely understand it until I have experience with it.” Similarly, Jon articulated that SL gives “value” and “meaning” “to what I’m learning.”

Most students expressed how much they valued class discussions for learning effectively, and they specifically noted the value of hearing a diversity of perspectives in these discussions. Relationships in the classroom were very important to study participants. Most interviewees stated that it was important for their learning to feel connected to the professor, and seven described the importance of feeling connected to other students in the class. When students were later asked what they found most valuable about SL, the responses were quite similar to their descriptions of how they learned most effectively. Nearly all of the interviewees spoke at different points about how SL enabled them to connect theory to experience, stimulated class discussions, led to learning that really mattered, and allowed for the formation of relationships in the classroom. Jon commented that SL “allows you to experience your [course] material in real life.” Similarly, Jeremy discussed how the SL experience created a “two-way” path for learning because he could bring his classroom learning to his SL site as well as bring the learning from his SL site to the classroom. What increased the learning further for Jeremy was hearing from his classmates: “I found it very beneficial when we did have reflections to hear other people’s stories.”

Characteristics and Actions of Professors that Countered Insecurity and Pressure

In reflecting on classes in which they learned effectively, most students cited the quality of a comfortable and non-judgmental class atmosphere. Characteristics and actions of professors were seen as key to laying the foundation for a positive class atmosphere, and study participants referred to numerous actions professors had undertaken to facilitate effective learning for them. Actions that were particularly appreciated by students included: encouraging students to ask questions; taking the time to get to know and understand students; genuinely caring about students and wanting the best for them; showing enthusiasm in sharing their subject matter and teaching it to students; encouraging students not to worry about their grade and to focus on learning instead; sharing personal stories and inviting students to do the same; being straightforward in expressing opinions while simultaneously valuing the opinions of others; challenging students to explain their perspectives; and being organized and intentional in structuring the course.

Most study participants indicated specifically that their ability to learn was intertwined with whether they felt they had a relationship or connection with their professor. Taylor said that the classes in which she had learned most effectively “were the ones that I felt like my professors knew who I was.” On the contrary, the classes that Taylor “didn’t really care about” were “the ones where I didn’t have a strong relationship with my professor.” Similarly, Sofia stated, “I just feel like the professor plays a big role

because I have to feel comfortable with the professor personally in order to learn effectively.” This is particularly pertinent to SL because of the way in which nearly all study participants described SL courses facilitating stronger relationships with professors and peers.

The importance of this comfortable class atmosphere and strong relationship with the professor was linked to the insecurity and/or pressure to succeed described by nearly all study participants. Nicole described how “intimidating” it was to be with “so many students who are so intelligent,” which led her to wonder, “What am I going to be able to contribute?” Erica stated similarly, “Everyone looks like they have it together. So I should have it together.” Nicole explained the important role a professor can play in reducing this insecurity by encouraging dialogue: “I think that really makes a difference for a lot of students. Especially for my friends who are students of color. Being able to have the professor encourage you to speak in class is—it changes everything.” She then described how she and her friends felt that their voices were often not valued in educational settings due to their race and gender.

Social Responsibility and a Desire to Give Back

In reflecting upon why they personally found SL to be valuable or why students of color more generally might feel favorably about SL, the majority of the interviewees spoke of the responsibility they felt to give back because of opportunities they had been given. Both Nicole and Sofia stated specifically that they were not going to college just for themselves, but to encourage their whole community. Sofia described how people with potential in low-income communities can feel “stuck” and “that there’s no way out.” As a result of the educational opportunities she had been afforded, she felt a responsibility to show others that “there’s a life beyond this community” that can be accessed through education and to help encourage them along the way. She strived to use her education “to help others, not just to help myself.” Similarly, Nicole spoke of the enthusiasm she felt about her upcoming graduation, explaining that she wanted to be an example to people in her community who had been made to feel worthless. She articulated powerfully, “I’m going to make it to a place where I can silence those nos for other girls, silence those racial slurs for other girls, and make them feel like they are capable of doing anything.” Likewise, Zara indicated that participating in SL was “kind of a way of me giving back in some way to my community.”

Ability to Relate

When asked to think about why students of color might respond even more favorably to SL than White students, participants’ responses often centered on an ability to relate to people at their SL sites. As Nicole stated, “If you’re not witnessing yourself you’re witnessing someone you know in other people.” Similarly, Lucia said, “The boy that I was tutoring ... that was me.” More than two thirds of interviewees discussed how they could see themselves or a family member in those they were working with at their service sites. Brandon reflected, “I know that there are people in my family that have to deal with the same struggles [as those at the SL site] ... like not knowing when you’re going to eat.”

Students described how the SL experience often connected students to a relatable and familiar environment. This theme emerged in most of the interviewees and manifested as students feeling that they connected more with their SL experience(s) than perhaps their White peers did. Lucia explained, “I feel like maybe the White students who attend [SL], they do it and they feel good about the service, but maybe they don’t fully understand where the people are coming from. I can 100% understand.”

Since several of the SL sites require students to provide tutoring or mentoring, one of the most common ways in which study participants felt that they could relate to their service experience(s) was by taking on a mentoring role which they could do what they wished someone had done for them when they were younger. Alysha, who was from a low-income family similar to most of the students she works with, shared that this makes her want to “find ways” to “help the students here grow” and “think about college” after high school. Zara expressed similarly that going to her SL site was “kind of like going back and talking to myself in some ways.” She felt that what she needed at that time, but did not get, was “someone to connect with” who “was cool and in college.” She appreciated being “able to give that back when I know I didn’t have that.”

In this ability to relate, the assets that students brought to their community engagement was clearly evident. They had cultural knowledge and/or knowledge of oppression that enabled them to understand the experiences of those at their service sites at a level that many of their White peers simply could not. This expertise can reduce the cultural dissonance many students of color typically feel on campus.

In contrast to feeling able to relate to the environment and people they encountered in their SL placements and projects, a few study participants mentioned feeling uncomfortable on campus. Some interviewees shared that they felt as though the city of Worcester and/or their service site felt more like home than the predominantly White Holy Cross campus. Lucia expressed how Worcester reminded her “in many ways” of her home because it is urban and has “a lot of Latinos” and “African Americans.” She described how comfortable she felt in Worcester, which contrasted sharply with how she felt upon re-entering campus. Lucia commented that was “kind of weird to think about” the way in which she became “a minority” again “as soon as I enter the gates.”

Empowerment

Perhaps the most compelling theme explaining why study participants believed SL is valuable for students of color was that of empowerment. Nearly all of the interviewees discussed how, in some way, their SL experience(s) had provided them an avenue for feeling legitimate, worthy, and empowered. As revealed in the previous quote from Lucia, and by the high proportion of study participants who reported feeling insecure at Holy Cross, there are indeed times when students of color feel disempowered. The qualitative results point to SL as a way in which students of color could, in the words of Nicole, “get that power back.” Sara explained that the ability for students of color to relate so well to the service site increases “their capital, their social capital, their cultural capital.”

Interviewees felt empowered both inside and outside the SL classroom. Nicole commented on how the class discussions in her SL course allowed her to see her racial identity as an “advantage” because she could more deeply comprehend the course material. Because of this, she spoke up more in that class than she typically did in her other (non-SL) courses. Similarly, Sara shared that she knew a very smart African-American male in her class who rarely spoke. The only comments he made all semester were “made during our discussion about [SL],” and she believed this was because it gave him the confidence that “he knows his stuff.” Zara reflected:

Speaking up in class, like especially for me, it’s scary. So, when ... I’m talking about my experience it’s not like I’m going to be wrong. It’s my experience.... So, it definitely made me more confident in talking ... it definitely made me part of the class and made me feel like my experience really matters since we have a whole class dedicated to it.

Nicole echoed this sentiment: “You just understand what systematic oppression is because you live it... It’s a great way to feel confident in the classroom. And it’s sad that something like that makes you feel good about yourself.”

Nicole also relayed that SL can provide an avenue for desired but difficult conversations to occur. As she explained, SL raises questions about justice and oppression that are important to students of color but that do not put students of color in the awkward position of having to share personal experiences in order for these conversations to be initiated. She stated:

The students of color are able to go back to the classroom and say, “See, I told you that happens.” You went to your [SL site] and you witnessed this happening and now we can have a conversation about it because it’s not just me talking to you about my experience but you also witnessed people who are impoverished and the difficulties that they’re faced with because there are systems that don’t take their needs into consideration.

Interviewees also felt empowered outside the classroom when interacting with people at their SL sites. Just as students gained confidence in the classroom because they could more easily relate their life experiences to course material, they also gained confidence through their ability to relate to those they worked with at the sites. While reflecting on her experience tutoring, Lucia shared that she had “never taken the time to kind of step back and feel like I should be proud of where I come from ... where I’m standing now.” This led her to see that “there’s actually kids out there that would look up to people like me.”

Taylor discussed her SL experience as a whole, both inside and outside the classroom. She felt empowered because her course, in its entirety, helped her to better understand oppressive systems, providing some explanation for the circumstances her family faced and was facing:

I feel like [the SL class] really helped me understand my life differently. Because I grew up thinking that like if I didn’t work hard enough then that’s the reason why I can’t get somewhere and then I’ve always kind of had this internal struggle in terms of I’m working hard enough, but it’s a lot easier for other people to work harder and then get somewhere and I feel like I have to work that much harder to get to the same place. And I didn’t know how to reconcile that or understand what that meant because my parents my mother was a housekeeper. My dad was a groundskeeper and so money was always an issue. It was always something that I had to think about and then I had friends who didn’t have to worry about that and their parents were always around and supportive. And I feel like I grew up a lot like by myself and trying to figure things out on my own and then it was really interesting for me taking [the SL] class because just looking at everything from a different perspective I guess and seeing how these greater social structures affect my life and just realizing that it is harder for some people to succeed than others.

Taylor’s realization that her parents’ unavailability and lack of support were due to forces much larger than individual choices and personal temperaments was extremely empowering for her. Her SL course not only enabled her to learn, in a hands-on way, about systemic injustices and how they affect people and communities, but it also caused her to feel differently about her own life. For the first time, Taylor had an explanation for the oppression she experienced, one that was very different from her original belief that her parents simply did not care enough or work hard enough.

Discussion

Both the qualitative and quantitative data clearly indicated that the students of color in this study believed SL was an effective pedagogical method that resonated with their learning preferences. Multiple regression results indicated that being a student of color was a statistically significant positive predictor of agreement level with the statements, “Including CBL in this course enabled me to learn more deeply than I otherwise would have” and “I learn better when I apply class material to real experience.” Thus, the quantitative data demonstrated that students of color believed SL enabled deeper learning than would have otherwise occurred and had a preference for experiential learning more broadly. The qualitative results from this study also indicated the value of SL for students of color as all study participants described an SL class when asked about prior classes that had been particularly effective for their learning. These findings are consistent with York’s (2016) qualitative findings in which low-income, first-generation students (the majority of whom were students of color) reported learning course content at a deeper level because of SL.

The specific characteristics of effective learning experiences described by students paralleled the qualities they associated with their SL classes, which are considered typical components in a high-quality SL experience, including application of course concepts to experience, strong relationships with professors and students, and class discussions. In addition to how SL fits with the way in which study participants reported learning most effectively, the findings suggest that SL may be particularly resonant for students of color because of: (1) the way in which it enables students to live out their desire to give back; (2) the way in which students of color can personally relate to SL sites, the people they meet at those sites, and the

course content of SL classes; (3) and the way in which SL reduces cultural dissonance and empowers students who are struggling to build confidence and feel that they belong in a highly selective college.

Throughout the qualitative findings it was apparent that this feeling of empowerment related to students being viewed from an asset-based perspective rather than the deficit ideology that pervaded their prior educational experiences. As articulated by Nicole, she and her peers of color previously “attended schools where our opinions were not very valued” and “were made to feel worthless.” This contrasted with the academic experiences in SL courses described by interviewees. In being encouraged to bring their life experience into the classroom, students were empowered by receiving the message that their voice mattered and they had valuable expertise to contribute to the learning process. When faculty took the time to get to know them, students were sent the message that who they are (including their cultural background) matters and that they are worth knowing. When students had knowledge of issues facing the community that their White peers did not, they were empowered by recognizing that they had unique assets and expertise to bring to the learning experience.

Similar to Museus and Quaye’s (2009) and York’s (2013) findings, some students of color in this study sought to reduce cultural dissonance by feeling connected to their home culture in some manner. York (2013) pointed out that underrepresented students were able to see themselves in SL sites, and SL provided an avenue for staying connected to communities with which the students identified. This was certainly true in this study as students conveyed feelings of being able to relate to the experiences and people at their SL sites as well as the neighborhoods where SL sites were located.

The findings of Joy and Kolb (2009) and Ibarra (2001) outlining individuals’ varying preferences for relational and contextual learning were consistent with the findings of this study. Interviewees expressed a desire to incorporate concrete experiences, contexts, and relationships in their learning. Similarly, the quantitative data indicated that ethnic minority status was a predictor of agreement with the statement, “I learn better when I apply class material to real experience.”

Overall, these findings are consistent with Song et al.’s (2017) conclusion that SL increases academic success among underrepresented students by facilitating a sense of belonging and with Lockeman and Pelco’s (2013) suggestion that the power of SL for students of color is in person-culture match. The study findings clearly demonstrated that SL served to reduce cultural dissonance as outlined by providing an experience that resonated with student learning preferences and immersed them in cultures more similar to their cultures of origin (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009).

Though SL shows great promise for reducing cultural dissonance among students of color, it is also worth mentioning potential limitations of SL. While none of our interviewees discussed this as a concern, one prior study (Seider, Huguley, & Novick, 2013) found that students of color taking SL classes in a predominantly White institution sometimes felt marginalized when discussions of race arose, particularly if privileged students spoke as if it was normal for everyone in the class or school to be from a privileged background. Similarly, SL class discussions can be disempowering when low-income students of color who were once the beneficiaries of service initiatives themselves listen to peers speak in a deficit-oriented manner about people or conditions at SL sites. Another challenge that may arise for students of color in SL classes is an unfair expectation that they will teach more affluent, White students about topics of race and socioeconomic status. Mitchell and Donahue’s (2009) book chapter entitled “I do more service in this class than I ever do at my site” highlights this problematic dynamic. Thus, despite its potential to empower racially minoritized students, SL can also be disempowering if it leads to “othering” students who are already questioning whether they belong in a predominantly White higher education institution.

Implications

It was clear from the ease with which interviewees related to people at their SL sites and from the high prevalence of study participants expressing insecurity about whether they had something valuable to offer in the classroom that many interviewees did indeed experience a dissonance between their culture of origin and Holy Cross’ academic culture. As outlined by Kuh and Love (2000) and validated by Museus and Quaye (2009), such a mismatch has the potential to negatively impact persistence and academic success.

The results of this study point toward concrete ways that teaching and learning within higher education can be structured to better resonate for students of color and, subsequently, reduce cultural dissonance. Study participants sought a collaborative, non-judgmental atmosphere in which they could learn through discussion of important ideas with their peers. They sought relationships with professors who care about them, mentor them, and reassure them that their voice is valuable in the learning experience. They sought opportunities to integrate concrete experience in their classroom discussions in order to provide further context for academic content. They sought opportunities to integrate their values of service and social responsibility into their education.

Although most of the study participants did not directly articulate the concept, it was clear that they were trying to combat the ways in which they had been disempowered in the past in order to feel that they and their experiences were valued in the present. It was particularly poignant to hear students speak of the ways in which SL enabled this empowerment to occur by: stimulating meaningful class discussions of racism, justice, and oppression that they found personally relevant; increasing confidence in their ability to make valuable contributions in class and in the field; enabling students of color to see themselves as role models through the eyes of the children they were mentoring and tutoring; and, in some cases, enabling study participants to better understand the larger structural forces that impacted their own family and community background. Overall, student comments reflected appreciation for faculty utilizing an asset-based approach to education by sending the message that who they are (including their cultural background) is important, that what they know from their prior life experiences matters, and that they are valuable contributors in the learning and knowledge production process.

In concrete terms, the study results inform the following teaching strategies for better supporting the academic success of students of color on a predominantly White campus:

- Build caring relationships with students and demonstrate a desire to know them holistically.
- Create a collaborative, non-judgmental class atmosphere.
- Reassure students that what they say in class matters and that their perspective is valuable.
- Integrate values of service and social responsibility into classes where possible.
- Integrate out-of-class life experiences to provide context and stimulate meaningful conversations about important issues facing society.

Each of these pedagogical strategies is incorporated naturally into a high-quality SL class. Thus, the findings of this study provide considerable insights into why prior studies have found that students of color may participate in and seek SL opportunities to a greater degree than White students (Christensen et al., 2015; Kuh, 2008; Lockeman & Pelco, 2013) and why prior research has found increased academic success among students of color who participated in SL courses (Bringle et al., 2010; Cress et al., 2010; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Keup, 2005; Reed et al., 2015; Song et al., 2017; Yue & Hart, 2017). The study participants' SL experiences clearly matched how they learned most effectively in a variety of ways.

Ibarra (2001) discovered among students “a growing disenchantment with academia in general” and a belief that academia is “so locked into a standard and dominant academic model that other relevant cultural value systems are excluded” (p. 7). With ever-increasing diversity in American society and a persistent achievement gap in educational attainment, it is imperative that epistemological assumptions underlying higher education in the United States be scrutinized for how they might foster cultural dissonance for students of color and, thus, serve as a barrier to academic success. Study results have indicated that SL is a pedagogical method that holds promise for breaking free from “standard and dominant” academic models and resonating with students from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. In this way, SL can serve to reduce the “distance between a student’s culture(s) of origin and culture of immersion” (Kuh & Love, 2000) and thereby increase the likelihood of academic success among students of color.

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