

Engaging College Students From Diverse Backgrounds in Community Service Learning

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Abstract

Community service learning at the university level is often conceived of as a mechanism for introducing privileged young adults to people with whom they have never interacted and experiences they have never had. American universities and courses involving community service learning are increasingly filling, however, with undergraduates who are members of the identity categories to which the community service learning experiences are intended to introduce them. The authors of this study consider the experiences of university students of color participating in a community service learning program.

Opportunities for community service learning have grown increasingly prevalent on American college campuses. The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI, 2009) defines community service learning 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.” According to HERI, 65% of American college students recently characterized their respective universities as offering opportunities for community service learning (Liu, Ruiz, DeAngelo, & Pryor, 2009). The majority of these opportunities are intended to engage privileged young adults in community service on behalf of individuals from marginalized or oppressed communities (Dunlap, 1998; Shadduck-Hernandez, 2005). As Butin (2006) has observed, “The overarching assumption is that the students doing the service-learning are White, sheltered, middle-class, single, without children, un-indebted, and between ages 18 and 24” (p. 481). Yet, increasingly, universities (and the community service learning courses these universities offer) are populated by undergraduates who do not fit into one or more of these privileged demographic categories (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002).

An important question, then, is how students from nondominant groups experience community service learning courses that seek to introduce them to issues facing groups of which they themselves are a part. To date, only a handful of studies have reported on the community service learning experiences of students of color (Chesler & Scalera, 2000; Coles, 1999; Green, 2001;

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Shadduck-Hernandez, 2005). Scholars found that students of color at Marquette University (Coles, 1999) and the University of Massachusetts (Miller & Scott, 2000) were less likely to participate in courses involving community service learning than White students. In explaining this finding, Coles observed that the fact that Marquette University's "service-learning program is sponsored by a predominantly white university in the middle of a city with a high proportion of people of color may establish it in the minds of many [students of color] as a white charitable program" (1999, p. 98).

Scholars have also reported that both the "service" and the "learning" embedded in these courses show some differentiation by race and ethnicity. For example, in a study of a community service learning course that involved tutoring low-income youth of color, Green (2001) found that African American college students expressed a greater degree of identification with their tutees as well as a greater willingness to push their tutees to succeed academically. Regarding the academic component of community service learning programs, a number of scholars have reported that White students characterize their learning in these courses about issues of poverty and other social issues to be more eye-opening than do participating students of color (Chesler et al., 2006; Enos, 1999). As Enos explained in her study of a community service learning program that brought university students into contact with migrant farm workers, "The students who are most affected are not necessarily the minority students . . . [but rather] the students who have been somewhat isolated and have not been exposed to the conditions" (1999, p. 58).

Additionally, scholars have reported that many students of color engaging in community service learning at predominantly White universities express feelings of discomfort and alienation in the classes that represent the academic component of their service-learning experiences (Coles, 1999; Green, 2001).

With the present study of the Social Action Program (SAP) at Beacon University, we sought to add to this scholarship by extending what is known about the experiences of college students of color participating in community service learning.² In so doing, we hope to offer useful insights to faculty and administrators engaged in community service learning with increasingly diverse student bodies.

The Social Action Program at Beacon University

The SAP is a community service learning program at Beacon University, a private university in a large American city. Participating students meet weekly for lecture and discussion of readings from philosophy, theology, and sociology that focus on social issues such as poverty, homelessness, public education, racism, and civil rights. In addition, all participating students spend several hours each week at a service placement related to one of the above-mentioned social issues. Examples of these service placements included urban public schools, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, correctional facilities, and affordable housing offices.

During the 2008–2009 academic year, nearly 400 Beacon University students participated in the SAP. Two thirds of these students identified as White, and one third identified as students of color. All of these students completed surveys at the beginning and end of their SAP experience. Additionally, 30 of these students participated in hour-long qualitative interviews at the conclusion of the academic year. Of these 30 students, 23 identified as White, 4 identified as African American, 2 identified as Asian or Asian American, and 1 identified as South American.

² Beacon University, the Social Action Program, and the names of all students in this article are pseudonyms.

Sense of Community

On the surveys that all SAP participants completed at the end of the academic year were a series of questions about students' perceptions of their experiences in the SAP. Specifically, students offered their perceptions on questions such as their sense of safety traveling to the service placement, involvement in meaningful work at the service placement, quality of interaction with their SAP professor, feeling of community in the SAP classroom, and perceived value of the program's assigned readings and subsequent discussions.

On only one of these measures—sense of community in the SAP classroom—were there significant differences ($p < .005$) between White students and students of color who had participated in the SAP. Specifically, the students of color in SAP were significantly less supportive of the notion that their SAP classes had offered a “strong sense of community.” The effect size of this difference was approximately one third of a standard deviation, which is noteworthy and warrants further consideration.

As for *why* White students and students of color experienced differently the sense of community within the SAP classroom, we look to our qualitative interviews with seven SAP participants who identified as students of color.

Race Discussions

Of the seven students of color who participated in qualitative interviews, four characterized themselves as deliberately *not* participating in class discussions when issues of race arose in their SAP classes. A number of different reasons were offered for this decision, one of which was a reluctance to be seen as a “representative” of all people of color. For example, Namwali—an African American woman from a working-class city in Massachusetts—explained:

In classes [at Beacon University] you are usually, like, one of or only one of two other black people. When you talk about issues like race, you don't want to be the black voice. I don't want to raise my hand [and say], “Oh, well, this is how black people feel.”

In this explanation, Namwali revealed her concern that as one of the few students of color in her SAP class, her opinions would be taken by her White classmates as representative of *all* African Americans. Rather than risk becoming such a representative, Namwali often chose to remain silent during conversations about racial issues.

On a similar note, Marcus, an African American student from a rural southern community, explained that he took “a vow of silence” during discussions of race in his SAP class out of a belief that “When a bunch of white people are talking about race and a black person says something, it kind of throws off the conversation.” As the only African American student in his class (and one of only three students of color), Marcus felt that his opinions about racial matters would be given undue weight because White classmates “expect you to say something insightful.” Similarly to Namwali, he responded to this dynamic by choosing not to enter into the discussion.

Two of the students of color who participated in qualitative interviews also characterized themselves as holding back in discussions of race so as to avoid appearing overly sensitive about racial issues. For example, Sabrina, an African American student majoring in economics, admitted that she sometimes grew offended by her classmates' comments about race and class. In those situations, Sabrina explained,

When I am offended, maybe I tend to hold back and think, like, am I really offended? Is this really offending me? When I respond, I don't want to offend the person who made the comment, so sometimes I tend to hold back in the discussion.

Here, Sabrina reported that in a classroom in which she is one of only two African American students, her response to comments she finds offensive is generally silence out of concern of coming across as offensive herself in return.

Namwali described a similar reaction to a discussion in her SAP class of the politics of Malcolm X. After reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Namwali characterized the majority of her White classmates as indignant that Malcolm X saw no role for White people in the struggle for civil rights. In response to their indignation, Namwali explained that "I think I was actually angry a lot of the times when we were discussing Malcolm X." However, she generally remained quiet during the class's discussions of Malcolm X because, according to Namwali,

I didn't want to be seen as the girl who thinks the world is racist. . . . I had to find a way to make my point without doing that or without alienating people. Without sounding like I am being a backwards racist. Oh, are you Malcolm X, too? No!

Here, Namwali revealed her concern that expressing her perspective would lead her to be perceived by her White classmates as either defensive or radical in her beliefs.

The fears expressed by these two students of appearing overly sensitive about issues of race seem to be underexplored in the scholarship on students of color and community service learning. However, a number of scholars writing more broadly about the experiences of students of color in predominantly White institutions have reported similar findings (Nettles, 1998; Oliver, Rodriguez, & Michelson, 1985; Uba, 1994). Guiffrida (2003) described African American students at a predominantly White institution as characterizing themselves as "guarded with their opinions and actions" out of fear of offering perspectives or viewpoints that might offend White classmates (p. 310). Moreover, Turner (1994) has used the phrase "guests in someone else's house" to describe the reluctance of many college students of color to express opinions that might prove upsetting or offensive to their White classmates. This reluctance by several students of color in the SAP to share their honest reactions to the comments of their White classmates would seem to offer a partial explanation as to why the students of color in SAP experienced a less cohesive sense of community in the SAP classroom than did their White classmates. If race is a salient component of these students' identity and experience, then their potential engagement is likely stifled when they perceive the social salience of these factors to be discredited by their classmates.

Several students of color also explained their silence during race discussions in the SAP classroom by describing the difficulty of conveying their perspectives on race to their White classmates. For example, in regard to Malcolm X's militant response to the racial discrimination he and his family had suffered, Namwali explained that "I didn't know how to make people understand that this is a lot of people's experience." Similarly, Abigail, a Cambodian American, said of her White classmates, "I think it's hard for them to understand what it's like to have to conform to the white image. To conform to what people want you to be in order to be accepted by them. They just don't understand." Likewise, Marcus expressed his shock at perceptions by his White classmates that racism is no longer a dominant problem in American society. According to Marcus,

We were talking about race today [in SAP] and . . . a lot of people were saying, "Well, racial issues shouldn't matter . . . they're there, but they don't really make a difference anymore, it's more personal." And I was, like, "Look at everywhere we go for SAP [service

placements]; it's nothing but people of color. Like, there is no SAP thing for white kids." So, I don't think they understand how race is part of people of color's lives.

Reflecting on this discussion from his SAP class about racism, Marcus expressed his belief that his White classmates did not understand the continuing role of race in the lives of people of color. However, Marcus chose not to respond in class to these perspectives with which he vehemently disagreed. As he explained, "It's not that I can't participate. It's just that I think the questions [of classmates] are ridiculous."

These explanations by SAP participants of color about the difficulty of conveying their perspectives on race and racism to their White classmates both support and extend the existing scholarship on community service learning and students from diverse backgrounds. On one hand, the respondents of color in this study reinforced the existing scholarship by noting the challenges they faced in race discussions due to a lack of sensitivity about or outright dismissal of these issues by their White classmates. Additionally, here we are able to see a mechanism by which these troubling interactions around racial issues are inadequately addressed and perhaps subsequently reproduced; namely, the explanations offered by the above-mentioned SAP participants express frustration with the challenge of *communicating* effectively about issues of race and racism with their White classmates. Due to these communication issues, a number of the students of color participating in SAP characterized themselves as abstaining from discussions of race, and the loss of their contribution likely symbolizes at least a partial withdrawal from the class community and also detracts from the learning of all participants.

Implications

In this article, we have explored how students of color at Beacon University describe and understand their experiences within the SAP. It should be acknowledged that as Robinson (2010) has recently written, Americans of color cannot be considered a monolithic body. Even within the relatively small sample of students of color from a single university, there was significant ethnic and racial diversity as well as diversity of opinion among the interviewed students of color about the effects of the SAP. Toward that end, we have sought with this study to provide additional nuance to the extant scholarship on the experiences of students of color participating in courses involving community service learning. We close here with some recommendations for the consideration of university faculty engaged in community service learning.

Institutions of higher learning are often characterized as venues for young adults to interact and learn from classmates from a diverse range of racial and ethnic backgrounds (Boisjoly, Duncan, Kremer, Levy, & Eccles, 2003; Camargo, Stinebrickner, & Stinebrickner, 2010). Astin (1993) has reported, however, that White college students and African American college students actually grow *further apart* over the course of their 4 years of college in two important ways: (a) their beliefs about the extent to which racial discrimination is a problem in America and (b) their personal commitment to promoting racial understanding. As Astin has noted, "The college experience, rather than narrowing political differences between the two major racial groups in this country, actually serves to exacerbate already existing differences observed at the point of college entry" (1993, p. 407).

One might reasonably expect a community service learning program such as the SAP—a program explicitly focused on issues of equity and social justice—to offer opportunities for college students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to discuss productively their various perspectives on issues of race, racism, and inequity in the contemporary United States. Such opportunities may have been limited, however, by the fact that many of the students of color in

SAP did not feel sufficiently comfortable in their classes to respond to their White classmates' perceptions of race and racism. As a result, students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in SAP missed out on valuable opportunities for authentic discussion of these issues across a diverse set of students.

In considering these missed opportunities, one clear implication is that university faculty engaged in community service learning should think carefully and work deliberately to foster a learning environment in which *all* students feel comfortable expressing their beliefs and perceptions of important social issues. Perhaps one tool for carrying out such reflection is recent scholarship that offers concrete and practical strategies for carrying out antiracist teaching. For example, Jones and Yonezawa (2002) have described utilizing class time a few weeks into the semester to meet with small discussion groups of three to five students to foster "greater understanding among educators about the ways constructions of race, ability, class, culture, and language impact students' classroom experiences" (p. 247). On a similar note, in her research on interrogating students' silences during class discussions, Schultz (2010) recommends both asking students privately and engaging entire classes in discussion about the reasons underlying their silence. Both of these strategies are intended to give students participating in learning experiences such as SAP the opportunity to share with their instructors the aspects of the class that are and are not supportive of their learning.

Prior to beginning "courageous conversations" of race and racism, Singleton and Hays (2008) recommend that educators introduce to students four agreements that "help create the conditions of safe exploration and profound learning for all" (p. 19). These four agreements are (a) stay engaged; (b) expect to experience discomfort; (c) speak your truth; and (d) expect and accept a lack of closure. Along similar lines, Ellsworth (1994) has written that authentic race discussions require faculty to work early in the semester to establish in their students high levels of trust in both the professor and one another. According to Ellsworth, such trust is developed by giving students opportunities to "know the motivations, histories, and stakes of individuals in the class" (1994, p. 316).

Green (2001) has written about the importance of service-learning faculty engaging students in dialogue about the ways in which students' "subject position" influences their experiences at the service site. Specifically, Green explained that with the undergraduates in her own service-learning course, "We explored how and why service-learning is different according to the race and class that each person brings to the service-learning site" (2001, p. 20). Likewise, Perry (2008) advocates incorporating into such discussions the effects of racism upon not only people of color but also White people. According to Perry, "I have found that too much emphasis on the negative effects of racism on people of color can add to racial minority students' sensation of dangerously being 'singled out' as a 'problem'" (2008, p. 228). Perry also recommends that during such discussions, teachers should explicitly "correct stereotypical assumptions students express in class about race, people of color, or even white people" (2008, p. 228).

As a final example, Carter (2008) offers advice to instructors to counteract "spotlighting" students of color within a predominantly White classroom or, conversely, rendering them racially invisible. Carter defines spotlighting as the perception by students of color that they are "racially hypervisible," such as when an African American student is asked by instructors or classmates to serve as a representative for the opinions of *all* African Americans. In contrast, teachers fearful of engaging in spotlighting can sometimes shift too far in the other direction by ignoring students' identities or experiences as people of color and, in so doing, creating "an atmosphere where black students (and other students of color) feel invisible" (Carter, 2008, p. 233). According to Carter, the key for educators is to monitor consistently this aspect of their own instruction and also to stay attuned to the verbal and nonverbal interactions occurring between students during race discussions. She writes, "After monitoring classroom interactions, the educator might attend to students of color to counteract ignoring, and ignore students' racial group membership to counteract spotlighting"

(Carter, 2008, p. 234). In other words, an educator explicitly attuned to the racial dynamics within his or her classroom can make adjustments to maintain a comfortable classroom community for all students.

Certainly the issues raised throughout this article about the experiences of students of color engaged in community service learning are complex ones, and none of the individual strategies offered in the preceding paragraphs can, in and of themselves, *guarantee* an antiracist classroom environment. That said, we do believe that providing faculty members who teach courses involving community service learning the opportunity to reflect together upon strategies such as those described above could have a powerful influence upon their effectiveness at fostering a learning environment in which all students feel comfortable expressing their beliefs and perspectives. As Carter (2008) noted, although there is no single strategy that can guarantee an optimal learning experience for all students, the educator who “consciously considers whether her moves are harmful or helpful to the students in the learning process will do better by her students” (p. 234). Offering faculty members engaged in community service learning the opportunity to come together to learn, consider, share, and refine antiracist teaching practices seems like an important step in doing better by all students.

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