The Influence of Parental Support on the Community Service Learning Experiences of American College Students

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Abstract

This mixed methods study considered the relationship between the civic development of college students participating in the Serve Program at Ignatius University and the influence of these students’ parents. The Serve Program is a community service learning program that combines coursework in philosophy and theology with a year-long service project. Analyses of pre-post survey data revealed that students whose parents were highly supportive of their participation in the program demonstrated the greatest increases in public service motivation and expected political participation. Qualitative interviews with Serve participants revealed that highly supportive parents provided students with additional opportunities for reflection upon the readings, lectures, and service projects they were encountering through the Serve Program.

Key Words

civic development, community service learning, social justice, parents, philosophy

Word Count

7,340 words
Opportunities to engage in community service are growing increasingly widespread on American college campuses. According to the Higher Education Research Institute, 65% of American college freshmen reported that their respective universities offered opportunities to get involved in community service or community service learning (Liu et al, 2009). Likewise, the Corporation for National & Community Service reports that 3.3 million American college students engage in community service or community service learning each year (Dolte et al, 2006). The term, community service, refers to any type of volunteer work on behalf of an individual, organization or community while community service learning pairs community service with intentional learning goals and opportunities for reflection and analysis (Kendall, 1990).

A number of civic development scholars have lauded this surge in community service participation among college students (Damon, 2008; Flanagan et al, 1998; Youniss et al, 1997). According to Youniss and colleagues (1997), community service experiences can introduce college students “to the basic roles and processes required for adult civic engagement” and also help them to “incorporate civic involvement into their identity during an opportune [developmental] moment” (p. 622). Likewise, Flanagan (1998) has asserted that community service can provide opportunities for young adults to develop a sense of themselves as “civic actors” (p. 458).

While participation in community service during the college years can have a powerful effect upon students’ civic development, we also know that young adults do not arrive at university with entirely unformed civic identities. As outlined in this study’s literature review, a growing
body of scholarship details the relationship between parental factors and an individual’s commitment to public service, citizenship and social action. However, there is little research which considers the relationship between parental factors and a college student’s experience within a community service learning program. In other words, millions of college students in the United States and other countries are engaging in community service each year, but there remain important questions about how these experiences interact with the types of parents and childhood homes from which these students are coming. We consider these questions through our present study of participants in the Serve Program at Ignatius University.¹

The Serve Program

The Serve Program is a community service learning program sponsored by the philosophy department at Ignatius University—a competitive Catholic university in a large North American city. According to the Serve Program’s website:

The mission of the Serve 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 Serve Program is a year-long course in philosophy and theology entitled ‘Person and Social Responsibility.’ Students meet three times a week for lecture and participate in a weekly discussion section. Assigned readings include works from the history of philosophy (e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Boethius, Locke, Rousseau), from contemporary philosophers (e.g. Hannah Arendt, Michael Foucault, John Rawls, Charles Taylor), and from non-philosophers (Paulo Freire, Jonathan Kozol, Paul Farmer) whose writings touch upon themes (e.g. justice, education, inequity) considered also by philosophical authors. The weekly discussion section allows students to meet with Serve faculty members in smaller groups of 12-
15 students in order 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 the traditional academic course, all Ignatius students enrolled in the Serve Program are placed at one of more than 50 social service agencies. Their work in these service placements ranges from tutoring urban elementary school student to volunteering at a suicide hotline, from working in an emergency room to helping low-income families apply for affordable housing. As is evident in these examples, there was great variety in the types of service experiences in which students participated; however, all of the placements shared the commonality of serving individuals or groups contending with poverty. A second commonality was that all students devoted 10-12 hours a week to their respective service placements for the entire academic year.

In previous writings, we have demonstrated the impact of the Serve Program upon participating students’ public service motivation, expected political voice, and beliefs about the causes of poverty in comparison to a control group of Ignatius University students on the program’s wait list (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2011a, 2011b; Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, 2012). Now, we consider the effects of various parental factors upon the civic development of Serve participants. The research questions guiding this investigation were the following:

1. What is the relationship between the civic development of college students participating in the Serve Program and the civic beliefs and actions of their parents?

2. How do Serve participants describe and understand the impact of their parents’ beliefs and actions upon their own experiences within the Serve Program?

RESEARCH CONTEXT
In this review of literature, we outline the research literature on the relationship between parental factors and the two measures of interest in this study: public service motivation and expected political participation.

**Parental Factors and Public Service**

There is a growing body of scholarship about the impact of one’s parents upon an individual’s commitment to public service. In a national study of volunteering and giving in the United States, Hodgkinson (1995) reported that among adults whose parents had *both* volunteered when they were young, three out of four currently performed community service. Among adults who had *one* parent volunteer when they were young, three out of five currently performed some type of community service. In contrast, among adults whose parents did not volunteer, fewer than one in four currently performed any type of community service. In short, Hodgkinson found evidence of a strong relationship between an individual’s commitment to community service and that of his or her parents.

Likewise, in a study of fully committed versus partially committed volunteers, Rosenhan (1970) found that the fully committed volunteers were far more likely to have been raised by parents who were themselves fully committed to altruistic causes. Fitch (1987) and Tierney and Branch (1992) have also found that college students participating in community service are more likely than their classmates to have been raised by parents who themselves performed community service.

Other scholars have focused on the role of parental figures in sustaining a young adult’s commitment to community service. For example, Pancer and Pratt (1999) reported that a key factor in sustaining a young adult’s commitment to community service is the “presence of a
supportive family or social network” (p. 49). Likewise, in his work on the development of purpose during adolescence, Damon (2008) noted that youth engaged in purposeful work “do not need external inducements once they get started, but they do need support—from family first and foremost” (p. 99). Finally, Schervish (1995) found that many young adults involved in community service cite parents who modeled for them a strong sense of civic responsibility.

Another set of scholars have focused on the relationship between public service motivation and parental levels of education. Specifically, a number of scholars have reported a significant positive relationship between parent education level and youth participation in community service (Kleiner & Chapman, 2000; McKinney, 2002; Schmidt et al, 2007). In other words, youth with highly educated parents are more likely than their peers to engage in community service in high school and college. These findings correspond with scholarship which has found youth from affluent families to be more involved in community service opportunities than youth from lower socioeconomic levels (Roker et al, 1999; Schervish, 1995). In explaining these patterns, scholars have noted that low-income youth often lack the discretionary resources required to participate in community service opportunities. In short, then, a growing body of scholarship has characterized a number of different parental factors as predictive of their children’s commitment to community service.

**Parental Factors and Political Participation**

There is also a body of scholarship describing the relationship between parental factors and various forms of political participation. Perhaps the most robust research in this area has come from analyses of international survey data on civic education collected by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). From analyses of these data,
Torney-Purta and Richardson (2005) reported a positive relationship between family discussions of political issues and predicted voting intent. In other words, youth from families who frequently engage in political discussions are more likely to express an intention of voting in local and national elections than youth from families with lower levels of political discussion.

Torney-Purta and Richardson (2005) have also reported a relationship between family political discussions and expected participation in non-violent protest. According to these scholars, youth from families that frequently engage in political discussion are more likely than their peers to anticipate participating in various forms of non-violent protest. Interestingly, Torney-Purta and Richardson found that while voting intent was also predicted by a number of school factors, intention to participate in non-violent protest was only predicted by parental factors.

Andolina and colleagues (2003) have also reported that youth who grow up in households where there is significant discussion of politics and political issues are more likely than their peers to be involved in political activities. According to these scholars, “By talking about politics, families teach their children that it is important to pay attention to the world around them—and to take the next step of doing something” (p. 277). In another finding that echoes those by Torney-Purta and Richardson (2005), Andolina and colleagues reported that youth with politically engaged parental figures “are also more attentive to news of politics and government and more likely to participate in boycotts or buycotts” (p. 277). Likewise, Weissbourd (2009) has reported that “One of the strongest predictors of voting are young adults’ memories of their parents voting, discussing with parents about elections, and accompanying parents to the polls” (p. 172). In short, several scholars have reported a positive relationship between youth growing up in politically engaged families and the future levels of civic engagement of these youth.
In his classic study of college student activists who participated in the 1964 Freedom Summer civil rights campaign in Mississippi, USA, McAdam (1988) reported that the majority of these college students described their parents as not only supportive of their efforts as activists but as the role-models who had fostered their activism in the first place. According to McAdam, “Far from using Freedom Summer as a vehicle for rebellion against parents, the applicant seemed to be acting in accordance with values learned at home” (p. 49). In fact, McAdam reported that nearly three fourths of the college students interviewed about their participation in the Freedom Summer campaign “explicitly acknowledged the positive role that either or both of their parents played in shaping the values that prompted them to apply” (p. 49). Very few characterized their political activism as a form of resistance to the values or politics of their families. Such a finding is supported by other scholarship on activism in young adulthood (Block et al, 1969; Daloz Parks, 2000; Flacks, 1971; Keniston, 1968). For example, Daloz Parks (2000) has reported that individuals who express high levels of commitment to the ‘common good’ often report close relationships with their parents and other family members.

Recall from the preceding section of this literature review that researchers have found youth participation in community service to be positively correlated with both parental education level and income level (Kleiner & Chapman, 1999; McKinney, 2002; Schmidt et al, 2007). Similarly, in his study of college students who had participated in the Freedom Summer civil rights campaign, McAdam (1988) reported that the majority of these students came from affluent families. According to McAdam, “Students, especially those drawn from privileged classes, are simply free to a unique degree of constraints that tend to make activism too time consuming or risky for other groups to engage in” (p. 44). Likewise, in their analysis of IEA civic education
data, Torney-Purta and colleagues (1999) reported that students raised in homes with large numbers of books demonstrated higher levels of civic knowledge than did their peers from homes with fewer books. If the number of books within a household can be regarded as a reasonable proxy for household income, then once again parental income level would seem to be a variable predictive of youth civic engagement.

In short, there is a growing body of scholarship documenting a significant relationship between parental factors and an individual’s commitment to public service, citizenship, and social action. That said, our review of the research literature did not reveal any scholarship on the relationship between parental factors and how college students experience a community service or community service learning program. In other words, there seems to be little scholarship which considers how the experiences of the millions of college students participating in community service every year are impacted by the types of parents and childhood homes from which they are coming. This question was the focus of the present study.

**METHODS**

**Sample Characteristics**

This study’s participants consisted of 362 Ignatius University students enrolled in the Serve program during the 2008-2009 academic year. This group was composed of 222 female students and 140 male students. Three hundred and twenty-one Serve participants were sophomores at Ignatius University, 28 were freshmen, and 13 were juniors. The majority of Serve participants identified as White (245) with smaller numbers of students identifying as African American (21), Asian American (40), Latino (30), multi-racial (16) and other (10). Finally, as would be expected at a Catholic university, the majority of students identified as Catholic (215) with smaller number of students identifying as Protestant (81), Jewish (6), Buddhist (5), Hindu (7), Muslim
(3) and no religion or other (45). The impact upon generalizability of carrying out this study at an elite Catholic university is taken up in the *Discussion*.

**Data Collection**

All of the participating students completed surveys in September of 2008 (Time 1) and then in May of 2009 (Time 2) that sought to assess participating students’ commitment to public service and expected political participation. Specifically, both surveys utilized measures adapted from a number of scales including Perry’s (1996) Public Service Motivation scale and Colby’s (2007) Conventional Electoral Activities scale.

Three hundred and eighty-six Serve participants completed the original survey administered in September of 2008 (Time 1), and then 362 of these students completed the follow-up survey administered in May of 2009 (Time 2). This high participation rate was due to the Serve faculty mandating completion of the surveys as a course requirement.

Qualitative interviews were also conducted in April of 2009 with a diverse group of 30 Ignatius University students enrolled in the Serve program. To select these 30 participants, we requested that the Ignatius University faculty members who teach in the Serve Program nominate 3-4 students apiece who could offer diverse perspectives on the Serve Program. These students were then contacted and invited to participate in an interview about their experiences in the program. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was sufficiently structured to ensure that questions posed to students were open-ended, clear, and not overly complex (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). However, the protocol also allowed the flexibility to pose what Patton (1990) refers to as probes or follow-up questions.

**Measures**
The Public Service Motivation measure consisted of five survey items adapted from Perry’s (1996) Public Service Motivation scale. These survey items solicited participants’ perspective about the importance of engaging in community service. For example, one item read: “Community service is something very important to me.” Another item read: “I have an obligation to look after those less well off.” Participants responded to these items along a 5-point Likert scale in which “1” represented strong disagreement with the given statement and a “5” represented strong agreement. A Principal Components Analysis (PCA) indicated that one key construct appeared to be measured by the Public Service Motivation measure, with the first component accounting for 44% of the standardized units of variance (eigenvalue = 2.23) and showing acceptable internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .68$) (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). A high score on the 5-point scale is associated with a strong commitment to engaging in public service while a lower score is associated with a weaker commitment to public service.

The Expected Political Participation measure consisted of five survey items adapted from Colby’s (2007) Conventional Electoral Activities scale. Participants expressed their likelihood along a 5-point scale of participating now or in the future in a number of activities that included voting in national and local elections, campaigning for a political candidate or cause, and donating money to a political campaign. A Principal Components Analysis (PCA) indicated that one key construct appeared to be measured by the Expected Political Participation measure, with the first component accounting for 48% of the standardized units of variance (eigenvalue = 2.44) and showing good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .73$). A high score on the 5-point scale for each of these items is associated with a high expectation of participation in the
given activity while a low score is associated with skepticism about the likelihood of such participation.

Finally, this study’s survey tool also included four survey items requesting information from Serve participants about their parents. Specifically, we asked students about whether or not their parents donated money to charity, engaged in community service, worked in service-oriented professions, and were enthusiastic about their child’s participation in the Serve Program. The first three of these items called for dichotomous yes/no responses while the final item asked participants to rate their parents’ enthusiasm for their participation in the Serve Program along a 5-point Likert scale.

**Quantitative Analysis**

In order to analyze our pre-post survey data, we fit an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model to assess the ability of several parental variables to predict Serve participants’ shifts in public service motivation and expected political participation. We also considered the effect of several potential demographic moderators upon these outcome variables.

First, preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, or homoscedasticity. Next, we fit a baseline covariate model to control for any confounding effects of students’ gender, religiosity, social class, political orientation, and pre-Serve scores on the public service motivation and expected political participation measures. Given the statistically null findings for a number of these control variables on the outcome, we removed them for parsimony in subsequent models.

We then added to the model the parental variables of interest: parental participation in community service, parental contributions to charity, parental engagement in service-oriented
professions, and parental enthusiasm for the Serve Program. Once again, non-significant variables were removed for parsimony from the fitted model. Finally, we tested for interactions between these parental variables and participants’ pre-Serve public service motivation and expected political participation. The full taxonomy of fitted models for both measures are presented in Appendix A.

**Qualitative Analysis**

The qualitative interviews with 30 Serve participants were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Our analysis of these interviews was an iterative process consistent with research methods focused on emic perspectives—descriptions of behaviors or beliefs by participants in language that is culturally specific to those participants (Becker, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, our research team worked collaboratively to develop a codebook based on the different ways in which participants in the Serve Program described their motivation for participation in Serve, their experiences within the Serve Program, the response of family and friends to this participation, and their perception of the program’s impact upon their beliefs and values.

Each qualitative interview was coded independently by two members of the research team. Team members then compared their work on each interview transcript, re-coded, and then compared again until all coding discrepancies were resolved. In order to facilitate the identification of patterns and themes cutting across the qualitative interviews, our research team then developed 2-3 page narrative profiles for all 30 students who had participated in qualitative interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1999). The results presented below focus on themes and patterns that emerged from interviewed students’ descriptions of their parents’ attitudes regarding their participation in the Serve Program.
RESULTS

Public Service Motivation

The descriptive statistics for the total mean scores of all Serve participants on the Public Service motivation (PSM) measure are presented in Table 1 below.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

As is evident in Table 1, the Ignatius University students participating in the Serve Program demonstrated statistically significant increases (p < .05) over the course of the 2008-09 academic year in their commitment to performing public service. Moreover, OLS regression revealed a significant relationship between Serve participant’s post-Serve PSM scores and parental support for their participation in the program (βPARENT SUPPORT = .11, p < .0001). Specifically, the Serve participants who demonstrated the largest shifts in public service motivation over the course of the 2008-09 academic year were also the students who perceived their parents to be most enthusiastic about their participation in the program. As is evident in Table 2 below, perceived parental support was the only parental predictor variable that remained significant in the final model. In other words, we found perceived parental support to be a stronger predictor of students’ public service motivation than whether or not a student’s parents donated money to charity, engaged in community service, or worked in service-oriented professions.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

One can also see in Table 2 above that Serve participants’ gender and political orientation were also significant predictors of students’ public service motivation. Specifically, students who identified as female and politically liberal demonstrated, on average, larger shifts in public
service motivation than their male and politically conservative classmates. The deeper interest of women in public service has been well documented by numerous scholars (Nolin et al., 1997; Youniss et al., 1999), and it is notable as well that women outnumber men in the Serve Program by more than 50%. The scholarship is less clear-cut on the relationship between public service motivation and political orientation; however, Lakoff (1996) has reported that political liberals express greater concern and empathy for the poor than do political conservatives. Perhaps the fact that the Serve Program’s community service placements focused on issues of poverty explains the greater shifts in public service motivation of the program’s politically liberal participants.

**Expected Political Participation**

The descriptive statistics for the total mean scores of all Serve participants on the Expected Political Participation (EPP) measure are presented in Table 1 above. As can be seen in Table 1, the Ignatius University students in the Serve Program also demonstrated significant (p < .05) increases over the course of the 2008-09 academic year in their expected political participation.

Fitting a series of OLS regression models also revealed a significant relationship between students’ shifts in expected political participation and parental support for their engagement in the Serve Program (β\(_{\text{PARENT SUPPORT}}\) = .10, p < .003). In other words, the students who demonstrated the largest shifts in expected political participation were also the students who characterized their parents as most enthusiastic about their participation in the Serve Program. Once again, this perceived parental support variable proved to be a stronger predictor of students’ expected political participation than whether or not their parents engaged in community service, donated money to charity, or worked in service-oriented professions. In fact, in our final
fitted model presented in Table 3 below, the only two variables that significantly predicted students’ post-Serve Expected Political Participation was perceived parental support and students’ pre-Serve levels of expected political participation. As for why parents’ enthusiasm (or lack thereof) for their children’s participation in the Serve Program demonstrated such a strong relationship with these measures of civic development, we turn to our qualitative interviews with Serve participants.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Parents’ Perceptions of the Serve Program

Of the 30 students from the Serve Program who participated in qualitative interviews, ten characterized their parents as supportive of their participation in Serve; six characterized their parents as unsupportive; and five described their parents as expressing safety concerns related to their participation in Serve (the other nine interviewed students did not characterize their parents as either supportive or unsupportive of their Serve participation). Here, we consider each of these groups in turn.

Supportive of Serve Participation

Ten Serve participants characterized their parents as supportive of their participation in the Serve Program. For example, Abigail explained that “My mom just recently started to learn how to text [message], and she will text me good luck with my girl today.” Because Abigail encountered significant resistance from the nine-year-old girl she was tutoring, she greatly appreciated this show of support from her mother. A second student, Liza, explained that when she went home on vacation during the 2008-09 academic year, her parents exorted her to talk about her experiences in the Serve Program with her younger brother and sister. As Liza explained,
“They’re interested, and my mom’s always like, ‘Tell your brother about this, tell your sister.’” Liza expressed pride in being held up by her parents as an example to her younger siblings of someone engaged in socially responsible behavior.

Other students described their parents as engaging in discussion with them of the ideas raised in the Serve Program. For example, Angela loaned her mother one of the Serve Program’s assigned theological texts, Himes’ Doing the Truth in Love. According to Angela, “I told her, ‘This is an awesome book, you need to read it.’ My mom thought it was great.” Likewise, Eddie explained that, “My dad was a philosophy major, so mainly [we’re] discussing my papers or something like that. Some of the stuff he hasn’t read, some of the stuff he has. So it’s kind of cool.” By expressing genuine interest in the academic study in which their children were engaging, these parents simultaneously expressed support for their children’s decision to participate in the Serve Program.

Another group of students described meaningful conversations in which they had engaged with their parents about their community service experiences in the Serve Program. For example, Corey explained that “Both my parents are very proud of what I’m trying to do at my service placement. One, because of the service itself, and two because I’ve come back and talked about these experiences, and they can see that I’ve grown from them.” Likewise, Marisa explained that “My dad and I had this very intense conversation when I was home over winter break, and he was just really impressed with what we were doing, which was really cool.” Finally, Donald described a dinner party he had attended with his parents in which he drew upon his learning from the Serve Program to challenge the political opinions offered by a businessman at the dinner. According to Donald, “My mom under the dinner table kind of patted my leg, like
encouraging me to keep going.” Donald experienced this quiet show of support as an indicator of
his mother’s pride in the content he was learning and the principles he was willing to champion.

**Parental Support and Student Learning**

Of the 10 Serve participants who characterized their parents as supportive of their participation
in the Serve Program, six described conversations with their parents that served as powerful
opportunities for learning. For example, recall from the preceding section that Marisa
characterized herself as engaging in a “very intense conversation” about the Serve Program with
her father over her winter break. In this conversation, Marisa and her father discussed ways in
which the company for which he worked offered its employees opportunities to participate in
public service. According to Marisa:

> He works at GE Capital, and it was kind of cool because he has done Habitat for
> Humanity through GE, and I think that is awesome because… I was under the
> assumption you get a job and just come to work, so now it is like I want to be able to
> integrate other things into work. I want to be able to do not just your typical nice job; I
> want to be able to have an effect on the community around me.

In this explanation, one can see that the interest Marisa’s father expressed in his daughter’s
participation in the Serve Program allowed for a conversation that impacted her career
aspirations.

Other Serve participants characterized themselves as engaging in similar types of conversations
with their families about the Serve Program. For example, Namwali explained that when she
talked to her parents about the poverty and inequity she witnessed at her community service
placement, “It is kind of a conversation like, ‘Oh yeah, this happens here,’ and they tell me
examples where else they see it and their experiences.” For Namwali, conversations with her
family about what she had witnessed at her service placement offered reinforcement of her conclusions as well as additional examples for her to consider.

A third Serve participant, Sam, explained that “I’ve called my parents sometimes to bounce off them things that have troubled me in our [class] discussions.” As an example, Sam described a discussion from his Serve class about teenage pregnancy in impoverished communities which he later discussed at length with his father. Another student, Frank, explained that, when he wanted to talk about his learning in the Serve Program, he found that his parents served as better sounding boards than his friends. According to Frank, “With my parents I have those conversations. My parents are kind of hippies so they are all over it, but it is interesting. With a lot of kids here [at Ignatius University], it is I would say a fairly conservative place for a liberal arts campus, so that is kind of a tense conversation.” In short, a number of students found their parents to be the most engaged and willing audience with whom they could talk about their learning and experiences in the Serve Program.

Finally, another Serve participant, Donald, credited his father with significantly impacting the lens through which he viewed his Serve community service placement tutoring low-income adolescents. According to Donald:

At first I was expecting to send these kids to college, put them on the honor role, but then I realized the motivation level for these kids wouldn’t always allow that, and so during the winter I kind of found myself really discouraged and not really looking forward to Serve anymore. And then I had a conversation with my dad who works with disadvantaged youth in the public school systems in Connecticut, and he said it’s not always about them getting the A. Yes, you want to see improvement, but it is more about establishing positive relationships with the kids that they might not have elsewhere. So since then I’ve had like a new outlook on the situation, and I’ve enjoyed my time more there.
In this explanation, Donald credited his father with helping him to reframe his understanding of the tutoring in which he was engaged and, as a result, improving his attitude and enthusiasm for these tutoring sessions.

**Leery of Serve Participation**

Six of the interviewed Serve participants characterized their parents as explicitly unsupportive of their participation in the Serve Program. Marcus explained that “My dad doesn’t like it. He’s kind of always been more focused on individual success, kind of like, ‘Why are you going to help them?’” Likewise, Alex explained that “My dad wasn’t too sure about it because he was concerned about how it would affect my workload and everything.” Finally, Annie explained:

> My parents have trouble understanding why I do this…So I rarely find myself talking about it because we often get into fights. They see how much time it takes; they see me going to bed late because I don’t have time to do my homework during the day so I have to stay up late. They feel like the costs outweigh the benefits.

All of these students’ parents expressed concern about their children spending too much time focused on the welfare of others rather than their own wellbeing.

Another student, Cecelia, described her father as offering a particularly negative response to her participation in the Serve Program. As Cecelia explained:

> When I told him over Thanksgiving break that I was doing it, he was livid. Yeah, I mean I think it is part of being a firefighter, and he grew up in Queens, was a bartender. He is very informed with that stuff. I think he has a skewed perception of homeless people. He has always told me never go near them. We got into a yelling match in the car on Thanksgiving. He was like “How dare they charge $50,000 dollars for you to go to school there?”…So I don’t usually talk that much [about Serve] either to friends and family at home.

In this explanation, Cecelia described her father’s frustration that his daughter’s academic coursework involved community service. His objections to her participation ranged from frustration over the cost of the college experience to displeasure that she was interacting with the
homeless through her service placement at a local soup kitchen. While Cecelia described her father’s frustration in the most colorful terms, he was by no means the only parent to express such dissatisfaction with the Serve Program. Serve participant Eddie noted that his Serve professor had admitted to the class that every year he spoke with parents “who are like, ‘Wait, I’m paying for my kid to go into ‘the hood’ and work with some crack head that is taking my tax money.’” In short, the six Serve participants who described their parents’ displeasure with the Serve Program were by no means aberrational.

Another five Serve participants characterized their parents as concerned about safety issues related to the Serve Program’s community service placements. For example, Selena—whose service placement entailed an overnight shift at a women’s homeless shelter—explained that “My mom, she is definitely nervous. She didn’t want me to do it at all. I think that if I said I was going during the day to an after school program [instead], she would still be really hesitant about me going.” Another student, Lori, admitted similarly that her parents “were kind of worried about me going alone to the poorer parts of the city.” Finally, Joseph added that his parents “were worried about my safety a decent amount, especially at the beginning, and I was like, this is ridiculous. It’s literally 10 minutes away from campus, so it’s not a big deal…But, yeah, they were worried for my well-being and my health and everything.” In short, a number of parents who may not have possessed ideological objections to the Serve Program did have concerns about their children’s safety while participating in the community service component of the program.

**DISCUSSION**

This study considered the relationship between the civic development of Serve participants and the influence of these students’ parents. Our analysis of pre-post survey data revealed evidence
of a statistically significant relationship between students’ shifts in public service motivation, expected political participation, and their parents’ support for their participation in the Serve Program. In short, students who characterized their parents as most supportive of their participation in the Serve program demonstrated the largest increases in their commitment to public service and in their expectations about future political participation.

Previous scholarship has considered the influence of one’s parents upon an individual’s commitment to public service (Hodgkinson, 1995), citizenship (Torney-Purta & Richardson, 1995) and social action (Andolina et al, 2003). Recall, for example, that Pancer and Pratt (1999) cited “a supportive family or social network” as a key factor in sustaining a young person’s commitment to public service. Likewise, McAdam (1988) reported that civil rights activists commonly cited the values learned from their parents as the inspiration underlying their activism.

What was surprising about the results of this study, however, was that ‘parental support for Serve’ proved to be a stronger predictor of students’ shifts in public service motivation and expected political participation than any other parental variable. Specifically, parental attitudes towards the Serve Program served as a better predictor of students’ increases in civic development than did their parents’ profession, participation in community service or commitment to philanthropy.

Such a finding was by no means an intuitive one. As noted in this paper’s Literature Review, a number of researchers have reported parental participation in community service and in service-oriented professions to be a powerful predictor of their children’s commitment to public service (Fitch, 1987; Hodgkinson, 1995; Rosenhan, 1970; Tierney & Branch, 1992). However, our qualitative interviews with Serve participants offered insight into the relationship between civic
development and parental support by revealing the full range of parental responses to students’ participation in the Serve Program. Recall that Ignatius University student Angela described her mother’s decision to read one of the Serve Program’s assigned texts, and Eddie discussed papers he had written for the Serve Program with his father. Other students such as Marisa and Liza described their parents’ pride at their participation in the community service component of the Serve Program. In contrast, students such as Marcus and Annie described their parents as displeased by the time their children were spending engaged in service rather than on traditional academic coursework, and Cecelia’s father actually grew “livid” that his tuition dollars were paying for his daughter to volunteer at a soup kitchen.

In considering these disparate responses to the Serve Program, a possible explanation for the relationship between students’ civic development and parental support emerges. Specifically, the students whose parents were enthusiastic about their participation in the Serve Program were able to engage in important conversations with their parents about what they were learning. Recall, for example, that Marisa credited a conversation with her father about the Serve Program as solidifying her desire for her future professional work to have a positive effect upon the community. In this conversation, Marisa’s father shared with his daughter that he conceived of his own career as a businessman as including both financial and pro-social objectives. In so doing, he modeled Weissbourd’s (2009) call to parents to “consider sharing [with college-age children] how our own ambitions and self-concerns are laced together with our altruism and compassion” (p. 172).

Another Serve participant, Donald, had begun to grow discouraged with his community service placement when a conversation with his father helped him to reframe the experience. In this
conversation, Taylor’s father also played a role which Weissbourd (2009) has characterized as crucial to the cultivation of idealism in young adults. According to Weissbourd, “As parents and mentors, we need to help young people work through their disillusionment as they come to learn more about the world in all its stubborn complexity, so that they don’t swing from wide-eyed idealism to dark pessimism” (p. 172). Donald credited his conversation with his father with warding off just such “dark pessimism.”

For Serve participants, these conversations with parents represented powerful learning experiences. On the most basic level, these conversations represented additional opportunities for Serve participants to reflect upon their learning in the Serve Program. Moreover, these conversations could be characterized as one-on-one tutorials with the “teachers” who knew these students best and whose opinions mattered to them the most. This description of students’ parents is underscored by scholarship which has found one of the defining characteristics of the American millennial generation to be close ties with parents (Clydesdale, 2007; Strauss & Howe, 2004; Twenge, 2006). In other words, many of the Ignatius students engaged in the Serve Program are likely quite accustomed to sharing and processing new experiences with their parents.

In contrast, the students whose parents were not supportive of their participation in the Serve Program lacked these opportunities for learning and reflection. For example, Alex, whose father worried about the effect of the Serve Program upon his son’s academic efforts, characterized his father as “not too interested” in hearing about his experiences in the program. A number of other Serve participants described themselves as explicitly striving not to talk about the Serve Program in the presence of their parents. For example, recall Annie’s explanation that “My parents have
trouble understanding why I do this…So I rarely find myself talking about it because we often get into fights.” Likewise, Cecelia explained that “I don’t usually talk that much [about Serve] either to friends and family at home.” The effect of this silencing can be considered on two levels. At the most basic level, these students simply had fewer opportunities to reflect upon their learning in the Serve Program than did their classmates with more supportive parents. Moreover, these students missed out on the opportunity to reflect upon their learning with the individuals most knowledgeable about the context from which they were coming, and whose opinions they likely held in high esteem.

If this explanation for the significant relationship between parental support and civic development is a plausible one, then our study holds important implications for both parents and educators. First, it is crucial for parents to understand that their interactions and conversations with their college-age children serve as integral ingredients in their children’s civic development. The college students in our study who demonstrated the greatest gains in public service motivation and expected political participation were the students with parents who expressed pride in their children’s participation in community service, who engaged in discussions with their children about the social issues raised by these community service experiences, and who described to their children the role of social responsibility in their own professional endeavors. Willingness to engage in these types of conversations served as a stronger predictor of students’ increases in civic development than a host of other factors that included parental participation in community service, service-oriented careers or philanthropic endeavors.

**Limitations**

This mixed methods study offers the intriguing possibility that parental support plays an important role in the ability of a university-based community service learning experience to exert
a meaningful impact upon the civic development of participating college students. However, there are several limitations to this study that will need to be addressed in future research efforts. Perhaps this study’s greatest limitation is that our triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data is somewhat speculative. While there is a clear and significant relationship between parental support and students’ increases in public service motivation and expected political participation, the correlational nature of this study makes it impossible to demonstrate a causal relationship between these factors. Future research efforts would also benefit from independently surveying parents about their support of their children’s participation in a community service learning program rather than relying upon students’ perceptions of their parents’ support. Such an effort would also benefit from surveying parents about their political orientation and other attitudes in order to ensure that ‘parental support’ is not simply a proxy for these other variables.

The generalizability of this study’s results may also be limited by the particular context in which the study was carried out. Specifically, Ignatius University is a competitive Catholic University with a student body comprised predominantly of students who identify as White and Catholic. As a result of these characteristics, this study’s findings cannot be assumed to be generalizable to all American college students. Perhaps a program that includes readings in theology finds a more receptive audience among students who have chosen to attend a university with a religious affiliation. Perhaps the social justice mission of the Serve Program receives greater reinforcement at an institution such as Ignatius University that cites the ethical development of its students as part of its core mission. In short, more research in more diverse contexts will be necessary to draw firm conclusions about the relationship between the experiences of American college students participating in community service learning and the support of their parents.
**Implications**

There is widespread consensus in the service-learning scholarship that opportunities for reflection are a key component of an impactful community service experience (Astin et al., 2000; Colby et al., 2007; Seider, 2007). Virtually all of this scholarship has focused on opportunities for reflection provided by educators; however, our study suggests that parents have a critical role to play as well in supporting their children’s reflection about their community service experiences. Perhaps, then, educators leading community service learning programs should consider mechanisms by which they can explicitly provide a role for the parents of participating youth. For example, faculty leading such a program could provide parents with an overview of the community service experiences in which their children will be engaging as well as the syllabi detailing the texts that youth will be reading. Even making such documents accessible to parents on a course website could greatly facilitate parents’ ability to engage their college-age children in discussion about their service-learning experiences. In so doing, university faculty can facilitate the ability of their students’ parents to fulfill what Weissbourd (2009) characterizes as one of the key responsibilities of parenthood: “creating conditions in our homes in which idealism can take root” (p. 172).
Appendix A:

Public Service Motivation

*Taxonomy of fitted multi-level models describing the relationship between Ignatius University students’ public service motivation and their parents’ support for their participation in the SERVE Program (n students = 362)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Model 1 Baseline Model</th>
<th>Model 2 Demographic Characteristics</th>
<th>Model 3 Adds Parental Characteristics</th>
<th>Model 4 Interaction Effects</th>
<th>Model 5 Final Fitted Model</th>
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*p < .10, **p<.05, ***p<.01, ****p<.001


Appendix A Continued

Expected Political Participation

*Taxonomy of fitted multi-level models describing the relationship between Ignatius University students’ public service motivation and their parents’ support for their participation in the SERVE Program (n students = 362)*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Model 1 Baseline Model</th>
<th>Model 2 Demographic Characteristics</th>
<th>Model 3 Adds Parental Characteristics</th>
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*p < .10. **p<.05. ***p<.01. ****p<.001
### TABLES TO BE INSERTED INTO MANUSCRIPT

#### Table 1. Summary statistics for mean public service motivation and expected political participation of Ignatius University students participating in the Serve Program (n = 362)

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#### Table 2. Final fitted model for relationship between public service motivation of Serve participants and their parents’ support for their participation in Serve, controlling for pre-Serve PSM (n = 362)

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$R^2 = .44$

#### Table 3. Final fitted model for relationship between expected political participation of Serve participants and their parents’ support for their participation in Serve, controlling for pre-intervention EPP (n = 362)

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$R^2 = .39$
References


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1 Ignatius University, the Serve Program, and all students in this paper are referred to by pseudonyms.

2 We initially fit a multi-level regression model to account for the fact that our 362 Serve participants were nested within ‘sections’ taught by 12 different philosophy and theology faculty. However, when none of our ‘section-level’ (level 2) variables were found to be significant in this model, we instead fit the more parsimonious OLS regression model described here.