

Changing American College Students' Conceptions of Poverty Through Community Service Learning

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Americans' beliefs about the causes of poverty and inequality have a direct impact on public support for economic and social policies designed to reduce poverty. This study considered the impact of the Pulse Program at Boston College on participating students' beliefs about the causes of poverty. The Pulse Program is a community service learning program sponsored jointly by Boston College's philosophy and theology departments. Through a mixed-methods research design involving random assignment to a treatment or a control group, the authors found that Boston College students participating in the Pulse Program demonstrated statistically significant shifts toward an understanding of poverty that emphasized structural causes over individual causes.

Nearly 40 million Americans are currently living below the poverty line—a figure that represents 13% of the American population as well as the greatest number of Americans living in poverty since 1960 (U.S. Census, 2010). Researchers have found that these struggling Americans are perceived by the majority of their fellow citizens to be responsible for their economic plight (Gudrais, 2008; Ladd & Bowman, 1998; Pew, 2007) and that such perceptions hold important implications for antipoverty public policy (Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Specifically, Americans who believe that individuals contending with poverty are responsible for their economic status are less likely to favor social and economic policies designed to reduce poverty. From these findings, Williams (2009) concluded that the challenge facing antipoverty efforts in the United States “is not a lack of knowledge about how to ameliorate economic suffering but instead a lack of public understanding of the barriers that block economic mobility” (p. 42). The focus of this study is the Pulse Program at Boston College—a

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community service learning program that seeks to foster in participants just such an understanding of the barriers to economic mobility.

The Pulse Program

The Pulse Program began in 1970 at Boston College—a Catholic college in Massachusetts, with the goal of demonstrating to students the relevance of philosophy and theology to the “real world.” According to the program’s website:

The mission of the Pulse Program is to educate our students about social injustice by putting them into direct contact with marginalized communities and social change organizations and by encouraging discussion on classic and contemporary works of philosophy and theology. Our goal is to foster critical consciousness and enable students to question conventional wisdom and learn how to work for a just society.

The academic component of the Pulse Program is a year-long course in philosophy and theology entitled “Person and Social Responsibility.” Students meet three times a week for class and participate in a weekly discussion section. While the content of the course varies somewhat across the 12 philosophy and theology faculty members who teach in the Pulse Program, readings in all sections include works from the history of philosophy (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Boethius, Locke, Rousseau), from contemporary philosophers (e.g., Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, John Rawls, Charles Taylor), and from nonphilosophers (Paulo Freire, Jonathan Kozol, Paul Farmer) whose writings touch on themes (justice, education, theodicy) considered also by philosophical authors. The weekly discussion section allows students to meet with Pulse faculty members in smaller groups of 12–15 students to ask questions about the weekly readings and lectures, to share successes and frustrations from their service placements, and to discuss connections between their academic learning and service experiences.

In addition to their academic requirements, all Boston College students enrolled in the Pulse Program are placed at one of more than 50 social service agencies. Their work in these service placements ranges from tutoring urban elementary school students to volunteering at a suicide hotline, from working in an emergency room to helping low-income families apply for affordable housing. During the 2008–2009 academic year, approximately 40% of the placements were in the field of education, 20% addressed issues of homelessness; 25% addressed issues involving healthcare or the elderly; and the remaining 15% involved the corrections system, immigration, racism, etc. Students devoted 10–12 hours a week to their respective service placements (including travel time) for the entire academic year.

As is evident from the few examples cited above, there was great variety in the types of service experiences in which students participated; however, all of the community service placements shared the commonality of serving individuals or groups contending with poverty. Similarly, nearly all of the service

placements brought the students into direct contact with members of the group they were serving. In 2008–2009, approximately half of the students involved in the Pulse Program participated in service involving youth and the other half in service involving adults. As we have previously reported, the students who were engaged in service involving adults demonstrated larger shifts in their public service motivation and feelings of efficacy than the students engaged in service placements involving youth. There were no significant differences observed across the type of service placement (e.g., education vs. homelessness vs. healthcare) in which students participated.

In previous studies, we found that the Pulse Program had a significant positive effect on participating students' public service motivation (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, in press) and expected political involvement (Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, in press). Now, we turn to the question of how the Pulse Program affected participating students by considering the impact of the program on participants' conceptions of poverty. The research questions guiding this investigation were the following:

1. What impact does the Pulse Program have on participants' beliefs about poverty and the causes of poverty in the United States?
2. How do Pulse participants describe and understand the impact of Pulse on their beliefs about poverty?

Research Context

The United States currently faces a state of greater income inequality than at any point since the Great Depression (Sherman, 2009). The top 1% of households in the United States possess more wealth than the bottom 95% (Sklar, Collins, & Leondar-Wright, 2003), and differences in healthcare, lifespan, and access to high-quality education have reached unprecedented gaps between America's wealthiest and poorest citizens (Fabrikant, 2005; Johnson, Smeeding, & Torrey, 2005). Moreover, a growing body of evidence suggests that the promise of economic mobility embodied by the American Dream has diminished substantially (Economic Mobility Project, 2007; Jencks & Tasch, 2006; Scott & Leonhardt, 2005).

Scholarship on Americans' beliefs about inequality and economic mobility often present Americans as holding one of two dichotomous perspectives about these issues: individualistic perspectives or structuralist perspectives (Feagin, 1975; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). The individualistic perspective offers character traits such as laziness, perseverance, and intelligence to account for differences between affluent and poor citizens, while the structuralist perspective relies on societal factors such as job shortages, low wages, discrimination, and unequal schooling opportunities.

According to much of the extant scholarship, the majority of Americans consider individualistic factors to be the primary causes of economic inequality (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Ladd & Bowman, 1998; Mantsios, 2003; Stuber, 2006). As noted in this article's Introduction, the majority of Americans believe that anyone can escape poverty through hard work (Gudrais, 2008) and that hard work guarantees success (Pew, 2007). Other studies have found that the majority of Americans believe that poverty is caused by "lack of effort" on the part of the poor (Schwarz & Volgy, 1992), and they oppose government policies that redistribute wealth from the affluent to the poor (Hochschild, 1995; Kluegel, Mason, & Wegener, 1995). In their landmark study of Americans' beliefs about inequality, Kluegel and Smith concluded that the majority of Americans believe: (1) economic inequality is caused by individual differences in ability and talent; and (2) those who achieve economic success are superior to their fellow citizens in ability, effort, or initiative.

A smaller group of researchers have sought to present a more nuanced account of Americans' beliefs about inequality. Wilson (1996) found that Americans possess different attitudes toward different types of poverty. For example, while the majority of Americans attribute welfare dependency to individualistic causes, they are far more likely to consider the issue of homelessness through a structural lens. Other scholars have challenged the idea that Americans understand poverty through either an individualistic or structural lens, arguing that a structural understanding of inequality can be "layered on" to an individualistic perspective as a result of personal experiences, group membership, economic conditions, etc. (Bobo, 1991; Hochschild, 1995). Moreover, Lee, Jones, and Lewis (1990) have documented the existence of "compromise explanations" in which Americans acknowledge that structural barriers exist while maintaining that these barriers can be overcome through individual effort.

Other scholars have found that demographic factors such as race, religion, age, gender, and socioeconomic status impact one's beliefs about inequality. A number of researchers have found women to be more empathetic than men to the plight of the poor and more likely to attribute inequality to structural causes (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Gilligan, 1982; Mestre, Samper, Frias, & Tur, 2009). Kluegel and Smith (1986) reported that working-class Americans are more likely to offer structural explanations for inequality and that affluent Americans are more likely to offer individualistic explanations for poverty. Higher levels of education are associated with a greater recognition of structural causes of inequality (Hunt, 2004); however, the type of education has also been found to influence an individual's beliefs about inequality. Specifically, Guimond, Begin, and Palmer (1989, 1996) found that individuals majoring in business grow more likely to attribute poverty and inequality to individualistic factors, while students majoring in a social science become more likely to attribute poverty and inequality to structural causes.

Lakoff (1996) reported that Americans who identify as politically conservative are more individualistic and those who identify as politically liberal are more structuralist in their explanations for inequality. However, Hunt (2004) found that this relationship between political ideology and beliefs about inequality holds true for White Americans but not for African Americans or Hispanic Americans. Hunt (1996, 2002, 2004) has also demonstrated the complex relationships between Americans' beliefs about inequality and their race/ethnicity and religion. According to Hunt, African Americans and Hispanic Americans are more likely than White Americans to recognize structural biases leading to economic inequality; however, these minority groups are also more likely than White Americans to offer individualistic causes of poverty and inequality. In interpreting these findings, a number of scholars have argued that members of oppressed groups are highly attuned to the broad challenges faced by the group to which they belong, whether or not they personally have experienced these challenges (Gurin, Miller, & Gurin, 1980; Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1985). As a result, such individuals can recognize the existence of structural barriers to social mobility while maintaining their belief in their own ability to influence their economic status.

Religion also influences an individual's beliefs about poverty and inequality. Hunt (2002) reported that Protestants and Catholics—which he characterizes as the dominant religious traditions in the United States—are more likely to offer individualistic explanations for poverty and inequality, while members of minority religious traditions (Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, etc.) are more likely to offer structural attributions for poverty and inequality. Even within these groups, however, significant variation is found. Among White Americans, Catholics are significantly more likely to offer structural explanations for inequality than Protestants. Among African Americans and Hispanic Americans, however, the opposite pattern is found. What these interactions between race/ethnicity and religion demonstrate is that Americans possess complex beliefs about inequality that are influenced by a number of different factors. Finally, because this study was conducted during a period of economic recession in the United States, it is important to note that a number of scholars believe that economic conditions can increase an individual's recognition of structural causes of poverty and inequality (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Piven & Cloward, 1971).

College Students and Beliefs About Inequality

The college years may represent an opportune period for engaging individuals in reflection on the complex causes and consequences of poverty. In his classic stage theory of development, Erikson (1968) characterized late adolescence as the period of life in which individuals move beyond a blind adherence to the beliefs and values of their families and begin to seek additional perspectives and ideologies “in order to organize their experiences and growing understanding of

the world” (p. 31). Young adults seek these new perspectives from a diverse range of sources that include peers, mentors, teachers, religion, politics, and literature, and these sources play an important role in the development of what Erikson (1963) refers to as an individual’s “mature adult identity” (p. 261).

Community service learning may represent one powerful mechanism for deepening college students’ understanding of poverty and inequality. Community service learning is defined as “a form of experiential learning where students and faculty collaborate with communities to address problems and issues, simultaneously gaining knowledge and skills and advancing personal development” (HERI, 2009). Scholars have found that college students participating in community service learning experiences become less likely to possess stereotypical perceptions of individuals contending with poverty (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000); less likely to blame social service clients for their struggles (Giles & Eyler, 1994); and more knowledgeable about complex social problems (Batchelder & Root, 1994). Other scholars have reported that college students participating in community service learning demonstrate increases in their feelings of social responsibility (Kendrick, 1996); recognition of social inequity (Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002); empathy (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997); desire to help others in need (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993); and moral reasoning (Boss, 1994). These and numerous other findings about the impact of community service learning on the attitudes of participating college students align with scholarship that has found attitudes formed as a result of direct experience to be stronger than attitudes formed through more passive learning experiences (Fazio & Zanna, 1981; Regan & Fazio, 1977) and that prejudicial attitudes can be reduced as a result of direct contact with members of other groups (Kohls, 1996; Mabry, 1998; Pettigrew, 1998).

Methods

Sample Characteristics

This study’s treatment group consisted of 362 Boston College students enrolled in the Pulse Program during the 2008–2009 academic year. This study’s control group consisted of 37 Boston College students who elected to participate in the Pulse Program during the 2008–2009 academic year but who were randomly assigned to the Pulse wait list.

The Boston College students in the experimental and control groups were proportionally similar in terms of age, gender, race, and religion. The experimental group was composed of 222 female students and 140 male students, while the control group was composed of 25 female students and 12 male students. In both groups, approximately two thirds of the students identified their race/ethnicity as White and their religion as Catholic. Because the Pulse Program is intended for

sophomores at Boston College, 393 of this study's 399 participants were between 18 and 21 years old.

Thirty students in the Pulse Program also participated in qualitative interviews (described below). Of these 30 students, 16 were female and 14 were male. Twenty-three of these students identified as White, three as African American, two as Asian American, one as Hispanic American, and one as African. Eleven of the students were majoring in business or economics; seven were majoring in a social science; five in the humanities; three in the natural sciences; three in communications; and one in education.

Data Collection

All the students in the treatment and control groups completed quantitative surveys in September 2008 (Time 1) and then in May 2009 (Time 2). Each survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. These surveys requested demographic information about participants' gender, religion, social class, race, political affiliation, etc. Also embedded within these surveys were items adapted from a number of different measures that included the Poverty in America Scale (NPR-Kaiser-Harvard, 2001) and the Public Service Motivation Scale (Perry, 1996).

Three hundred eighty-six students in the experimental group completed the original survey administered in September (Time 1), and then 362 of these students completed the follow-up survey administered in May (Time 2). This high participation rate was due to the Pulse faculty's mandate to complete the pre- and postsurveys as a course requirement. In the control group, 48 students completed the initial survey in September (Time 1), and then 37 completed the follow-up survey in May (Time 2). Limitations caused by these uneven sample sizes are taken up in the Discussion.

Steps were taken throughout the survey administration to reduce demand characteristics (i.e., pressure for students to offer favorable responses on their pre- and postsurveys). Both the pre- and postsurveys were administered by Boston College's Office of Institutional Research rather than by the faculty of the Pulse Program or this study's authors. Students completed the surveys online at a time and location of their choice and were assured prior to beginning the surveys that their answers would be confidential and not seen by their respective Pulse professors. Specifically, the introduction to the survey explained that the survey questions were intended to help the Pulse Program gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences and that students should answer "as honestly and candidly as possible." Moreover, because the Office of Institutional Research conducts end-of-course evaluations for all Boston College courses in an identical manner, the experience of offering confidential opinions about course material would not have been a unique or novel experience for Pulse participants. For these reasons, we

believe students' responses to be valid representations of their beliefs, values, and worldviews.

Qualitative interviews were also conducted in April 2009 by this study's lead author with 30 Boston College students enrolled in the Pulse program. To select these 30 participants, we requested that the 12 Boston College faculty members who taught in the Pulse Program nominate 3–4 students apiece who could offer diverse perspectives on the Pulse Program by virtue of their gender, race/ethnicity, and college major. These students were then contacted and invited to participate in an interview about their experiences in the program. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was sufficiently structured to ensure that questions posed to students were open-ended, clear, and not overly complex (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Interview questions focused on students' motivation for participating in the Pulse Program; their experiences in the Pulse class; their experiences at their respective service placements; particularly impactful assigned readings; and the program's impact on their beliefs about wealth, poverty, and inequality. All interviewed students received a \$10 gift certificate to a local coffee shop.

Measures

The Attributions for Poverty measure consisted of 13 items adapted from the Poverty in America survey (2001) developed as a collaborative effort by National Public Radio, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government (contact the lead author for the full 13-item scale). These survey items solicited participants' opinions of various possible causes of poverty. Approximately half of these items described individualistic causes of poverty, such as laziness and lack of motivation. For example, one survey item read "Poor people lack talent and abilities." The other half of the survey items described structural causes of poverty such as job shortages and low wages. For example, a second survey item read "Most of the jobs poor people can get don't pay enough to support a family." Students responded to all 13 of these items along a 5-point Likert Scale in which a "1" represented *strong disagreement* with the given statement and a "5" represented *strong agreement* with the statement.

A Principal Components Analysis indicated that a single construct was being measured by this scale, accounting for 28% of the variance (eigenvalue = 3.61) and showing very good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$). The construct being measured by the Attributions for Poverty measure is the extent to which Pulse participants understood poverty to be caused by structural factors. Scholars have characterized the Poverty in America scale as incorporating "valid measures of the extent to which people attribute poverty to individual and structural causes . . . placing a structural response on one end of the continuum and an individualistic response on the other" (Hopkins, 2009, p. 753).

Quantitative Analysis

A two-by-two between-groups analysis of covariance strategy was utilized to consider the impact of the Pulse Program on participating students' beliefs about the causes of poverty.¹ In this analysis, participation in Pulse represented the independent variable; students' postintervention beliefs about poverty represented the dependent variable; and students' preintervention beliefs about poverty were treated as a covariate in order to control for any preexisting differences between the experimental and control groups. In addition, we considered the influence of several demographic moderators on the treatment variable: participants' gender, class status, religion, religiosity, college major, political orientation, etc. Before carrying out the analysis, preliminary checks were conducted to ensure that there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes, and reliable measurement of the covariate. The effect size of the question predictor—participation in the Pulse Program—was calculated using Cohen's *d*.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative interviews with 30 Pulse students were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were assigned to each interviewed student. We then coded these transcripts using emic and etic codes drawn from the scholarship on beliefs about inequality, community service learning, emerging adulthood, civic development, and civic engagement. Emic codes refer to descriptions of behaviors or beliefs by participants in this study in language that is culturally specific to these participants. An example of an emic code from this study are references by participants to the "Boston College bubble." An etic code refers to descriptions of behaviors or beliefs in the terminology of a particular academic discipline. An example of an etic code from this study is "American Dream," which was used to note references by participants to fluid social mobility in the United States. While the phrase "American Dream" is used colloquially, it is also defined in the sociology literature as "the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it— material or otherwise— through their own efforts" (Hochschild, 1995, p. 6).

Two coauthors coded each transcript independently, compared their work, re-coded, and then compared again until all coding discrepancies were resolved. Recurring themes and patterns were then identified in these coded interview

¹ In our initial analyses of these data, we considered the impact of the Pulse Program on participating students by specifying a multilevel model to account for the fact that these students were "nested" within 15 sections (i.e., classes) taught by 12 different professors. However, when these analyses revealed no significant relationship between a student's assigned section and beliefs about poverty, we shifted to the simpler analytic strategy (analysis of covariance) that we report on here.

Table 1. Summary Statistics for Boston College Students' Attributions for Poverty ($n = 399$)

	Number	Descriptive statistics for attributions for poverty		
		Pretest M (<i>SD</i>)	Posttest M (<i>SD</i>)	Adjusted posttest means
Pulse participants	362	3.64 (.41)	3.87 (.44)	3.87
Control group participants	37	3.68 (.41)	3.68 (.32)	3.63

transcripts and considered in light of the extant scholarship on community service learning, beliefs about inequality, and civic development outlined in this study's literature review (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Two-to-three page narrative profiles—a mechanism for facilitating reflection and analytic insight about the study's participants—were also developed for all 30 students who participated in qualitative interviews (Maxwell, 1996).

Results

Attributions for Poverty

The descriptive statistics related to total and estimated mean scores of Boston College students in the treatment and control groups are presented in Table 1. With initial mean scores of 3.64 and 3.68, respectively, the students in both the treatment group and the control group began the academic year, on average, with an understanding of poverty and inequality that acknowledged the role of structural causes. Such a finding is not surprising for a sample of predominantly Catholic students who have chosen to matriculate to a Jesuit university—an institution and religious denomination for which social justice serves as one of its “central tenets” (Fleming, 1999, p. 2).

Although there were no statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between the Pulse participants and the control group participants in their initial attitudes toward poverty, analysis of covariance revealed a significant difference between the two groups in their postintervention beliefs about poverty ($F[1,337] = 10.54$, $p < .001$). Specifically, after adjusting for pre-Pulse beliefs, the Boston College students participating in the Pulse Program demonstrated a significant shift toward a structural understanding of poverty that their peers in the control group did not demonstrate. Although the effect on Pulse participants was only a medium-sized one (Cohen's $d = .49$), few educational interventions of such relatively short duration and “dosage” generate more than small or moderate effects (Light, Singer, & Willett, 1990). The Pulse Program, then, might reasonably be characterized as an effective mechanism for influencing participants' beliefs about the causes and consequences of poverty.

Table 2. Analysis of Covariance Describing the Relationship Between Students’ Postintervention Beliefs About Poverty and Participation in the Pulse Program (Students [n] = 399)

Variable	DF	Type I SS	F Value	p Value
Corrected model	7	31.51	44.58	.0001
Prepoverty score	1	26.61	263.53	.0001
Pulse participation	1	1.06	10.54	.001
Gender	1	0.96	9.51	.002
Political orientation	1	1.64	16.20	.0001
Protestant	1	0.50	4.92	.02
Business major	1	0.60	5.96	.01
Error	330	33.32		
Total	337			
Corrected total	337			

R² = .48.

In terms of moderators on students’ attributions for poverty, our analyses revealed there to be statistically significant main effects predicted by gender, political orientation, college major, and religion (see Table 2). Specifically, there was a significant positive relationship between a structural understanding of poverty on the postintervention survey and identifying as female, Protestant, politically liberal, and majoring in a field other than business. These results are taken up in this article’s Discussion.

Changing Perspectives on Poverty

This study’s qualitative interview data offered insight into how Boston College students describe and understand the impact of Pulse on their understanding of poverty. Of the 30 students who participated in qualitative interviews at the conclusion of the Pulse Program, 27 explicitly described the Pulse Program as altering their understanding of the factors that contribute to poverty. For example, biology major Natasha² said of Americans contending with poverty:

The majority view is that they did something to get where they are, and we are going to ignore the problem because they don’t really want to get out of it anyway. And we are just giving them freebies, and they are taking it. I am realizing that, yes, that is sometimes the case, but a lot of the time it is not.

On a similar note, history major Alex explained that prior to Pulse, he had assumed poverty came about “maybe stereotypically because of drugs or some bad decisions, but now I see the possibility for actions that weren’t necessarily their own fault. Circumstances happen.” In these students’ words, one can see evidence of their deepening recognition of the structural factors that contribute to poverty.

² All student names in this article are pseudonyms.

Other students credited the Pulse Program with having a similar effect on their conceptions of poverty. Business major Liza explained that the Pulse Program had “highlighted” her ignorance about poverty by “putting a face to it.” As she explained, “It’s like I’ve always been around very similar people to myself, so now I see different people coming from different places, having different things, and especially having different opportunities.” International studies major Donald credited the Pulse Program with deepening “my understanding of the systemic social problems that exist in America.” Hispanic studies major Frank explained that “There are a lot of very concrete institutional things that I am noticing now for the first time, that are I think huge issues.” Finally, international studies major Alice described her newfound realization that “A lot of the time what makes you successful is a lot about how you were raised. And if you were privileged growing up, you’re a lot more likely to be successful and everything like that, and you can’t really control what you’re born into.”

Impact of Community Service Placements

In terms of precisely how the Pulse Program exerted its influence on participating students, 23 of the interviewed students cited the impact of their respective community service placements on their beliefs about poverty. A number of these students credited the service placements with exposing the barriers that hamper individuals’ efforts to pull themselves out of poverty. For example, biology major Natasha’s service placement was at a local homeless shelter in a nearby community. While volunteering at the shelter, she described the following encounter with a homeless man who asked for assistance in applying for a job at a local convenience store. According to Natasha:

I set up the email, and then we applied for like a Walgreen’s job online. He wanted to work, but he just has trouble getting it because he committed a felony. He got in a fight with his cousin in the street, so they both got arrested.

From this encounter, Natasha learned about the difficulty that individuals with criminal records face in looking for employment. As she noted, “That was definitely a memorable experience because it is just sad that he couldn’t get a job.” On a similar note, communications major Selena volunteered at a women’s homeless shelter and admitted that prior to Pulse, “I always thought if they (the homeless) just worked hard and got a job, they would be fine. Just seeing the women who have jobs who still can’t do it; it has definitely changed my view.”

Biology major Danny described a similar epiphany about the lack of opportunities available to the incarcerated men he encountered at his service placement. Danny’s community service placement was at a local prison facility where he tutored inmates interested in obtaining their General Education Diplomas (GEDs). According to Danny:

I guess before [this service placement] my thoughts went along the lines that it is the person's own fault if they are not well off. After seeing the people at the placement, you see how much their environment affects them. It seems like all of them came from an environment with poor education systems. They all dropped out of high school early, and that probably affected their lives and led them to do drugs, crimes.

Danny's observations about the effects of a poor education were echoed by several other students. History major Annie's service placement was at a treatment facility for substance abusers. In speaking with the facility's clients and attending several group sessions, she came away shocked by how little these individuals had understood about the negative effects of drug use. According to Annie:

One of the things that surprised me was how little drug addicts and alcoholics know about their own condition. Because I've grown up with alcohol education and drug education as a kid, I know what I'm getting into if I drink or if I do drugs . . . But because they didn't get any alcohol and drug education they didn't know how this was going to affect them. That was definitely one thing that shocked me.

Three other students discussed concerns about educational opportunity that they witnessed through community service placements that involved tutoring urban youth. For example, international studies major Donald characterized himself as feeling a "huge, huge disappointment with the United States' public school system. I just see how funds are portioned and just the disparity in locations." In comparing his own school experience in Greenwich, Connecticut, to the students he was tutoring, Donald asserted, "They are not even allowed to take the textbooks they have in class home, so how are they supposed to do their homework? That is so frustrating." Another student, English major Angela, explained that "One of my students was like 'I don't have my textbook because we can't take it home.' That made me mad because at my high school I had my own textbook for every class. I was able to take them home [and] leave them at home if necessary." Finally, finance major Joe actually conducted his tutoring at the home of his tutee. He was shocked to discover that his tutee didn't have a bed of his own. Speaking of the housing development in which his tutee lived, Joe explained, "It's really just like a whole place that I've never really seen before, and it really gives you a better understanding of just exactly what these kids have to go through and how difficult it is for them to get out of their situation." For Joe and other Pulse participants, their service placements highlighted the barriers to social mobility facing millions of Americans.

Connecting Academics and Service

Fourteen of the Boston College students who participated in qualitative interviews cited readings from the academic component of the Pulse Program as having significantly influenced their conception of poverty. For example, finance

major Sam described the impact of reading French philosopher Michel Foucault's perspective on the influence of social institutions. According to Sam:

I took a lot out of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment*. I was just primarily taken aback and shocked by the idea that in fact we are not free and that we are trapped in societal structures and that we are products of those structures. It was eye-opening.

In terms of how this reading had affected him, Sam explained that "What Pulse has really done is make us aware of social structures and their influence on us and their influence on the oppressed." He admitted that "It was almost something I hadn't considered before because we tend to hide ourselves from the truths that are within our system, the oppression that is within our system."

Communications major Kathleen noted that in her Pulse class, "We try to draw the connections with Plato and Aristotle to discuss how to create a just society." According to Kathleen, this focus on what constitutes a just society led to discussions of "social and economic and political repercussions of our entire system in the United States." Particularly notable about Kathleen was that she was able to utilize these discussions about the structural factors that contribute to economic inequality to reflect on the urban youth she had encountered at her service placement. According to Kathleen, as a result of these readings and discussions, "I can see how the infrastructure of our society trickles down and affects the kids that I work with. Sometimes I feel like they don't have as much hope, or they are down just because their resources are limited." Here, Kathleen drew on both her philosophy readings and her community service placement to describe her recognition of the obstacles facing the urban youth with whom she was working.

History major Alex was able to make a similar connection between his service placement at a homeless shelter and his reading of Brazilian social theorist Paulo Freire. As Alex explained, "Freire talks about liberating the oppressed from the oppressive and the dialectical structure." Here, Alex noted the way in which Freire's writings focus on the societal structures that contribute to the oppression of the poor. Moreover, Alex was able to identify ways in which the homeless shelter at which he was volunteering did not combat the oppressive social structures about which Freire writes. According to Alex:

Some of the programs that we do are just to help them or solve the immediate problems of homelessness but don't work to change the system which is perpetuating homelessness. So by not really doing anything, we are just saying we are okay with the situation and not working to change it.

In their interviews, both Alex and Kathleen credited philosophical texts with highlighting for them the structural factors that contribute to poverty, and they were then able to reflect on their community service experiences in light of this newfound understanding of oppression and societal structures.

Both premed major Namwali and international studies major Alice cited their readings from Catholic Social Teachings as having an impact on their beliefs about how society should respond to poverty. In her interview, Namwali asked, “Why isn’t the funding going where it is needed, you know, the preferential option for the poor?” The “preferential option for the poor” is a phrase from Catholic theological writings that refers to committing oneself to the needs of the poor even if it means hardship for the rich (Dinn, 2001). On a similar note, Alice explained that she had been powerfully affected by her readings from the Catholic Social Teachings, which advocated “having the people who were least advantaged being able to participate in society, so that they could get out of their cycle of being disadvantaged.” For both Namwali and Alice, their study of Catholic Social Teachings offered clear policy implications for the economic inequality they now recognized to exist.

While the Pulse Program primarily focused on philosophical and theological texts, there were also several sociological readings included on the program’s syllabus. Economics major Max cited the impact on his conception of poverty of David Shipler’s *The Working Poor*. According to Max:

It’s just like there is this cycle that is going on when you are in poverty. As soon as something starts working for you, there is something that knocks you down. Whether that is you stop getting your income benefits, you stop getting your health care, your child gets sick. It’s just this vicious cycle that as soon as you start to make it, there is something there to knock you down.

Similarly, in her description of Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*, Janessa described her suspicion that the structural barriers that contribute to poverty may be more pernicious than she had initially believed. According to Janessa:

This guy, an investigative journalist, went into the Bronx pretty much and was working there and talking to people [living there]. And that whole book went into just how they were set up by society to fail. Pretty much they make these waste incinerators in areas where kids and families were breathing in the air, and they had planned on putting it in a wealthier neighborhood first, but the wealthier neighborhood had protested so they moved it to the poor neighbor and set it up where kids were getting asthma. The asthma rates were up the roof, and they didn’t do anything about it.

Here, Janessa described the phenomena of undesirable industries and services being placed in poor communities, and the negative health consequences that can result for men, women, and children living in these communities.

Discussion

In this study, we found that the Pulse Program at Boston College had a significant effect on participating students’ beliefs about poverty and inequality. Specifically, participants in Pulse came away from the experience with a greater

recognition of the structural factors that contribute to poverty and inequality in comparison to their peers on the Pulse wait list.

The influence of the Pulse Program on participants' understanding of poverty and inequality is worthy of careful consideration in light of scholarship, which has found a direct relationship between Americans' beliefs about inequality and their support (or lack thereof) for economic and social policies designed to reduce poverty (Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Klugel & Smith, 1986). Programs such as Pulse that heighten participants' awareness of the structural factors that contribute to poverty and inequality can increase public support for government programs and policies designed to reduce the number of Americans living in poverty.

The Pulse Program may be particularly impactful because of its placement at Boston College—a highly competitive 4-year institution ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as one of the top 50 universities in the United States. In recent scholarship on the relationship between socioeconomic status and political influence, several researchers have found that the policy preferences of individuals in the top third of the income distribution exert significantly more influence on the voting records of their elected representatives than the policy preferences of middle-class constituents, and that the policy preferences of America's poorest citizens exert no discernable influence at all on legislators' voting records (Bartels, 2008; Gilen, 2005). In short, then, the 13% of Americans currently living in poverty exert little-to-no influence on the voting records of their legislators, while graduates of elite institutions such as Boston College will likely go on to exert a disproportionate influence on these same legislators when issues of poverty and inequality come to the table (if these issues even come to the table at all). If more universities offered community service learning opportunities akin to the Pulse Program, their students' heightened awareness of the structural factors that contribute to inequality could have a significant impact on antipoverty public policy in the United States.

An important consideration for such universities are the particular aspects of the Pulse Program that had an impact on participating students' beliefs about poverty. Qualitative interviews with Pulse participants revealed that these students perceived the impact of the Pulse Program to lie in the combined effect of their personal conversations with individuals at their weekly service placements and the theoretical frameworks offered to them by Pulse's assigned readings (and expanded upon during weekly lectures).

In terms of the personal conversations, recall from this study's Results that students described encounters during their service placements in which they learned how a criminal record can become a barrier to employment; how incarcerated men and women working toward their GEDs had grown up in underresourced communities; and how the public schools in many low-income communities do not effectively prepare students to compete with their more affluent peers. Through these and other conversations, the Boston College students participating in Pulse

learned firsthand about the structural barriers that contribute to poverty and that can impede social mobility. Their accounts underscore extant scholarship, which has found such personal contact with members of oppressed groups to be a key component of impactful service experiences (Kohls, 1996; Mabry, 1998; Pettigrew, 1998).

In terms of theoretical frameworks for understanding inequality, recall also from the Results that Pulse participants characterized philosophical works such as Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment* and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as having opened their eyes to the influence of oppressive societal structures. Other students cited sociological works such as Shipler's *The Working Poor* and Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* as opening their eyes to the cyclical nature of poverty. A third group of students cited theological readings by Dorothy Day and others as having offered them a framework for considering society's responsibilities to the poor and disenfranchised. In all of these explanations, one sees further evidence that effective community service experiences are accompanied by academic experiences that allow participating students to think beyond their individual actions and to consider the larger structural issues that have necessitated the volunteer work (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Batchelder & Root, 1994; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Gray et al., 1998; Seider, 2007).

The nexus of these two factors—personal conversations at the service placements and a theoretical framework for understanding poverty and inequality—may be the weekly discussion sections in which all Pulse students participated. As noted in this article's Introduction, the discussion sections were explicitly intended to provide students with a venue for drawing connections between their academic readings, weekly lectures, and service experiences. A number of researchers have characterized such opportunities for reflection as a crucial ingredient in impactful community service learning experiences (Connors & Seifer, 2005; Eycler, 2002; Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 1999).

In these weekly discussion sections, Pulse faculty gave participating students the opportunity to discuss the successes and challenges at their respective service placements and to connect these experiences to the assigned readings. In his qualitative interview at the conclusion of the Pulse Program, finance major David explained:

Discussion section is incredible, I love it. It is a viewpoint into all of the other placements. I wish I could sit in discussion sections with all of the other classes, [and] the other discussion section in my class. That is where the real meat is, the real juice.

Similarly, premedical student Namwali explained that "What I have enjoyed the most [about Pulse] is the discussion time that we have. We get to hear about everyone else's placements . . . I sort of get the whole experience without going to every placement." Finally, economics major Sabrina explained that "Having a

large class setting is kind of hard for me to speak up in class [rather] than actually having [a] smaller setting What we also do is connect the readings to what we learn at the placement and what we learn in the readings.” For Sabrina, the discussion section represented a more comfortable venue to ask questions, clear up misconceptions, and share her thoughts. It was a space where for her and other students all of the lessons of the Pulse Program came together or, as David noted so colorfully, “where the real meat is, the real juice.”

Significant Predictors

Finally, it is also important to note that the participants in the Pulse Program who identified as female, politically liberal, Protestant, and majoring in a field other than business, were all associated with larger shifts toward a structural understanding of poverty. As noted in this study’s literature review, previous scholarship has shown that women are more likely than men to attribute inequality to structural causes (Mestre et al., 2009); political liberals are more likely than political conservatives to favor structural explanations (Lakoff, 1996); and social science majors are more likely than business majors to cite structural explanations for poverty and inequality (Guimond & Palmer, 1996). This study of the Pulse Program underscored each of these previous findings.

Perhaps a more unexpected finding was that Pulse participants who identified as Protestant exhibited larger shifts in their attributions for poverty than their classmates of other faiths (the majority of whom identified as Catholic). As noted in this study’s literature review, scholars have found Catholic Americans, on average, to offer more structural attributions for poverty and inequality than Protestant Americans (Hunt, 2002, 2004). This study seems to have demonstrated the opposite pattern. One possible explanation is that many of the Catholic students participating in the Pulse Program had already been exposed prior to college to the structural perspective on poverty presented in the Catholic Social Teachings, and therefore these students found these readings on the Pulse syllabus to be less influential than did their non-Catholic classmates. For the Protestant students, on the other hand, their introduction to the (previously unfamiliar) Catholic Social Teachings—in combination with their community service experiences—may have proven particularly impactful in terms of their evolving understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty. Another possibility is that Protestant students who have chosen to attend a Jesuit institution are simply not representative of the broader population of Protestant Americans.

Limitations

With this study, we have sought to utilize an experimental design and mixed-methods approach to contribute to the scholarship on Americans’ beliefs about poverty and inequality; however, there remain limitations to this study that will

need to be addressed in future research. First, the uneven sample size of this study's treatment and control groups does reduce the statistical power of the ensuing quantitative analysis; specifically, the estimated causal effect is less certain because of the larger confidence intervals on the point estimates for the control group. Although researchers have found that uneven sample sizes in random assignment experiments do not, on average, introduce bias, it would be prudent to replicate this study with a more balanced sample (Avins, 1998; Sposto & Krailo, 1987; Torgerson & Campbell, 2000).

A second limitation are the atypical characteristics of this study's participants. Boston College is one of only 28 Jesuit universities in the United States and is ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as a highly competitive university. As a result of these characteristics, we cannot assume this study's findings to be generalizable to all American college students. College students at other types of universities may well have entered into the Pulse Program with very different beliefs about poverty and inequality and, as a result, experienced the program in different ways.

Conclusion

In this article's Introduction, we noted that there are currently more Americans living below the poverty line than at any point in the past 50 years and that the gap between the affluent and the poor has reached unprecedented levels. Such a state of affairs is highly alarming if one agrees with Depression-era President Franklin Roosevelt (1937) that "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have enough; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

Williams (2009) has asserted that combating poverty and inequality in the United States "does not necessitate the creation of more *new* programs but rather an increase in public support for *existing* programs" (p. 42). With this study of the Pulse Program at Boston College, we have sought to demonstrate that powerful community service learning experiences represent one mechanism by which educators can begin to produce a citizenry with a deeper understanding of the complex causes and consequences of poverty and, in so doing, increase the public support for antipoverty public policies.

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