

## Complicating College Students' Conception of the American Dream through Community Service Learning

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*This study considered the impact of the SERVE Program upon participating college students' belief in the American Dream. The SERVE Program is a community service learning program sponsored by the philosophy and theology departments at Ignatius University. Using a mixed-methods approach, the authors found that participating students demonstrated significant declines in their belief in the American Dream in comparison to a randomly assigned control group. Qualitative interviews revealed that the program exerted this influence, in part, by providing participants with diverse opportunities to think critically about the availability of opportunity in the United States.*

Hochschild (1995) has defined the American Dream as “the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it—material or otherwise— through their own efforts” (p. 6). A belief in this promise is one of the most deeply held beliefs in American culture regardless of ethnicity, class status, or geography (Bullock & Lott, 2001; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). In their classic study of Americans' beliefs about inequality, Kluegel and Smith found that an astounding 90% of Americans believed their own opportunities for economic success to be equal to or better than the average American. More recently, Scott and Leonhardt (2005) found that 75% of Americans believed (incorrectly) that the chances of moving up in class status have risen over the past thirty years. Along similar lines, 71% of Americans surveyed for the 2006 World Values Survey expressed their belief that anyone can escape poverty if he or she works hard enough (Gudrais, 2008). In short, the American Dream is one of the (if not the) most firmly entrenched memes in American culture.

Faith in America's opportunity structure is particularly strong among contemporary emerging adults (Brooks, 2001; Seider, 2008a; Twenge, 2006). As Levine and Cureton (1998) noted in their study of the millennial generation, “No generation has wanted to believe in the American Dream more than current undergraduates” (p. 135). Such an optimistic outlook has numerous benefits; however, young adults who express confidence in the availability of personal opportunity in the United States are less likely to recognize structural and societal barriers to economic success (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Howard, 2008). They are also less likely to conceive of them-

selves as having a role to play in addressing these barriers (Damon, 2008; Seider, 2008b). In short, emerging adults who believe all Americans have unfettered access to the American Dream have little reason to conceive of themselves as responsible for the wellbeing of struggling fellow Americans.

The SERVE Program<sup>1</sup> at Ignatius University seeks to foster in its participants just such a sense of responsibility for fellow citizens. Ignatius University is a competitive Catholic university in a large American city. The SERVE Program is a service-learning program that began in 1970 as a joint venture between Ignatius University's philosophy and theology departments. According to the 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 ‘Individual and Social Responsibility.’ Students meet twice a week for lecture and participate in a weekly discussion section. While the content of the course varies somewhat across the 12 philosophy and theology faculty members who teach in the SERVE program, typical readings include works by Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Foucault, Freire, Malcolm X,

Shipler and Kozol. A SERVE syllabus from the 2008-09 academic year is available as Appendix A.

In addition to this academic course, all Ignatius University students enrolled in the SERVE Program choose a community service project from a menu of more than 50 choices that include tutoring urban elementary school students, volunteering at a suicide hotline, working in an emergency room, helping low-income families apply for affordable housing, and tutoring prison inmates working towards their GED's. Students devote 10 hours a week to their respective placements for the entire academic year.

Participation in the SERVE Program fulfills Ignatius University's extensive philosophy and theology requirements. As a result, every year nearly 500 Ignatius University students express interest in the approximately 400 places available in the program. Such a large number of participants, as well as the SERVE Program's process of filling its places via a randomized registration lottery, enabled this study to yield robust insights about the impact of SERVE upon participating students' beliefs about the American Dream. The research questions guiding this investigation were the following:

1. What impact does the SERVE Program have upon participants' beliefs about the American Dream and the availability of personal opportunity in the United States?
2. How do SERVE participants describe and understand the impact of SERVE upon their conception of the American Dream?

We addressed these questions with a mixed methods approach, drawing upon quantitative survey data to address Research Question #1 and qualitative interview data to address Research Question #2. In so doing, our goal was to offer concrete insights to university scholars and administrators about the role that opportunities for reflection about the American Dream can play in fostering a heightened commitment to social justice in American college students.

### Research Context

The scholarship on attributions for wealth and poverty suggest that Americans typically offer one of two explanations for economic inequality: individualistic explanations or structural explanations (Bullock, Williams, & Lambert, 2003; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). Individualistic explanations offer character traits such as willpower, perseverance, and intelligence to account for differences between affluent and poor citizens while structural explanations rely on societal factors such as job shortages, low wages, and unequal schooling opportunities.

A substantial body of scholarship has demonstrated that the majority of Americans consider individualistic factors to be the primary causes of economic inequality (Cozzarelli et al, 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Ladd & Bowman, 1998; Mantsios, 2003; Schwarz & Volgy, 1992; Stuber, 2006). Schwarz and Volgy (1992) reported that the majority of Americans believe that poverty is caused by 'lack of effort' on the part of the poor. Likewise, a 2003 survey on American Political Values found that 62% of Americans reject the claim that, "Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of our control." Finally, a number of scholars have found that the vast majority of Americans (including poor Americans) oppose government policies that redistribute wealth from the affluent to the poor (Hochschild, 1981; Kluegel, Mason, & Wegener, 1995; Ladd, 1994; Pew Research Center, 2007). In summing up the majority of Americans' beliefs about economic inequality, Kluegel and Smith (1986) cited the following three beliefs as dominant in American culture:

- Opportunity for economic advancement is widespread in America today
- Individuals are personally responsible for their positions
- The overall system of inequality is therefore equitable and fair.

Kluegel and Smith referred to this set of beliefs as the "dominant stratification ideology"—in layperson's terms, the American Dream.

Although belief in the American Dream is widespread across all demographics of Americans, scholars have found that affluent and white Americans—the demographics that made up the majority of this study's sample—are more likely than their non-affluent, non-white counterparts to espouse a firm belief in the American Dream (Cozzarelli et al, 2001). As for why affluent white Americans might be more likely to believe in the American Dream, Flanagan (2003) noted that people's explanations for economic inequality are highly dependent upon how the social contract works "for people like them" (p. 258). Likewise, Lerner's (1980) just world theory suggests that people are deeply invested in interpreting events and circumstances in ways that allow them to maintain their belief in a just world. Consequently, Montada and Schneider (1991) have proposed that, "Confronted with large populations and groups of people who are less fortunate than oneself...it is easier to defend the belief in a just world by interpreting the existing disadvantages as self-inflicted and not as inflicted by circumstances, the society, or other people" (p. 63). In short, then, the extant scholarship would predict that the majority of Ignatius University students participating in the

SERVE Program began the program with a firm belief in the American Dream.

### University-Based Community Service Learning

Opportunities to participate in community service are widespread today on America's college campuses. According to the Higher Education Research Institute, 65% of college freshmen reported that their university offered opportunities to get involved in community service (Liu, Ruiz, DeAngelo, & Pryor, 2009). Campus Compact—an organization dedicated to promoting community service opportunities on college campuses—now counts 1100 American colleges and universities among its membership (Campus Compact, 2009). Finally, a 2006 report by the Corporation for National & Community Service found that 3.3 million college students engaged in community service in the past year (Dote, Cramer, Dietz & Grimm, 2006). This figure represents over 30% of all American college students and exceeds the volunteer rate for American adults.

These high rates of volunteerism among American college students are particularly important in light of scholarship which has found such volunteerism to be positively associated with heightened self-confidence, efficacy, commitment to equal opportunity, and feelings of responsibility for the wellbeing of others (Billig, 2000; Eyler, Giles, & Grey, 1999; Flanagan, 2004; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Perry & Katula, 2001; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). Researchers have also found community service participation during the college years to be associated with later participation in community service as an adult (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Oesterle, Johnson & Mortimer, 2003).

However, other scholars have argued that participation in community service is not necessarily accompanied by a heightened commitment to political involvement or activism (Boyte & Kari, 1996; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Walker, 2002). In a study of college students participating in both service-learning experiences and community service experiences, Hunter and Brisbin (2000) found that neither of these service experiences significantly impacted participating students' beliefs about politics, political elections, elected officials, or their own roles as citizens. These scholars concluded that "Service learning, even with explicit classroom discussion...is not a miracle cure for students' political apathy, civic disengagement, or lack of support for the values supporting pluralist participatory democracy" (p. 625). Likewise, Boyte (1991) has asserted that "Volunteers usually disavow concern with larger policy questions, seeing service as an to politics" (p. 766).

Further evidence for this perspective can be found in Soo and Hartley's (2009) investigation of 63 universities recognized by the Carnegie Foundation as having made 'community engagement' a significant institutional priority. All 63 of the universities in Soo and Hartley's study offered courses involving community service learning; however, Soo and Hartley found that the majority of these opportunities involved "altruistic community-based work that is often devoid of activism or even attention to the larger socio-economic and political forces that cause societal problems in the first place" (p. 8). As an example, Soo and Hartley cited a collaboration between a university and a local homeless shelter that was "conceived of as a way for students to interact with community members and to provide a service to the community" but offered no mechanism for "tying this direct service work to larger civic or political ends" (p. 14).

In short, evidence suggests that many of the community service opportunities offered by American universities are not structured to foster a greater commitment to activism or social justice. As a result, many college students have come to see community service as an alternative to greater civic or political involvement. Such a worldview underscores Damon's (2008) finding that, "Few young people today imagine that they might find purpose in the public sphere as politicians, civic leaders or community organizers. There is very little public leadership aspiration among today's younger generation" (p. 53).

In contrast to the service-learning opportunities profiled by Soo and Hartley (2009), the SERVE Program at Ignatius University explicitly seeks to "educate our students about social injustice" and teach them "to question conventional wisdom and learn how to work for a just society." In this study, we considered the impact of the SERVE Program upon participants' beliefs about the American Dream—a clear example of "conventional wisdom" within American culture. In so doing, we sought to uncover strategies and insights for university scholars and administrators engaged in strengthening their own students' commitment to social justice.

### Methods

This study's experimental group consisted of 362 Ignatius University students enrolled in the SERVE program during the 2008-2009 academic year. This study's control group consisted of 37 Ignatius University students who elected to participate in the SERVE Program during the 2008-2009 academic year but who were randomly assigned to the SERVE wait list. Because the SERVE Program is intended for sophomores at Ignatius University, virtually all of the participants are between eighteen and twenty years-old.

Table 1.

*Demographic Comparison between SERVE Participants and Control Group by Race (n = 399)*

	Race						
	N	African American	Asian American	White	Latino	Biracial	Other
SERVE Participants	362	21	40	244	30	16	11
Control Group	37	3	8	20	2	2	2

The Ignatius University students in the experimental and control groups were proportionally similar in terms of gender, race, and religion. The experimental group was composed of 222 female students and 140 male students while the control group was composed of 25 female students and 12 male students. The demographic characteristics of the two groups in terms of race and religion are presented in Tables 1 and 2 below. The uneven sample size of this study’s experimental and control groups does reduce the statistical power of the ensuing quantitative analysis; specifically, the estimated causal effect is less certain because of the larger confidence intervals on the point estimates for the control group. Clearly, a more balanced sample would have been preferable; however, researchers have found that uneven sample sizes in random assignment experiments do not, on average, introduce bias (Avins, 1998; Sposto & Krailo, 1987; Torgerson & Campbell, 2000).

*Data Collection*

All the students in the experimental and control groups completed quantitative surveys in September of 2008 (Time 1) and then in May of 2009 (Time 2). These surveys requested demographic information about participants’ gender, religion, religiosity, social class, race, political affiliation, SERVE professor, SERVE service placement, etc. Also embedded within this survey tool were items adapted from the following scales: Belief in a Just World (Peplau & Tyler, 1975); Expected Political Voice (Colby et al, 2007); Survey about Poverty in America (NPR-Kaiser-Harvard, 2001); the Protestant Ethic Scale (Mirels & Garrett, 1971); Beliefs about Conventional Political Activities (Colby et al, 2007); Public Service Motivation (Perry, 1996); and Altruism (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999).

Three hundred and eighty-six students in the

experimental group completed the original survey administered in September (Time 1), and then 362 of these students completed the follow-up survey administered in May (Time 2). This high participation rate was due to the SERVE faculty’s mandate to complete the pre- and post- surveys as a course requirement. In the control group, 48 students completed the initial survey in September (Time 1), and then 37 completed the follow-up survey in May (Time 2). Students in the control group received a \$20 stipend for completion of these surveys.

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 12 Ignatius University faculty members who taught 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. All interviewed students received a \$10 gift certificate to a local coffee shop.

*Measures*

This paper focuses on participants’ results on the Protestant Ethic measure (see Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, in press-a, in press-b for significant effects on students’ public service motivation and expected political voice). The Protestant Ethic measure consisted of six survey items adapted from Mirel and Garret’s (1971) 19-item Protestant Ethic Scale. These

Table 2.

*Demographic Comparison between SERVE Participants and Control Group by Religion (n = 399)*

	Religion								
	N	Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	None	Other
SERVE Participants	362	81	215	6	5	7	1	31	16
Control Group	37	7	23	1	0	1	1	2	2

survey items are presented below in Table 3. According to Quinn and Crocker (1999), “The Protestant ethic is an ideology that includes that belief that individual hard work leads to success and lack of success is caused by the moral failings of self-indulgence and lack of discipline” (p. 404). We chose the Protestant Ethic measure as a proxy for belief in the American Dream, which Hochschild (1995) defines as “the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success... through their own efforts” (p. 6). ‘Strong agreement’ on the items that comprise this measure is associated with a strong belief in this ideology while ‘strong disagreement’ on these items is associated with a rejection of this ideology.

A Principal Components Analysis (PCA) indicated that one key construct appeared to be measured by the Protestant Ethic measure, with the first component accounting for 47% of the standardized units of variance (eigenvalue = 2.81) and showing good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Quantitative Analysis*

The 362 Ignatius University students participating in the SERVE program are ‘nested’ within SERVE sections (i.e., classes) taught by 12 different professors. To account for the nested structure of the data set, we specified a multi-level model to examine the impact of the SERVE program upon participating students while controlling for select background characteristics of the particular SERVE section in which students were nested (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). We also considered several potential individual-level and section-level moderators.

Individual-level student data (Level 1) include independent variables such as gender, race, religiosity, and pre-treatment beliefs on the Protestant Ethic measure. SERVE section-level data (Level 2) include independent variables such as participation in the SERVE Program; the particular faculty member teaching the section in which a student is enrolled; and whether that faculty member is a member of Ignatius University’s philosophy or theology faculty. The full list of tested variables is presented in Appendix B. The independent variables for the final

fitted model can be seen below for student  $j$  in SERVE section  $i$ :

$$\text{Post Protestant Ethic Beliefs}_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Political Orientation}_{ij} + \beta_2 \text{Social Science Major}_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Initial Protestant Ethic Beliefs}_{ij} + \beta_4 \text{SERVE Treatment}_i + \beta_5 \text{SERVE Professor}_i + (r_{ij} + u_i)$$

where:

- $\beta_0$  is the intercept parameter
- $\beta_1 - \beta_3$  represent the effects of student-level moderators on the outcome
- $\beta_4$  represents the main effect of treatment on the outcome
- $\beta_5$  represents the effect of the student’s SERVE professor
- $r_{ij}$  represents the within-classroom variance
- $u_i$  represents the between-classroom variance

We began our analysis by fitting an unconditional model for the Protestant Ethic Measure, controlling for SERVE professor but containing no other variables, to compare the within-class and between-class variance. Next, we built a baseline model by first adding individual-level predictors such as gender (Level 1) and then adding section-level predictors such as the departmental affiliation (philosophy or theology) of the SERVE professor teaching a particular SERVE section (Level 2). Given the statistically null findings for a number of these variables on the outcome, we removed them for parsimony in subsequent models using likelihood ratios tests. Finally, we added our question predictor— section-level participation in the SERVE Program.

This model predicts shifts in belief on the Protestant Ethic measure over the course of the 2008-2009 academic year in that the treatment variable (SERVE Participation) is predicting only outcome variance not accounted for by the pretest (Initial Protestant Ethic Beliefs). The final, most parsimonious conditional model for the Protestant Ethic measure is reported in the *Results* below. The effect size of the question predictor in this model— participation in the SERVE Program— was calculated using Cohen’s  $d$ .

Table 3.  
*Protestant Ethic Measure*

Question #	Statement
1	Anyone who is willing to work hard has a good chance of succeeding.
2	Any person who is willing to work hard can make a good living in our country.
3	In general, everyone has an equal chance of getting ahead in our society.
4	When the government provides services for free, people tend to get lazy.
5	When the government provides services for free, people tend to cheat.
6	The United States is an equitable society.

Table 4.

Summary statistics for mean attitudes of Ignatius University students' belief in the Protestant Ethic ( $n = 399$ )

	Descriptive Statistics for the Protestant Ethic			
	Number	Pre-Test M (SD)	Post-Test M (SD)	Adjusted Post- Test Means
SERVE Participants	362	2.76 (.63)	2.55 (.68)	2.54
Control Group Participants	37	2.85 (.58)	2.76 (.69)	2.86

### Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative interviews with 30 SERVE students were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were assigned to each interviewed student. We then coded these transcripts using emic and etic codes drawn from the scholarship on beliefs about inequality, community service learning, adolescent development, emerging adulthood, civic development, and civic engagement.

Two co-authors coded each transcript independently, compared their work, re-coded, and then compared again until all coding discrepancies were resolved. Upon completing the coding and categorizing of the transcribed interviews, matrices were constructed that juxtaposed the themes and patterns emerging from the data with the relevant scholarship (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Narrative profiles were also developed for all 30 students who participated in qualitative interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## Results

### Belief in the Protestant Ethic

The descriptive statistics for the total mean scores of Ignatius University students on the Protestant Ethic measure are presented in Table 4 below.

The 362 Ignatius University students enrolled in SERVE began the 2008-2009 academic year with a total mean score on the Protestant Ethic measure of 2.76 units ( $SD = .63$ ) along a 5-point Likert scale and concluded the year with a total mean score of 2.55 units ( $SD = .68$ ). In other words, over the course of the academic year, the Ignatius University students in SERVE became *less* certain, on average, that financial success in America is attributable to hard work and less certain that financial struggle in America is attributable to personal failings. This shift in attitude can be interpreted as evidence of a diminished belief in the American Dream.

The 37 Ignatius University students in the control group began the 2008-2009 academic year with a total mean score on the Protestant Ethic measure of 2.85 units ( $SD = .58$ ) and concluded the academic year with a total mean score of 2.76 units ( $SD = .69$ ). These students, too, demonstrated a decline in their belief, on

average, in the Protestant Ethic, though this decline was approximately half that of the Ignatius University students participating in the SERVE Program.

Fitting a taxonomy of multi-level models revealed a significant difference in the follow-up Protestant Ethic beliefs of the SERVE participants and the control group participants ( $\beta_{SERVE} = -.29, p = .01$ ) and evidence of a small effect size (Cohen's  $d = .31$ ). More specifically, Ignatius University students participating in the SERVE program demonstrated significant declines in their belief in the Protestant Ethic in comparison to their peers in the control group. From these results, we can conclude that Ignatius University students in the SERVE Program demonstrated a diminished belief in the American Dream at the conclusion of the 2008-09 academic year in comparison to their peers in the control group. The taxonomy of fitted multi-level models is presented in Appendix B. The statistics for the final fitted model are presented in Table 5 below.

Also evident in Table 5 above is that only two individual-level variables were significant predictors of Ignatius University students' shift in Protestant Ethic beliefs: political orientation ( $\beta_{POLITICAL\ ORIENTATION} = .15, p = .005$ ) and type of college major ( $\beta_{SOCIAL\ SCIENCE\ MAJOR} = -.17, p = .018$ ). Specifically, characterizing oneself as politically liberal and majoring in a social science were both associated with larger negative scores on the Post-Intervention Protestant Ethic measure. As can be seen in the fully taxonomy of models presented in Appendix B, other individual-level measures such as race/ethnicity, social class, and religiosity did not significantly predict participants' shifts in attitude on the Protestant Ethic measure.

### Qualitative Results

This study's qualitative interview data offered insight into how Ignatius University students describe and understand the impact of SERVE upon their beliefs about the American Dream. Of the 30 students who participated in qualitative interviews at the conclusion of the SERVE Program, 13 explicitly rejected the idea that opportunities for economic advancement are accessible to *all* Americans. Nine other SERVE participants expressed a newfound uncertainty about the equity of American's opportunity struc-

Table 5.

Final fitted model for effects of SERVE upon Protestant Ethic scores of Ignatius University students, controlling for select background characteristics of the 'section' in which SERVE Participants are enrolled ( $n$  SERVE sections = 12,  $n$  students = 399)

Fixed Effect	Coefficient	Se	T-ratio	p-value
Intercept	.98	.17	5.82	.0001
<b>Section Level</b>				
SERVE participation	-.29	.11	-2.60	.01
<b>Individual Level</b>				
Political Orientation	.07	.02	2.95	.005
Social Science Major	-.17	.07	-2.45	.018
Pre Protestant Ethic Score	.63	.04	14.05	.0001
Random Effect	Variance Component	Se	Z	p-value
Random Effect of Student ( $r_{ij}$ )	.24	.05	4.85	.0001
Random Effect of Section ( $u_{0j}$ )	.02	.05	.31	.38

ture. Here we describe each group in turn.

*Rejecting the American Dream.* As noted above, 13 of the Ignatius University students who participated in qualitative interviews rejected the idea that economic opportunities exist for all Americans. For example, Ignatius University student Angela Gutman explained:

People have this mindset [that] if you work hard, you will get what you want and succeed, and that is not necessarily the case with everybody. Some people work hard their whole lives and just don't make it. Some people are privileged by the time they are born and make it without even trying hard.

Likewise, Felicia Santos said of the American Dream: "I do not think it is necessarily true. I think you can reach a certain level easier if you are born into it. You just see so many people work so hard, and they just don't get it." Finally, Marcus Anderson went perhaps the furthest of any of the interviewed students in asserting that the American Dream is not only false but detrimental. In response to a question about whether or not he believed in the American Dream, Anderson offered the following perspective:

No. I'd like to think it's possible, but I almost think it has kind of the reverse effect because it's kind of like we use radical examples to prove that's the norm, which makes no sense. Like we talk about how Oprah was a black woman from poverty. It's like, okay, she was one person. And we kind of use the American Dream to say anybody can make it. [So] why aren't you making it? So you clearly did something wrong. And that really starts to hinder more than anything else.

All three of these students acknowledged that hard work can lead to success for some individuals. However, Gutman, Santos, Anderson and 11 other interviewed students unequivocally rejected the idea that all Americans have a reasonable chance of achieving success through their own efforts—Hochschild's definition of the American Dream.

Ten of these students explicitly credited readings, discussions, and experiences from the SERVE Program as having impacted their beliefs about the American Dream. For example, Eddie McCabe and Matthew Muldoon both utilized the phrase "the American myth" to describe the American Dream, and both students cited a course text—Shipler's (2004) *The Working Poor*—as the source of this phrase as well as a significant influence upon their beliefs about America's opportunity structure. According to McCabe:

I'm not saying every homeless person should be given a house, a job, and what not. Personal responsibility has to be taken. But you cannot throw a blanket down and say, 'Take care of yourself. You have fallen into that hole. Dig yourself out.' Because there are issues around that hole that are going to keep pushing you in it. And you are not going to be able to get out of it. I think Shipler's book does a really good job of showing that.

McCabe went on to cite an example from *The Working Poor* of the way in which a problem such as one's car breaking down—an easily solvable problem for middle and upper class individuals—can prove devastating for the working poor. Likewise, Ignatius University student Matthew Muldoon cited the following character sketch from *The Working Poor*:

[A woman] was working but she couldn't get promoted because she was of color, and then for that reason she could not get dental insurance. So even when she was offered a promotion, she didn't have good teeth, and it was a very appearance-important position. This woman is working hard, but is she successful? No. And is she happy? No.

What is clear from McCabe and Muldoon's descriptions is that they both took away from *The Working Poor* a deeper understanding of the structural factors that can inhibit hard-working individuals from achieving economic success. In his interview, Muldoon explicitly noted that, "Before SERVE, I would have said that if you work hard, you will be successful." He understood his beliefs about the American Dream to have been directly influenced by his participation in the SERVE program.

Other students cited other readings from the SERVE program as having impacted their conception of the American Dream. For example, Ignatius University student Natasha Ingram explained that she was particularly impacted by Burd-Sharp's (2008) *The Measure of America*, which Ingram described as offering a "human development look at the United States." *The Measure of America* presents data on the health, education, and overall wellbeing of different segments of the American population, and, in so doing, impacted Ingram's understanding of the American Dream. As she explained:

They (the authors) talked a lot about capabilities. Capabilities include having a good family, support system, and having good health, or whatever. If you end up with bad circumstances, as much as you try really hard, you are not going to get out of it unless you get some help from somewhere.

In her interview, Ingram— who characterized her own family as working class— explained that, "Before SERVE, I always saw the American Dream as 'work hard, you will be successful.'... [Now] I just realize more and more, I definitely did not get here on my own." According to Ingram, the SERVE Program deepened her understanding that economic success is dependent upon a series of factors beyond simply an individual's work ethic or ingenuity.

Four other Ignatius University students cited the community service experiences they engaged in through the SERVE Program as having influenced their conception of the American Dream. For example, Alice McGonagle's community service placement entailed staffing a suicide hotline sponsored by the Samaritans. According to McGonagle:

[Prior to SERVE] I would have been really naïve and said, well, the American Dream is

attainable for everyone because everyone has the capacity to pull themselves out of whatever situation they are in if they work hard enough. But I think I have become more realistic about it, and I realize that that's not necessarily always true.

Here, McGonagle described a shift in her thinking about the availability of opportunity in the United States. Later in the interview, she stated more even more emphatically, "A lot of the time your money has so much to do with where you get in life... If you are always in bad schools because of the neighborhood where you live in, you are constantly being pushed down to the bottom again. And so I think there are exceptions, but in general it is very, very hard to attain the American Dream." As for what aspects of the SERVE program influenced her thinking about the American Dream, McGonagle referenced the individuals she had spoken to on the Samaritans' crisis hotline. As she explained:

I think just talking to people who have mental handicaps or maybe aren't necessarily the most advantaged people, the most educated people, who are just constantly saying, 'I can't pull myself up out of this. I can't do it.' And so it definitely did influence that thinking.

A second student, Frank Hammond, also characterized his community service placement through SERVE as having influenced his belief in the American Dream. According to Hammond:

I do not really buy totally into the 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' myth, but I did certainly have a little more stock in that before SERVE. And now I see people who I am just amazed they are able to get through the day much less focus on education. It is unbelievable.

In this explanation, Hammond referred to his community service placement at a Section 8 housing agency. Section 8 is a program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development that subsidizes the rental payments of very low-income households (U.S. HUD, 2009). Through this placement, Hammond had the opportunity to interview individuals applying for Section 8 housing and to meet with individuals already enrolled in the program. In so doing, he was offered a window into some of the struggles facing low-income individuals. As Hammond explained, these interactions served to increase his skepticism about the veracity of the American Dream.

Two other Ignatius University students described their SERVE service placements as having a similar effect upon their perception of the American Dream.

Sam Barksdale volunteered for an organization that provided support to recent refugees to the United States. According to Barksdale, "I can see that the refugees we work with are battling systems of the U.S. government, for instance, and of simple immigration policies. It's really a struggle for them to settle in a way that gives them an equal opportunity to succeed." Likewise, Kathleen Wilmer volunteered with a program that offered tutoring and tennis instruction to low-income youth. In her interview, Wilmer explained of the youth with whom she was working: "This is probably kind of a biased or weird view, but I feel like they have limited access to the American Dream." Both of these students credited their service placements with opening their eyes to the fact that, for some individuals, structural obstacles stand in the way of success and prosperity.

*Questioning the American Dream.* In their qualitative interviews at the conclusion of the SERVE Program, nine other Ignatius University students revealed themselves to be newly conflicted about the equity of America's opportunity structure. For example, Ignatius University student Felix Green explained that, "I think I've realized [through SERVE] there's unfortunately less mobility than I thought." In response to an explicit question about the American Dream, Green admitted his uncertainty:

I think that's one of the biggest questions out there. I think there's people who are rich and not very naturally gifted who are going to stay comfortable, and if they were poor, they wouldn't be able to get out of it. But I think there are poor people who are naturally gifted and can get out of it.

In these words, Green described a newfound recognition of the disparate opportunities afforded affluent and poor individuals, but maintained that talent can sometimes overcome these disparities.

Joe Antonucci, another Ignatius University student, offered the following description of SERVE's impact upon his worldview:

Before this, it was kind of like, I got where I am, I worked really hard to get where I am. Sorry if things didn't work out for you. But now it's a little bit different. It is like, yeah, I got here with hard work, but these [poor] people are trying hard too.

In these words, Antonucci struggled to reconcile a conception of his own success as due to hard work and perseverance with the recognition that many of the individuals he had met and read about through the SERVE Program are also dedicated and hard working.

A number of other Ignatius University students characterized themselves as similarly conflicted. In

their interviews, several of these students sought to demonstrate the viability of the American Dream by describing their parents' 'rags to riches' stories while simultaneously acknowledging that the SERVE Program has fostered their doubts about the accessibility of the American Dream for all Americans. For example, Ignatius University student Selena Rambaud explained that her father's "parents both died when they were really young, so he paid for his entire college and just seeing how successful he is really shows if you are willing to work hard enough, you can [be successful]." On the other hand, Rambaud— whose service placement entailed spending one night a week at a women's homeless shelter— admitted a newfound uncertainty about the accessibility of the American Dream. In response to a question about whether or not she believed in the American Dream, Rambaud explained:

I do not know because a lot of the women there work really hard. Like the woman who works at a mental hospital. She works until 10 o'clock every night. Last night she came in, and you could just tell she was exhausted...I think a lot of them are really genuinely trying, and the deficits of poverty are just pulling them back.

Similar to a number of her classmates, Rambaud described a genuine confusion about which version of the American Dream to believe: the rags-to-riches story offered by her father or that presented by the struggling homeless women she had encountered through her service placement.

Max Pincus and Abigail Leng offered similar rags-to-riches stories about their own father figures. According to Pincus, his father "came from a really poor family. He is the only one in his family who went to college. He paid his way through school and now is an urologist." At the same time, Pincus explained that his participation in the SERVE Program had led him to realize "that hard work, the American Dream, just isn't realistic no matter how hard some people work. It's just never going to bring them out of a bad situation."

Abigail Leng, another Ignatius University student, explained that her grandfather grew up in poverty in Indonesia, earned enough money to immigrate to the United States, and then "had to prove himself again" when he arrived in America. As a result of her grandfather's ability to achieve economic prosperity, Leng characterized herself as "not so sympathetic" of individuals contending with poverty in the United States. At the same time, Leng explained that, "I feel like the idea that everyone can reach the American Dream isn't true. Obviously if you are a white male who is heterosexual, you have better chances." Leng's perspective

on the advantages afforded some individuals by their race, gender, and sexual preference were highlighted for her by Johnson's (2001) *Privilege, Power, and Difference*—a text that was a part of the SERVE curriculum. Like eight of her Ignatius University classmates, Leng came away from her SERVE experience with newfound doubts about the equitability of opportunity for all Americans; however, she was not yet ready to abandon an interpretive framework that was an established part of her family lore.

### Discussion

This study's quantitative and qualitative *Results* demonstrated the role of the SERVE Program in engaging participants in critical inquiry of America's opportunity structure. Fostering such engagement was no small feat. Recall that Ignatius University student Kathleen Wilmer expressed her belief that the low-income youth she tutored through SERVE had "limited access to the American Dream." However, Wilmer prefaced this observation with the caveat that such a perspective was "probably kind of like a biased or weird view." Wilmer seemed to believe it was inappropriate to express skepticism about the availability of opportunity for all Americans.

Wilmer's reluctance to critique America's opportunity structure serves as a reminder of the scholarship presented in this paper's literature review demonstrating the strength of the American Dream as a meme in American culture. Moreover, Kluegel & Smith (1986) have reported that even educating students about structural causes of inequality—as SERVE does—rarely leads to a reorganization of these students' worldviews. Rather, individuals adopt what Kluegel and Smith refer to as "compromised images" in which they simply *append* their newfound understanding of inequality to existing beliefs about the opportunity structure rather than allowing their new understanding of inequality to *re-shape* their existing worldviews. In other words, even learning about the structural factors that contribute to poverty and inequality does not typically diminish an individual's faith in the American Dream.

In spite of these challenges, this study's quantitative survey data demonstrated that the SERVE Program had a significant negative effect upon participating students' belief in the American Dream. As noted in this paper's *Introduction*, such an effect represents an important lever in promoting a sense of social responsibility among college students. If college students believe that opportunities for economic advancement are widely available to all Americans, then they possess little incentive to advocate for Americans contending with poverty and other challenges (Howard, 2008; Seider, 2008a). Likewise, Gardner (2004) has noted that the process of chang-

ing people's minds about a social issue "begins by acknowledging that most individuals do not even recognize when a particular problem exists; their consciousness must accordingly be raised. Only when the problem is recognized as such is there a possibility for change" (p. 129). In short, the critical lens which the SERVE Program turned upon America's opportunity structure served as a key lever in the program's efforts to strengthen participants' commitment to public service, activism and advocacy.

This study's qualitative interview data revealed that different Ignatius University students perceived their beliefs about the American Dream to have been impacted by different aspects of the SERVE experience. For example, a number of SERVE participants cited the impact of their interactions at service placements that ranged from crisis hotlines to homeless shelters to tutoring programs. Other students cited the impact of readings from the academic component of the SERVE Program. Even among these students, there existed great variety in the particular readings that had influenced them. Some students favored readings that focused a sociological lens on inequality; others students favored readings from a human development perspective; and still other students cited readings that offered philosophical and theological responses to inequality. We contend that this diversity—both in assigned readings and service opportunities—played a key role in SERVE's ability to impact students' conception of the American Dream.

### *Representational Redescription*

In *Changing Minds*, Gardner (2004) asserted that "Representational redescription is probably the most important way of changing the minds of students" (p. 141). Representational redescription refers to the use of many different formats to convey a lesson or idea. In other words, educators introducing a complex or controversial issue are well-served by presenting this issue to their students through diverse content such as academic papers, biographies, documentary film, and even fiction, movies, and songs. According to Gardner, "New ideas do not travel easily, and it is hard for them to take hold. Because we cannot know in advance which formats will prove effective in communicating a new message, we are well advised to use several alternative formats" (p. 102).

Perhaps what renders the SERVE experience such a powerful one for participants is that, rather than residing in a single department at Ignatius University, the SERVE Program is a genuine collaboration between the university's philosophy department, theology department, and more than 50 social service organizations in nearby cities and towns. As a result of this three-way collaboration, Ignatius University students participating in the SERVE Program are

exposed to perspectives on America's opportunity structure that draw from philosophy, theology, social work, education, and public policy. Our qualitative interview data demonstrated that SERVE participants cited a diverse set of readings as having impacted their conception of the American Dream. SERVE participants also described as impactful the opportunity to learn about other students' community service experiences through the SERVE Program's discussion sections.

The SERVE Program's weekly discussion sections were intended to give participants the opportunity to discuss the successes and challenges at their respective service placements and to connect these experiences to the assigned readings. In his qualitative interview at the conclusion of the SERVE Program, Ignatius University student David Burke explained:

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

Several other students echoed Burke's perspective about the value of the discussion sections.

For example, Namwali Ezedi explained that, "What I have enjoyed the most [about SERVE] is the discussion time that we have. We get to hear about everyone else's placements. . . . I sort of get the whole experience without going to every placement." The opportunity for SERVE participants to learn about each others' service placements represented another form of representational redescription embedded within the SERVE Program's structure. By incorporating all of these diverse vantage points into a single program, the SERVE Program increased the odds of changing the minds of participating students about the American Dream.

### Limitations

Although we believe this study's findings are robust, there remain limitations to this study that will need to be addressed by future research. Perhaps this study's most significant limitations involved the atypical characteristics of its participants. Ignatius University is one of only 28 Jesuit universities in the United States and ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as a highly competitive university. As a result of these characteristics, we cannot assume these study's findings to be generalizable to all American college students. The Jesuit branch of Catholicism has long been associated with a tradition of social justice, and it is possible that college students interested in attending a Jesuit university are more interested in issues of social justice than their peers at

other institutions.

Numerous scholars have also reported a positive relationship between religiosity and social responsibility (Colby & Damon, 1992; Hodgkinson, 1995). It seems likely that young adults attending a Jesuit university would demonstrate greater levels of religiosity than their peers at secular institutions. It is also possible that the critiques of the American Dream raised by the SERVE Program received greater reinforcement from faculty and students on a Jesuit campus than would be the case if the SERVE Program were moved to a secular campus. More research in more diverse contexts will be necessary to draw firm conclusions about the ability of community service learning programs such as SERVE to foster reflection upon America's opportunity structure.

### Conclusion

In their study of 63 universities designated as 'community engagement' exemplars by the Carnegie Foundation, Soo and Hartley (2009) found that few of the service-learning opportunities at these institutions offered participants an opportunity to reflect upon the societal and political issues that rendered such community service necessary in the first place. In contrast, the SERVE Program at Ignatius University explicitly sought to expose participants to issues of social and political injustice through community service placements and readings in philosophy, theology, sociology, and education. With this study, we demonstrated that these diverse opportunities to think critically about America's opportunity structure had a significant impact upon participating students' belief in the American Dream.

There has been surprisingly little scholarship on the sociopolitical development of privileged young Americans such as those at Ignatius University, yet Howard (2008) has asserted that "Affluent students need educators committed to working toward critical consciousness as much as do poor students" (p. 11). Critical consciousness refers to an awareness of existing social inequities and their history for marginalized peoples (Freire, 1970). Watts and colleagues (2003) have written that supporting the development of critical consciousness in privileged youth requires educators to engage these youth in reflection and analysis of their own privileged status in comparison to marginalized fellow citizens. The SERVE Program provided Ignatius University students with just such an opportunity. As one student, Gretchen Zouros, explained at the conclusion of the 2008-2009 academic year, "I was more focused on myself as an individual before SERVE. [I'm] not saying I was self-centered, but I was very about myself working hard and getting places, where SERVE has made me see that it is a lot of other

aspects of life that get you where you are.”

After a year in the SERVE Program, Zouros and many of her classmates had begun to recognize that success, failure, affluence, and poverty are influenced by a number of factors beyond any single individual’s control. They also had begun to recognize that neither they nor individuals struggling with poverty and homelessness were entirely responsible for their respective positions in America’s opportunity structure. We contend that such recognition is a key step in the development of a sense of social responsibility for the wellbeing of one’s fellow citizens. And although opportunities for community service and community service learning have become ubiquitous on college campuses across the United States, few of these programs explicitly (or even implicitly) engage students in reflection about the equitability of America’s opportunity structure. With this study, we have sought to demonstrate that offering such opportunities for reflection can have a powerful effect upon the development of social responsibility in American college students.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The SERVE Program, Ignatius University, and SERVE participants are all referred to by pseudonyms.

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Appendix A

**Individual & Social Responsibility**

**2008-2009**

Course Description:

This two-semester, twelve-credit course fulfills all core requirements in Philosophy and Theology. Course materials and methods consist of reading of classical philosophy texts, scripture and other readings to be expected in any core Philosophy and Theology course; class meetings will be a mix of lecture and discussion.

In addition to these standard approaches to the study of these disciplines, SERVE requires a significant commitment to community service for the entire two semester course and a once per week discussion group. There is also a requirement for two discussion groups per semester with the other students at your service site. These will take the place of two of the class discussion groups. The dates are to be determined.

Required texts:

Euripides, *Ion*

Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace*

Plato, *Republic*

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Michael Himes, *Doing the Truth in Love*

Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews*

Augustine, *Confessions*

*The Catholic Study Bible*

John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*

Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings*

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

Allan Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*

David Shipler, *The Working Poor*

Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*

Martin Luther King, various speeches and writings

## Appendix B

*Taxonomy of fitted multi-level models describing the relationship between Ignatius University students' belief in the Protestant Ethic and their participation in the SERVE Program (n SERVE Sections = 12, n students = 399)*

<b>Predictors</b>	<b>Model 1 Demographic Characteristics</b>	<b>Model 2 Adds Initial Public Service Motivation</b>	<b>Model 3 Adds Section- Level Characteristics</b>	<b>Model 4 Adds Participation in SERVE</b>
Intercept	2.16***	.54***	.67****	.98****
<b>Section Level</b>				
Philosophy v. theology SERVE Participation			-.01	-.29****
<b>Individual Level</b>				
Gender	.18**	.01		
Religiosity	.12			
Spirituality	.04			
High school service	.01			
Parent volunteerism	-.04			
Parent service-oriented job	-.04			
Black	-.01			
Latino	-.03			
Asian	.23**	.10		
Poverty in family	-.06			
Class Status	.01			
Political orientation	.15****	.05**	.06*	.07****
Christian	-.05			
Social science major	-.31***	-.14*	-.21**	-.17****
CSOM	.09			
Initial Protestant Scores		.66****	.63****	.63****
-2 Log Likelihood	695.9	551.1	547.6	544.6

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .001$