Frame-Changing Experiences:
A Key to the Development of a Commitment to Service-Work and Social Action in Young Adults

by

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Abstract

In this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with college students who perform 10-20 hours of service-work each week. These interviews revealed that 15 of the 20 of the students surveyed could point to a single academic experience as having played a primary role in their development of a commitment to service-work by altering the 'frame' through which they viewed their community and/or their role within this community. Examples of such experiences include Bible studies, academic classes, a freshman orientation program and independent study. In this paper, I refer to such experiences as 'frame-changing experiences' and offer a model that documents the role of these 'frame-changing experiences' in catalyzing a young adult's commitment to service-work and social action.

Introduction

In "The Moral Equivalent of War," William James (1906/1920) suggested that his students at Harvard College should be sent out into the world as an army of volunteers "to coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, to clothes washing and window-washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes and to the frames of skyscrapers" (p2). Such work, James believed, would render these young men less "blind to the lot of the less fortunate classes" and lead them to "come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas" (p2).

In this study, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 20 college students from a private university in a large northeastern city who were, in some sense, living out James' prescription. Specifically, each of the college students in this study perform 10-20 hours of weekly service-work at local homeless shelters, prisoner education programs, hospitals and elementary schools. To provide some context for the level of commitment to service-work demonstrated by the college students in this study, consider the fact that only 14% of Americans and 5% of college students report volunteering five or more hours per week (Hodgkinson, 1995; Austin, Sax and Avalos, 1999). The college student-volunteers in this study, of course, perform two to four times that amount. My goal, then, in conducting this study was to investigate the factors, characteristics, and pathways that led these young adults to develop such a deep commitment to service-work and social action.

Research Design

Students were identified for participation in this study through recommendations made by the professional staff members of the university's undergraduate community service organization (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). With these professionals' assistance, I strove for maximum variation in terms of the gender, religion, age, race/ethnicity, and home state of the participants in the study (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). More specific information on the diversity of the sample can be found in Appendix A.

Each student in the sample participated in a semi-structured interview that lasted approximately two hours. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using etic codes drawn from the scholarship on service-work, identity development and frame analysis (Maxwell, 1996). These codes were then grouped into categories in order to allow patterns, themes and analytic questions to arise. Additionally, profiles and narrative summaries were constructed for each of the students within the sample (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In this paper, all students are referred to by pseudonyms.

Key Findings

The study's most important finding concerns an experience common to 15 of the 20 participating students that is relatively unexplored in the literature on commitment to service-work and social action. Specifically, in describing their development of a commitment to service-work, three fourths of the students in this sample described an academic experience that they believe profoundly altered 1) the 'frame' through which they viewed their community and/or 2) their conception of the role they could play as service-workers within this community. I refer to these experiences as "frame-changing experiences." The use of the wording "and/or" to describe these frame-changing experiences is deliberate because 11 of the students in the sample described this experience as having altered *both* their view of their community and their role within this community. Four other students in the sample described their academic experience as having altered their conception of the role they could play within their community, but *not* their view of the community itself.

The other phrase I use deliberately in describing frame-changing experiences is "an academic experience." I use this phrase to differentiate the frame-changing experiences described by students in this study from the "triggering events" and "transformative experiences" described by Haste (1983), Hart et al. (1995) and Fischman (1999). According to these scholars, triggering or transformative events are "sudden, unexpected occurrences that create powerful emotional responses that may 'trigger' a reexamination of one's life-choices" (Haste, 1983, p102). A frame-changing experience, in contrast, is not a transient "occurrence" that lasts just moments or hours, but rather a protracted experience that unfolds over days or weeks. As described by Haste (1983) and Hart et al (1995), a triggering or transformative event seems to impact one's emotions initially and then, afterwards, one's worldview. A frame-changing experience works in

the reverse; the experience first leads to a shift in one's worldview and/or self-concept, followed perhaps by an emotional response to this shift. In this paper's definition of frame-changing experiences, then, I use the phrase "academic experience" to differentiate these experiences from triggering or transforming events rather than to establish some scholarly threshold which such experiences must meet.

Examples of Frame-Changing Experiences

Let me offer here a few examples of frame-changing experiences described by participants in this study. Three students in the sample describe the Bible studies as frame-changing experiences that they participated in during their freshman year of college. For example, Bonnie, a college senior, offers the following explanation for her commitment to volunteering at a local homeless shelter:

> I was a Christian all through high school, but I think we didn't, [in Church] talk very much about issues of social justice, and I think,[that] being at [college]…I'm in [names a particular Bible-study], and we talk a lot more about those issues, and like looking at— like our heart for the poor and the oppressed, and just like doing Bible studies on that— like that wasn't something that I had heard before…It's almost like a central part of Christianity that I don't think was emphasized to me before.

Here, Bonnie explains that while she has been a practicing Christian for many years, her participation in a social justice-oriented Bible study led her to adopt a framework in which it is one's Christian duty to care for the 'poor and oppressed.'

Five other participants in this study describe an academic class as serving as a frame-changing experience. For example, Lester, a college junior, attributes his dedication to volunteer work at an urban public high school, in large part, to the readings and guest lecture offered in one of his undergraduate courses by educator Jonathan Kozol:

> He just spoke, and just blew me like out of my seat. Just like everything about him. I can't even like begin…He just kind of just wham bam in a three-punch just knocked down, to me, just two things: he just showed how ridiculous the idea of a level playing field is in this country for educational access. So he does that on one hand. And then two, just with this absolute love of kids, just shows what lives are at stake, these unbelievably wonderful lives.

Here, Lester explains how Jonathan Kozol's lecture led him to adopt a worldview in which he came to see poor children as being unjustly denied educational opportunities. Lester explains later in his interview that, "One of the reasons I got so into teaching was like reading books like Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*… and realizing how bright, wonderful amazing kids don't get the opportunity [to succeed]." In these words, one can see that the combination of Kozol's lecture and writings have not only altered Lester's worldview but also his conception of the role he can play within this world. Specifically,

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over the past two years, Lester has volunteered approximately 15 hours per week in a local public high school while simultaneously pursuing his professional teaching certification in order to teach full-time upon graduating. His exposure to Kozol's teaching pushed him to view the world as one in which educational opportunities are distributed inequitably, and motivated him to volunteer his time to try to lessen this inequity.

These examples offered by Bonnie and Lester represent just two examples of frame-changing experiences described by students in this study. Other students cited as critical to their development of a commitment to service-work their participation in a "four-day service orientation program" prior to their 'freshman week' at college. Still other students described independent reading— a philosophy text in one case, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in another—as pivotal to their development of a commitment to service-work. While the specific experiences varied, however, each of these fifteen students described an academic experience that deepened their commitment to service-work by altering the 'frame' through which they viewed their community *and/or* their conception of the role they could play as service-workers within this community.

Domain-Specific and Global-Interpretive Frame-Changing Experiences

As noted earlier in this paper, the students in this study described two different types of frame-changing experiences. Eleven of the students described frame-changing experiences that altered the frame through which they viewed their community, *and* their role within this community. Let me refer to these students for now as having experienced "Type I" frame-changing experiences. Four other students in the sample described themselves as having frame-changing experiences that altered their conception of the role they could play within their community, but *not* their view of the community itself. Let me refer to these students for now as having experienced "Type II" frame-changing experiences.

Sociologist Ervin Goffman's (1974) work on frame analysis is useful for better understanding these two types of frame-changing experiences. Goffman (1974) defines a frame as a "schemata of interpretation that enables individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large" (p21). In other words, a frame describes the way in which an individual views the world and his or her role in it. Snow, et al. (1986) build on Goffman's work by defining two different types of frames. A global-interpretive frame is a "new primary framework [that]…comes to function as a kind of master frame that interprets events and experiences in a new key" while a domain-specific frame is a "self-contained but substantial change in the way a particular domain of life is framed" (Snow et al, 1986, p474-475). If one analyzes the academic experiences described by the 15 students in this sample through the lens of Goffman (1974) and Snow et al.'s (1986) work, one can see that the "Type I" frame-changing experiences result in students altering their global-interpretive frames while "Type II" frame-changing experiences result in students altering a domain-specific frame.

Allow me to use the words of participants in this study to clarify the differences between these two types of frame-changing experiences. Esther, a college senior who volunteers at a local homeless shelter, describes her participation in the college's freshman week service-orientation program (nicknamed FUP, short for the First-Year Urban Program) as resulting in a global-interpretive frame-change. She explains that,

> Over the summer as a FUPee you are sent a packet. A packet of all these different readings. There are readings about gender oppression; there are things about racism, about prisons, about homelessness. And you are just told read this before you come to FUP. And during FUP there are discussion groups every couple of nights where you get together with a couple of leaders and a few other FUPees just to talk about your thoughts. It was amazing because I haven't even thought about some of this stuff. I hadn't thought about how oppression permeates our lives in ways that we don't think about. And FUP made me really, really angry. I left FUP saying oh my gosh!, I really have to do something.

In these words, Esther describes the articles she read as part of her university's service-orientation program as opening her eyes to the way in which "oppression permeates our lives" and led to her resolve "to do something [about it]." In this way, Esther's frame-changing experience can be seen as having altered both her conception of the world as well as her role within this world. Snow, et al. (1986) might describe this shift in the "master frame" through which Esther views the world as a shift in her global-interpretive frame. Ten other students from the study can be described as having experienced global-interpretive frame-changes as well.

In contrast, four of the students in this sample might be described as having had domain-specific frame-changing experiences. For these students, their frame-changing experiences did not lead to the wholesale adoption of a new worldview, but did alter their conception of the role they could play within this worldview. Take Esohe, for example, a college junior who volunteers more than 10 hours a week at a local public hospital. In her interview, Esohe describes herself as having entered college with a worldview shaped by her Christian upbringing, her parents' status as African immigrants, and her own experience as a middle-class African-American. The combination of these experiences led her to adopt a worldview or frame in which she believed that "everything is kind of connected" and "you are responsible for those behind you as well." She entered college with the goal of becoming a doctor. During her freshman year of college, however, Esohe took a seminar entitled "Understanding HIV and AIDS", which focused on the ways in which wealthy countries are connected economically, morally and health-wise to the fate of developing countries. This course did not change, but rather reinforced, Esohe's existing ideology concerning the connections between all people and the ways in which people need to support one another. However, this course did change Esohe's conception of the role that she could play within this worldview. As she explains,

That class made me not want to be a doctor anymore…It really got me fired up about social justice issues [and] want to go into public health. And I was kind of like, 'I don't want to be a doctor sitting in an office.' And so it kind of made me want to be a certain type of health care professional.

In this shift from aspiring doctor to aspiring public health worker, one can see that Esohe's overall ideology—her 'master frame'— has remained constant while a change has occurred within one domain of this master frame, specifically, her conception of herself as a professional service-worker. In this way, Esohe and three other students in this sample can be said to have experienced a change in a domain-specific frame rather than in their global-interpretive frames.
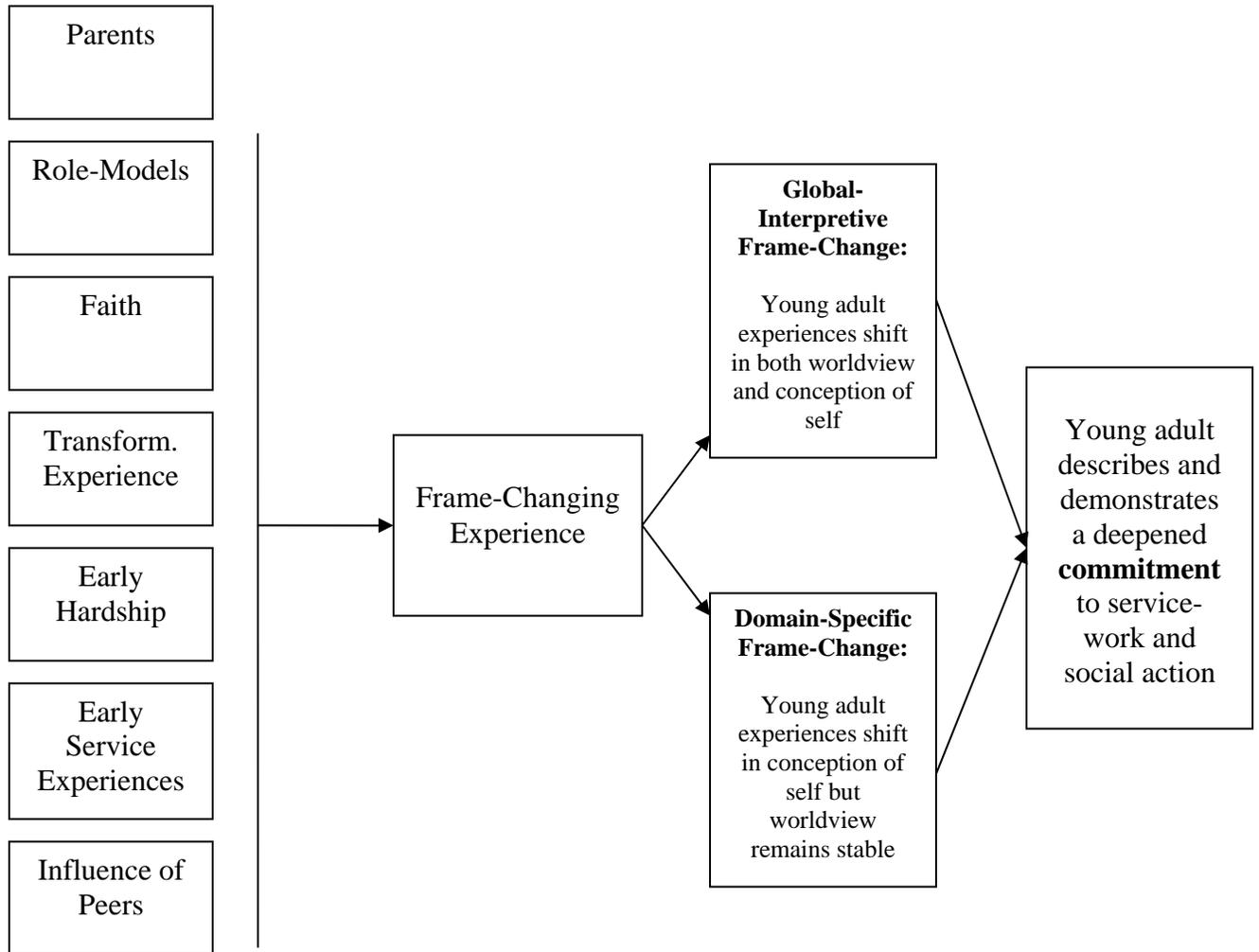
The Model

In the existing scholarship, the factors known to influence a commitment to service-work and social action include service-oriented parents and role-models; a strong religious faith; early service opportunities through school, religious and community organizations; the influence of one's peer group; experiences of early hardship; transformative experiences; and direct requests or invitations to participate in service opportunities (Rosenhan, 1970; Haste, 1983; Clary and Miller, 1986; Fitch, 1987; McAdams, 1989; Wuthnow, 1991; Serow, 1991; Tierney and Branch, 1992; Damon, 1992; Hart et al, 1995; Johnson et al, 1998; Sax and Astin, 1998; Fischman et al, 2001). In this study of committed young service-workers, all of these factors were found to have played a role in one or more of the participating college students' development of a commitment to service-work. This study also revealed, however, that 15 of the 20 students in the sample attributed their development of a commitment to service-work, in part, to a particular academic experience that had altered their conception of the world and/or their role within the world. In the figure below, I offer a conceptual model that positions these frame-changing experiences as a critical factor in catalyzing a young adult's existing 'ethic of care' into a full commitment to service-work. For the students in this study, these frame-changing experiences came in the form of Bible-studies, academic courses, a service-orientation program, and independent reading.

Let me state clearly here that I do not mean to suggest that a frame-changing experience in and of itself can account for the development of a commitment to service-work in young adults. Nor do I argue that the development of a commitment to service-work requires such an experience. As the Oliners (1988) note in their study of Holocaust rescuers, "The paths to virtue are neither uniform nor standardized" (p220). Rather, I propose here *one pathway* towards a commitment to service-work and social action.

FIGURE 1: **"Frame-Changing Experience" Model**

The factors below can instill in adolescents an 'ethic of care' and a *predisposition* for the development of a commitment to service-work and social action.

As can be seen in the figure above, the various factors that researchers have found to play a role in the development of a commitment to service-work remain integral to the model. Factors such as one's parents and role models, religious faith and early service experiences all play the role of instilling in children and adolescents what Gilligan (1982) refers to as an 'ethic of care' and, thus, a *predisposition* for development of a commitment to service-work. An 'ethic of care' is defined by Gilligan (1982) as a desire to minimize harm inflicted upon another person or people to the greatest extent possible. Such an orientation is an important pre-condition for allowing a commitment to service-work and social action to emerge. However, the model theorizes that for many young adults, a frame-changing experience is necessary to catalyze this existing 'ethic of care' into a full commitment to service-work and social action. For some young adults, this frame-changing experience results in a shift in both worldview and self-concept: in other words, a shift in their *global-interpretive* frame. For other young adults, the frame-

changing experience results in a shift in self-concept but not worldview: in other words; a shift in a *domain-specific* frame. In both cases, however, the result is a deepened commitment to service-work and social action.

Let me again utilize a student from the study to illustrate this proposed pathway. Louis, an Asian-American college senior who volunteers approximately 15 hours a week at a local homeless shelter, describes his faith in Christianity as "central to the way I think about service and justice" and as the "spiritual foundation" for his service-work. Yet, Louis also concedes that the depiction of social justice in the Bible is "limited in some ways." Specifically, Louis feels there generally "aren't pictures of activists in scripture." In this way, his participation in the university's first-year service-orientation program (FUP) served as an important catalyst in transforming the 'ethic of care' fostered by his religious beliefs into a full commitment to service-work. As Louis explains, growing up, "Service and activism were not presented [to me] as a framework of thinking, and I think that's what FUP really did for me." While he credits Christianity with providing the "spiritual foundation" for his desire to perform service, he notes that he "didn't really connect [faith] to service until FUP started getting me thinking about it more critically." Here, then, one can see how the framework that Louis adopted through his participation in the service-orientation program served to catalyze the existing 'ethic of care' instilled in him by his Christian upbringing.

Interpreting the Model

The proposed conceptual model shown above is built upon two theoretical frameworks: Ervin Goffman's (1974) work on frame analysis and Erik Erikson's (1968) work on identity development. Earlier in this paper, I utilized Goffman (1974) and Snow et al.'s (1986) work on interpretive frames to explore and distinguish between global-interpretive and domain-specific frame-changing experiences. Now, I turn to Erikson (1968) to explain how frame-changing experiences can fill an important role in the identity development process.

According to Erikson (1968), it is primarily during late adolescence and the college years that individuals focus on the development of their ego identity, the identity derived from their relationships with other persons, institutions and the social-historical context in which they live. To accomplish this ego identity development, Erikson (1968, 1965) explains that young adults "seek to identify with values and ideologies" that can counteract their "newly won individual identity with some communal solidarity" (p31, p24). Young adults seek out these ideologies in religious, political, ethical, philosophical, and literary systems.

Consider, then, through the lens of Erikson's identity development model, the frame-changing experiences of the fifteen students in this sample. Three of the students in this sample—Bonnie, Louis and Bill— describe experiences in Bible studies in which they came to see service and activism as, in Bonnie's words, "a central part of Christianity." These students can be regarded as having turned to a religious system for an ideology that gives their world a "semblance of continuity and coherence" (Youniss et

al., 1999, p250). Five other students in this sample—Esohe, Martin, Ashwin, Dara and Lester—describe frame-changing experiences that occurred in academic classes. For Esohe, Martin and Ashwin, these courses concerned the subject of public health while, for Lester and Dara, the subject matter concerned personal and societal choices in the modern world. Each of these classes, however, exposed these students to ethical and political systems and provided them with the opportunity to adopt new ideologies or make alterations to existing ones. The same can be said for the six students—Esther, Eric, Ann, Nancy, Deborah and Jeff— who describe their participation in the university's First-Year Urban Program as an experience critical to their development of a commitment to service-work. This service orientation program— through its reading packet, speakers, and discussions— exposed students to ethical and political ideologies that could be adopted wholesale or used to adjust existing frameworks. Finally, one student, Ty, describes a frame-changing experience based on his own independent study of philosophy. Citing philosopher Peter Singer to justify his desire to spend his extracurricular time "doing things that have some kind of meaning," Ty explained that he had taken on an "egalitarian" ideology as a result of his "end of high school mid-life crisis."

In all of these students' experiences, then, one can see the ego identity development process play out as described by Erikson (1968). As these youth move towards adulthood, they are breaking away from a strict adherence to their parents' ideologies and values while simultaneously seeking out alternative ideological systems that can organize their understanding of the world and their role in it. Such a process is likely going on every day of the year on high school and college campuses across the United States, but for 15 of the students in this sample—perhaps because of the 'ethic of care' instilled in them through parents, role-models, religious faith, early service experiences, etc.—the various ideological systems they sought out and adopted shared the common characteristic of framing service-work as a worthy and necessary endeavor.

Limitations

Having focused the majority of this paper on the 15 students in the sample who described frame-changing intellectual experiences as critical to their development of a commitment to service-work, let me acknowledge again that five students in this sample describe no such experience as having played a role in their development of a commitment to service-work. Clearly, then, one cannot reasonably argue—nor do I attempt in this paper to suggest— that the development of a commitment to service-work *requires* an academic or intellectual frame-changing experience. Rather, I propose here that one pathway towards a commitment to service-work involves an academic or intellectual frame-changing experience that catalyzes an 'ethic of care' already instilled in young adults through their service-oriented parents and role-models, religious faith, early service experiences, etc. The fact that the experiences of 15 of the 20 students in this sample seem to fit this proposed pathway make it, to my mind, worthy of further study.

A second limitation related to this study concerns the fact that all 20 students in this sample were drawn from the pool of service-workers at a single, highly competitive private university. It seems possible that subjects drawn from such a pool might be more influenced by intellectual or academic experiences, and more likely to have such experiences, than a sample of college students drawn from a more diverse range of American colleges and universities. Whether this proposed model, then, is equally useful in understanding the developmental pathway of a wider cross-section of college student volunteers requires further study.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to demonstrate the impact that academic experiences can have on the development of a commitment to service-work in young adults. Working to understand the role that these frame-changing experiences can play in the development of a young adult's commitment to service-work seems a particularly relevant topic of study for both secondary and university-level educators. Educators have little control over many of the factors and characteristics that researchers have found to influence a commitment to service-work— factors such as our students' parents, religious faith, early service experiences, etc. However, educators *can* play a role in shaping the academic and intellectual experiences that their students encounter in late adolescence. If such experiences are as important in catalyzing a commitment to service-work as this preliminary study would suggest, then both secondary schools and universities would do well to begin studying the curricula and pedagogy offered by the various Bible studies, academic courses and programs described as so meaningful by students in this study.

Marian Wright Edelman, activist and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, once said, "You just need to be a flea against injustice. Enough committed fleas biting strategically can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable and transform even the biggest nation." By supporting students in becoming committed service-workers and activists, educators increase the number of "fleas against injustice," both through the service-work these young adults engage in as students as well as the career paths along which these students' service experiences may lead them to travel.

Appendix A: The Study's Sample

Gender of Students	Number of Students
Male	10
Female	10

Age of Students	Number of Students
Sophomores	5
Juniors	6
Seniors	9

Religion of Students	Number of Students
Christian	9
Catholic	1
Jewish	1
Hindu	1
Buddhist	1
Atheist	1
Non-Practicing	6

Race/Ethnicity of Students	Number of Students
White or European-American	8
Black or African-American	2
Asian-American	4
Latino/a or Cuban-American	1
Indian or Southeast Asian-American	2
Middle Eastern-American	1
Filipino/a	1
Half-White, Half-Asian-American	1

Students' Home State/Province	Number of Students
Massachusetts	3
New Hampshire	1
New Jersey	1
Missouri	1
California	5
Virginia	1
West Virginia	1
Minnesota	1
Florida	1
Connecticut	1
Texas	2
Illinois	1
British Columbia	1

Factors Influencing Commitment to Service-Work	Number of Students Cited
Activist or Service-Oriented Parents	9
Service-Oriented Role-Models	13
Religious Faith	12
Early Service Opportunities	17
Influenced by Peers/Asked to Volunteer	13
Early Hardship/Transformative Experiences	5

Characteristics of Committed Volunteers	Number of Students Cited
Alignment of Personal and Moral Values	18
Emphasis on Human Relationships	16

Motivations for Volunteering	Number of Students Cited
Altruistic or Humanitarian Concern	20
Expansion or Conformity to Social Circle	13
Coping with Own Worth and Competence	6
Preparing for Career	7

Type of 'Frame-Changing' Experience	Number of Students Cited
Global-Interpretive	11
Domain-Specific	4
No Frame-Changing Experience	5

Type of 'Frame-Changing' Experience	Number of Students Cited
Bible Studies	3
Academic Classes	5
First-Year Urban Program	6
Independent Study	1
None	5

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