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# Exploring Students' Perceptions of their Experiences in a Social Justice Living-Learning Community

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*This qualitative study explored students' perceptions of their experience in a social justice living-learning community throughout their time in the community and one year after participation. Findings illustrated students (1) developed a broader conception of social justice and greater awareness of social justice issues in the community, (2) increased their capacity for social justice and civic engagement, and, (3) established enduring values, which included appreciation for community and increased capacity for social connection.*

Contemporary higher education leaders continue to deem the development of civic-minded graduates as among the primary goals of postsecondary education (Astin, 1996; Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, & Stevens, 2010; Hurtado, Ruiz, & Whang, 2012). Today's undergraduates are poised to engage with their communities in numbers greater than their predecessors in previous generations, believing it is their responsibility to make society better (Kiesa et al., 2007). In 2012, more than two-thirds of postsecondary students reported participation in community service over the past year, despite their overwhelming disillusionment with the United States government and social institutions (Levine & Dean, 2012)

Civic engagement lacks a common definition in the literature (Jacoby, 2009), however it typically includes involvement in the community with the purpose of "enhancing students' understanding of civic life" (Cress et al., 2010, p. 4). A growing body of research raised concerns with community service, service-learning, and other forms of civic engagement as reinforcing stereotypes (Dooley & Burant, 2015). These studies urged greater care when designing community involvement opportunities, including attention to students' development and previous experience, meaningful curricular connections, and adequate contextualization and reflection (Dooley & Burant, 2015).

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Some campuses have linked social justice to civic engagement to advance students' knowledge about inequity, thus moving them away from a savior orientation (Dooley & Burant, 2015) and deepening their understanding of the experience (Prentice, 2007). Although conceptualized in varying ways, for this article social justice is defined as work toward ending the system of oppression giving certain social groups greater privilege and power over other groups (Broido, 2000). When coupled, the terms civic engagement and social justice often indicate the educators' desire to situate students in their broader communities and increase their awareness of social inequity, which may inspire them to work for social change at the individual, cultural, and institutional levels (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004).

Living-learning communities (LLCs) are increasingly utilized to deepen and cohere students' collegiate experiences (Matthews, Smith, & MacGregor, 2012). Although variation exists in thematic and organizational type, these communities typically group students together in a residence hall, offer a shared academic experience, and provide co-curricular activities related to a theme (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011). Social justice LLCs, which focus on increasing students' awareness of social inequity and providing them with opportunities to work for social change, are often found on college campuses (Inkelas, 2007). Yet little formal research has been done that explores the impact of these communities on students. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore students' experiences throughout their time in a social justice-focused LLC (hereafter referred to by the pseudonym SJLLC) and one year after participation, focusing on how students described their participation in SJLLC and what aspects of the LLC had a lasting impression on them.

### Empirical Literature

Research on living-learning communities and social justice education informed the design of this study. Many scholars illustrated the potential benefits of LLC participation in terms of academic (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003) and student involvement (Pike, 1999) gains, as well as increasing faculty and student interaction (Cox & Orehovec, 2007). Furthermore, Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner, and Inkelas (2007) illustrated when students interested in civic engagement are placed in communities focused on such engagement, they exhibit a stronger sense of civic engagement than peers in other LLCs and traditional residence halls.

Looking more explicitly at the class experience, Watterson, Rademacher, and Mace (2012) described pedagogy associated with teaching within a social justice LLC. They believed the "deliberative dialogue and deep listening" strategies in the LLC provided a transformative environment for students to develop their understanding and engagement in social justice issues (p. 2). However, research is needed to understand how participation in a social justice LLC affects students' understanding of social justice after they leave the LLC. Research in the context of a social justice themed living-learning community is especially necessary given the intent of these communities to promote social justice and civic engagement outcomes.

Development of social justice attitudes in the collegiate context also informed our study. Broido (2000) explored the development of social justice allies in college and found information sources (classes, connections to others, independent reading, travel) and reflection opportunities that students experienced while in college helped them to clarify their position on social justice issues and gave them confidence in their understanding of these issues. Broido identified two ways students began to act as allies for social justice: "being in a position or role where ally behavior was expected of them" or recruitment for social justice action (p. 13).

Much of the research on the development of social justice attitudes has been done in the context of service learning (Finley, 2011). Hurtado et al. (2012) found service-learning, done in

the confines of a class with reflection built into the experience, “affects civic values and cognitive outcomes above and beyond generic community service” (p. 8). Cress and colleagues (2010) found additional gains in social responsibility, citizenship skills, reducing stereotypes, and facilitating cultural understanding. Furthermore, Finley (2011) linked service learning to a significant impact on intrapersonal and social development.

However, Kendall (1990) argued service-learning experiences should have an explicit aim of moving students from the mindset of providing charity to promoting social justice. Morton (1995) described a charity mindset as one where the control of the service remains with the provider, which fails to address the foundational causes of social inequality. A social justice mindset, in contrast, redirects the provision of service from charity to social change. Students engaged in service with a social justice mindset would analyze social inequality from individual, cultural, and institutional levels and would connect this awareness to action (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004) and civic engagement.

Although the contexts are different, the findings related to service-learning outcomes are potentially transferable to social justice LLCs, but more research is needed to know for sure. Such research will inform faculty and administrators about the experiences of students while in SJLLC and the outcomes after they leave the LLC. In addition, the research may illuminate how postsecondary institutions can better meet needs of students in these communities and help focus attention on curricular and co-curricular aspects making an enduring impression on students' social justice perspectives and commitment to civic engagement.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

We used Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory to frame this qualitative study. This Person – Process – Context – Time framework enables researchers to gain a more holistic understanding of the complexity of students' experiences (see Renn & Arnold, 2003) as it sharpens a researcher's gaze to explore the interaction of students within varying contexts. Bronfenbrenner (1993) illustrated how personal attributes, called developmentally instigative characteristics, set in motion “reciprocal processes of interpersonal interaction” (p. 12) affecting learning. These characteristics include (1) personal stimulus characteristics, (2) selective responsivity, (3) structuring proclivities, and (4) directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). *Personal stimulus characteristics* detail how people's actions invite or inhibit particular responses from the environment disrupting or fostering psychological growth (e.g., how peers or a service agency might respond differently to a shy versus outgoing member of the LLC). *Selective responsivity* describes how people interact with their surroundings (e.g., some students may immerse themselves fully into their service learning experiences, while others may be more reticent or standoffish). *Structuring proclivities* address how people seek out increasingly complex activities (e.g., some students may choose to merely live amongst like-minded peers in their social justice community while others might use the experience to further develop their commitment to social justice). *Directive beliefs* are how people view their agency in relation to their environment (e.g., students who believe they can affect societal change through charity and those who believe they can affect societal change through civic engagement and social justice action).

In addition to personal attributes, Bronfenbrenner's (1993) model illustrated the importance of context, or the environmental characteristics interacting with the person and affecting developmental processes. Bronfenbrenner envisioned these characteristics as nested systems surrounding an individual, from proximal to distal. He labeled these the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem. The microsystem is most proximal; it is the student's immediate environment.

The mesosystem is “two or more settings frequented by the same person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 20). We were most interested in students’ experiences in their shared mesosystems, which in this case would be inclusive of students’ microsystems of living environment, classes, and activities. We were curious about the interaction between students’ developmentally instigative characteristics and their mesosystems and how these mesosystems changed from their time in the LLC to the following year. Specifically, we addressed the following questions:

1. How did students describe their participation in SJLLC?
2. What aspects of SJLLC, if any, made an enduring impression one year after participation?

## Method

**Setting.** The setting of the study was SJLLC (pseudonym), a sophomore community dedicated to examining issues of social justice at a private, Catholic university in the Midwest (CMU). SJLLC is one of three LLCs at CMU with a class component. First- and second-year students are required to live in campus housing, but most do not live in LLCs. Students wanting to live in SJLLC must apply for one of the 24 spots. They lived on two floors in a residence hall (one all-men and one all-women), enrolled in two three-credit courses together (a philosophy course in the fall and theology course in the spring), participated in three hours of service learning weekly as part of their coursework, and worked in groups with peers to raise awareness about social justice issues in the LLC, including poverty and educational disparities. Students’ service learning assignments were in agencies working with adults, including recent immigrants, seniors, and those living with AIDS. At the start of the academic year, students participated in an overnight retreat organized by the Office of Residence Life and attended by their resident assistants and philosophy instructor, during which they engaged in team building activities, developed a common definition for social justice, and discussed their goals for the academic year.

**Participants.** Eight students from SJLLC participated in the interview portion of the study. To protect their identity, each student was assigned a pseudonym. We interviewed students three times—at the end of the fall and spring semesters during the year they lived in the LLC, and again in the spring the year following their time in the LLC. Five women and three men were included in the sample, one of whom identified as Indian, and the remainder as Caucasian. The racial demographics mirrored the demographics of SJLLC, as well as the campus in which it was situated. However, men were slightly underrepresented in the sample.

**Data Collection.** Our semi-structured interview protocol was guided by Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) framework, which enabled us to focus on the various aspects of students’ mesosystems, which were inclusive of their shared microsystems (courses, interactions with peers in the LLC, service-learning) and the ways in which students interacted and perceived their experiences. During the first two interviews, which lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, we asked students general questions about their experiences in SJLLC, at their service learning site, and in their courses. We also asked them to define social justice and discuss interactions with peers. In the final set of interviews, which lasted between 50 and 120 minutes, we asked students to reflect on their experiences in SJLLC, remaining connections to SJLLC, community service continuation, and changes they attributed to SJLLC. Again, we asked them to define social justice.

## **Trustworthiness and Analysis**

We took several steps to ensure trustworthiness of the qualitative research process (Creswell, 2007), including transcribing all interview data verbatim, sending synopses of the interview back to participants, corroborating participants' responses with interview notes, gathering data at different points in time, and discussing results of the data as a research team. The research team was comprised of one faculty member and three graduate students, two of whom had worked in residence life at other institutions and all of whom had worked with college students. The demographics largely mirrored those of participants, as all four identified as women, three identified as Caucasian and one identified as a woman of color. The researchers' prior experience in residence life informed the data collection and analysis the most, as they used that knowledge in addition to prior research to shape interview questions. They were also careful to ensure that the data informed the development of their themes as opposed to their assumptions.

We used a constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to analyze the data and draw themes. We independently read through and conducted open coding of each participant's three transcripts in chronological order (time 1, time 2, and time 3). Then, we discussed our coding, revising synonymous codes for consistency (e.g., deeper understanding was changed to broadened understanding) and developed a common coding scheme. We went through the data again with the common scheme and then grouped our codes into categories and the emergent themes these categories reflected. After the themes were identified, we reviewed the transcripts to ensure the emergent themes were reflected in the transcripts.

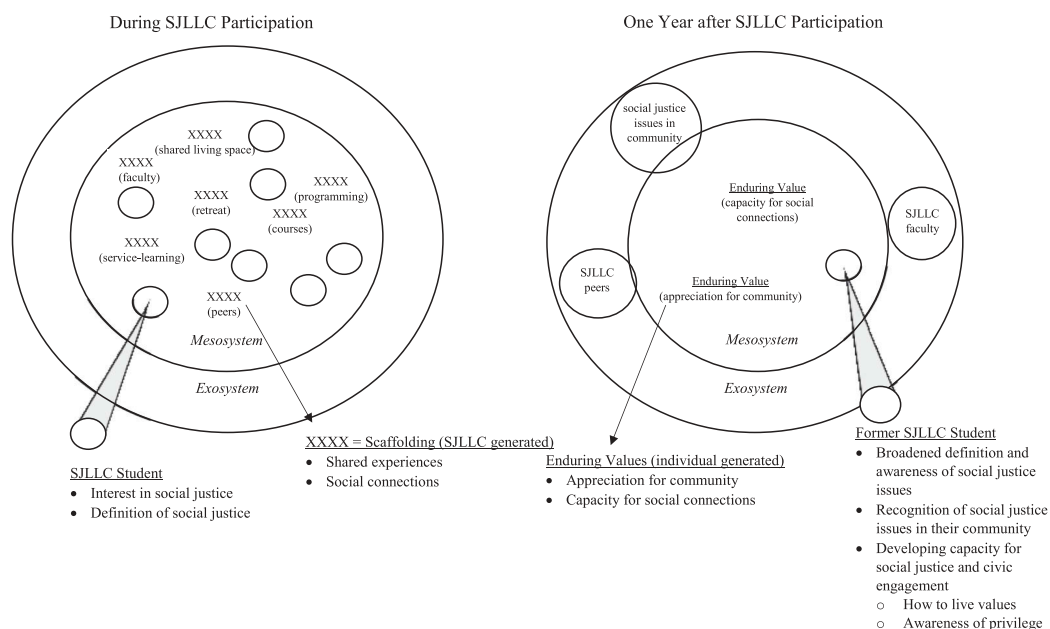
## **Findings**

We found after participating in SJLLC, students described a broadened conception of social justice and greater awareness of social justice issues in the surrounding community, increased capacity for social justice action and civic engagement, and enduring values for social development. Before describing these themes, we will set the context.

### **Experiences in SJLLC**

Our initial interviews revealed that when students were living in the shared mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) of SJLLC, comprised of microsystems including their residence hall floors, shared classes, and various service learning sites, these microsystems served as intentional scaffolding developed by staff and faculty in SJLLC, through which students could learn about social justice. Scaffolding in educational settings is described as helpful, structured interaction aimed at helping a student reach a particular goal (Bruner, 1978). In Figure 1, we use an adaptation of Renn and Arnold's (2003) depiction of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to illustrate participants' experience while in SJLLC, with their shared mesosystem (left side) and one year after participation (right side). From students' descriptions of their experiences during our first and second interviews, it was clear the organizational dimensions of SJLLC (proximity to one another, shared coursework, service learning) and interest in social justice issues served as scaffolding for students' social justice understanding and social development, including connections to and relationships with peers (scaffolding is depicted in Figure 1 with Xs [XXXX]). This scaffolding was built from organizational elements of the community (shared living space, classes, and co-curricular activities) and supported students as they made social connections and discussed social issues. Several students felt more willing to engage with peers in SJLLC about complex social issues (like poverty and homelessness) because the community scaffolding indicated shared values. Their similar selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) also helped them build community, as most students eagerly partook in social justice activities and invited others to

Figure 1. Students' ecosystems during and one year after participation in a social justice living-learning community. (Adapted from Renn & Arnold [2003].)



join their causes. They also discussed sharing meals, studying together for their philosophy tests, and having discussions with peers about their shared academic experiences. With one exception (Sandra, whom we will discuss in more detail), students enjoyed living with peers with similar interests and most described SJLLC as respectful, open, and tolerant.

In exploring students' perceptions one year after their participation in SJLLC, it was evident their mesosystems had shifted, and thus, their LLC scaffolding and day-to-day interactions with peers fell away (see Figure 1, right side). Students were in contact with only a few others from SJLLC, yet when they saw peers on campus, connected immediately and deeply. Enduring outcomes of SJLLC recounted by students included (1) a broadened conception of social justice and greater awareness of social justice issues in the surrounding community, (2) increased capacity for social justice action and civic engagement, and (3) social development. Figure 1, right side illustrates the themes we describe below, namely after leaving SJLLC, students applied what they had gained from the organizational scaffolding provided by SJLLC into their post-SJLLC lives. They brought enduring values from the LLC, which included appreciation for community and increased capacity for social connection to enhance their lives.

### Broadened Definition of Social Justice

In their first interviews, students explained they developed a common definition of social justice at their fall retreat. In their second (one semester later) and final (one year later) interviews, we asked students to define social justice again. We found over time students demonstrated growth in their understanding of the concept—their identification of social justice issues broadened, as did their ability to observe social justice issues in the surrounding community.



**Broadened Understanding of Social Justice Issues.** Students discussed broadening their understanding of social justice issues through the interests of their peers. Among the topics about which they mentioned learning more were fair trade and vegetarianism (mentioned by Robert), environmentalism (mentioned by Andrea), feminism (mentioned by John), and fair-trade Cocoa production (mentioned by Sue). Students appreciated the broadened perspectives, which, as Robert stated, “[they] wouldn’t otherwise have thought about.” Robert reflected on his peers’ influence on his understanding of social justice.

So many of [my SJLLC peers] had so much more experience than I had with [homelessness, segregation, violence] and in fact dealing with situations that I didn’t even encounter, really some difficult situations working with the homeless in one aspect or another, or underserved people. I think that made me more aware too.

Andrea echoed Robert’s comments, explaining that, because of SJLLC, she applied the term ‘social justice’ to issues she would not have initially. She connected issues she once thought of as disparate (climate change and vegetarianism for example) using a social justice lens. It is clear from these interactions their understanding of the issues social justice encompasses expanded as part of their experience in SJLLC.

Although most students credited peers from SJLLC for broadening their understanding of social justice, the experience was not universal. Sandra discussed how being in SJLLC turned her off to social justice because exposure to others’ perspectives did not resonate with her. She explained,

I would say that I’m a little bit more [politically] conservative than my peers. . . . Everyone has “their” issues. . . . I’m really interested in women’s issues in relation to abortion and am prolife. . . . I feel like [SJLLC] has been a deterrent—like I am less concerned about issues of social justice now.

Sandra articulated that her feelings of exclusion likely stemmed from her dismissal of peers’ social justice issues. She explained, “some people are really into—they care about AIDS as an issue. I could care less about AIDS as an issue.”

Interviews with other students confirmed Sandra’s suspicion. John explained how being intolerant about others’ social justice issues was an unacceptable behavior in the community.

If anyone were to be derogatory toward the demographic of anyone’s service-learning site, I wouldn’t like that. I wouldn’t like it if someone started talking stuff about people at the AIDS Center. I am pretty sure a lot of the people working with the homeless wouldn’t be too happy [if someone said something negative about the homeless].

While most students welcomed the broadened perspective of social justice, for Sandra, the wider conceptualization of social justice was off-putting, and served as a deterrent to developing engagement in social justice work.

**Social Justice in their Backyard.** In addition to most students broadening their perspectives of social justice, they described being more aware of the social justice issues in the area surrounding the university. In [Figure 1](#) (right side), we depict students’ greater awareness of social justice issues in the exosystem, which Bronfenbrenner (1993) contends affects the student but does not contain the student. Students became better informed about issues such as poverty, homelessness, and AIDS through their service-learning sites and discussions with peers while in SJLLC, but most concluded their work with the site at the end of the year, opting not to continue after they left



SJLLC. In our final interview, Zoey reflected on how her experience with her service-learning site made her more aware of the issues facing the city. She explained,

I think about before I went [to my service site], how little I knew about that area... and the struggles that those people were having. If I hadn't had that service side of it, it would not have been a place I would have gone at all in my four years in college, or probably afterwards. What stands out is that when I went to this site and spent a year there, I became part of their community.

Zoey explained by being part of SJLLC, she was more inclined to work for justice.

Last year, our city was named one of the most segregated in America. When you're confronted with these conversations, you can't just wipe it off your shoulder. You have to talk about it and you have to do something about it. When living in a really active community that is going out every day and doing something, and being part of the community, you're more inclined to act and you're more aware.

Robert also discussed the experience in SJLLC as changing his awareness of "all of the social justice issues in [the city], America, and the world." In his earlier interviews he talked about how being a part of SJLLC helped him learn how to be responsive to issues such as homelessness. In his first interview, he explained, "When I got to [CMU], I was like, 'oh wow. There are homeless people around. They are asking for money. What do I do? This didn't happen in my town.'" His exposure to social justice issues through SJLLC helped him to unpack his assumptions about homelessness. He shared one meaningful exchange.

When I was at the [Service-Learning site], there was a '84 engineering grad from [CMU], who I had a feeling probably had some underlying mental illness, but still, he could be me. He had a good job. That can happen. It humanizes it a lot.

By Robert's third interview, he found he was integrating what he had learned about social justice into his day-to-day interactions and was able to reflect on his response to homelessness in contrast to the responses of his family. He shared,

I was in a coffee shop in New York yesterday and a man came up to us and was clearly homeless and had some mental illness. He said, "Can I use your phone." My parents were very worried about me... It was interesting to see the difference between my mom's [response] and mine. [My mom] is a wonderful, caring and loving person, but you know what she said afterwards, "What's wrong with that guy? Why's he doing that? Go somewhere else." And I thought, "you know, maybe he doesn't have anywhere else to go." It wasn't that she was trying to be spiteful or anything, but I think most people just really don't understand [homelessness].

Despite having not lived in SJLLC or participated in service-learning for a year, Robert's compassion for homeless people remained salient as evidenced by his discussion of his reaction to interacting with a homeless person and contrasting his response to his mom's. His story is indicative of others' experiences in the community as well; one year after participation, most students who lived in SJLLC demonstrated a broadened awareness of social justice issues and an increased ability to identify these issues in their communities.

### **Developing Capacity for Social Justice and Civic Engagement**

Students' description of their emergent capacity for social justice and civic engagement was the second theme emerging from our initial, second, and final interviews with students. They described SJLLC as helping them clarify how to live their values and become more aware of privileges they had been afforded, which increased their capacity for social justice and civic engagement.

**How to Live Values.** Our interviews illustrated students' orientation toward social justice action became more practical over time. Except for Sandra and Zoey, students identified classes as being a catalyst for thinking more deeply about social justice in relation to their lives. In his final interview, Robert reflected on his experience, stating,

I learned quite a bit [in the classes]. The theology class . . . really helped me in terms of understanding a practical application to religion. Myself as a Catholic, I think you learn a lot of the things you're supposed to learn as a Catholic, I think sometimes you don't really understand. One of the things I learned [in the class] is [how to make the theology] more relatable [to life].

Students credited SJLLC with helping them learn the difference between charity and justice (Andrea, John, Preston, Robert, Zoey), the importance of solidarity in struggle (John, Sue), and how to apply social justice theories to their lived experiences (Andrea, Sue). Andrea shared her growing awareness of the structural inequality as impeding justice.

[In SJLLC] I have been put into more hands-on situations where I am working for social justice. Whereas before, it was a lot more theoretical. But, [now] I've spent significant time in various non-profits throughout the city trying to do work. And, maybe before, I would do [a meal program for homeless people] on Saturday morning. My original reason for signing up was like, "well, big picture, homelessness is bad, we need to combat homelessness." And I am realizing what I do for a couple hours on Saturday mornings isn't going to end homelessness. . . but what it is going to do, is help individuals for those couple hours, help them get their week started off better, from the bottom up.

In her final interview, Sue discussed how the material from the courses developed her understanding of social justice. She credited Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with encouraging her to think more deeply about vocation, solidarity, and her contribution to society. Preston echoed Sue's experience, except he credited his SJLLC experience with challenging him "to figure out what I want to be when I am an adult, how to change the system, not, you know, just die and give a bunch of money."

**Awareness of their Privilege.** Ultimately, students attributed to SJLLC a new understanding of privileges they were afforded. During their first two interviews, seven of the students referred to greater awareness of resources they grew up with (computers, books), access to education, and health care. These discussions also carried over into students' final interview, especially for John and Robert.

Initially, John spent substantial time wrestling with class material, trying to reconcile his views on philosophy, religion, and social justice with those of his peers. From our first to second interview, John's view of the connection between service and social justice shifted markedly. Whereas in his first interview, John expressed an interest in taking time off school to participate in service, during his second interview, he expressed more skepticism, recounting his doubts about the transformative experiences reported by peers after spring break community service trips. He acknowledged the privilege he and others possessed made it difficult to truly walk in others' shoes. He critiqued some of his SJLLC peers, explaining "they are middle-class White kids or middle-class minorities. . . and you can say being homeless must be awful all you want, but I don't really think they can imagine it on a level that it requires to truly know what [the homeless] are going through." In John's final interview, he attributed his growing awareness of privilege to the SJLLC philosophy class, explaining it helped him apply a social justice lens to issues and thus, "think [more] about other people's position in the world relative to my own."

Similarly, Robert's three interviews illustrated his growing awareness of his privilege. In his first interview, he shared his thinking about social justice issues (such as homelessness) and was beginning to understand underlying causes. He seemed overwhelmed by the issues, explaining, "I'd like to work towards making some changes [in society], but some of the issues are beyond what I can just do myself, you know?"

In his second interview, Robert articulated an understanding of his privilege relative to others and how it might limit his understanding of social justice. He explained,

I am a little embarrassed to admit this because of the way it may make me come off. I grew up in the sixth wealthiest town in the United States. I wasn't really that exposed. I didn't really know anybody who lived in poverty. ... It's hard to say you understand social justice when you—I have this friend who grew up [in an impoverished section of the city] and has lived with tremendous crime her whole life—it's kind of hard for me to come in and say, "I understand, I understand social justice."

In Robert's final interview, he again acknowledged his privilege and articulated his responsibility not to ignore the plight of others. In response to a question about how his experience in SJLLC informed his definition of social justice, he remarked,

I think if it did nothing else, it made it so that [I] couldn't ignore [the social injustice] going on. I think sometimes, when you get whisked away by being a college student at a school like [CMU], you see all these things that are going on, but it's a little too easy to ignore. As a friend of mine said to me—I was complaining about nobody paying attention to any of that stuff—she said, "Well, what did you want, picking a \$40,000 a year school?" That struck a chord with me because I thought, "there's some truth to that."

## Social Development

In addition to the social justice outcomes students described throughout and after their experiences in SJLLC, students also credited their experience in the LLC with helping them develop value for community and skills to make social connections. During their final interview (one year later), students drew upon community building skills gained in SJLLC to become more integrated into their new communities.

While in SJLLC, students described how they utilized the organizational elements of the community like shared living spaces and classes, connections to faculty, and co-curricular activities as scaffolding to develop value for community and deepen their social connections. One year after participation, several students reported reflecting on their experiences, emulating the shared values they found in SJLLC by seeking out community with others and striving to develop deeper social connections.

At the foundation of students' desire to seek others with shared values and deepen their social connection was their appreciation for the community formed in SJLLC. This community provided a source of friendship and lasting relationships. Andrea stated:

What I learned from [SJLLC] was just how important [meaningful] friendships were to me. ... I knew I wanted to find like-minded people, but I didn't really know how important that was going to be to my [CMU] experience until I found them.

The notion of students with similar social justice interests appeared throughout essentially all interviews as a common bond between SJLLC members.

Some students also discussed how SJLLC changed their view of community. Zoey explained,

I used to think community was just a bunch of people that lived together, and that has more weight now. All those interactions made our community strong, and having all these experiences together. What I learned from the experience is how to create a strong community and the components of [a community].

Learning, living, and interacting in SJLLC created shared experiences for participants, which allowed them to grow both as individuals and in community, and taught them how to build community.

Beyond the community development, students discussed how SJLLC taught them to make social connections. For over half of the students, understanding came in the form of recognizing their communication styles and pushing their boundaries to form more connections.

Zoey showed growth in developing social connections. In her first interview, she discussed her discovery that she and her roommate had different points of view on some social issues. She found herself exploring why their views were different, and as she did so, became comfortable asking probing questions. Eventually, she explained, she left her “comfort zone and became more outgoing.” In her final interview, Zoey discussed how being a member of SJLLC continued to affect her, “I think I seek out and [am] more involved in community. I really enjoyed that experience. That wasn’t something that I would normally do when I joined the floor.” This transformation from listening to peers to then actively engaging suggests Zoey developed in her ability to form social connections. Most students echoed Zoey’s sentiment, reporting being more confident in their social interactions and engagement related to social justice issues.

### Discussion and Implications

When students lived in SJLLC, they experienced many similarities in their mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1993); they lived and took classes together and partook in shared meals, co-curricular activities, and service learning. One year later, their mesosystems were changed. Yet the growth many of them they experienced while participating in SJLLC remained, as did their ability to create their own sense of community. Students possessed broadened awareness of social justice issues and the presence of these issues in the community surrounding CMU and greater capacity for social justice and civic engagement, shown through the ability to live out their values and awareness of privilege. Furthermore, they were able to emulate some of the scaffolding initially provided by the LLC in creating their own communities—seeking others with shared values while deepening friendships. These findings suggest shifts in students’ developmentally instigative characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), and particularly in their *selective responsivity* (how they interacted with their surroundings) and *directive beliefs* (their agency in relation to their environment). Students demonstrated new awareness of and engagement in social justice in the community surrounding CMU (*selective responsivity*) and deeper consideration of how to live their values (*directive beliefs*). Students’ developmentally instigative characteristics may also explain their differing reactions to others’ social justice issues (Sandra being resistant to learning about AIDS; Sandra and Zoey not connecting concepts from their coursework to their experiences in the communities).

Regarding implications for research, Broido (2000) identified information sources and reflection opportunities as necessary for social justice ally development. Our findings support these claims; students discussed how peers and coursework served as information sources and conversations with peers helped them to reflect on their experiences. Our findings revealed another important aspect of social justice ally development—capacity building. Our participants discussed how their experience in SJLLC helped them become more aware of their privilege relative to others and provided them with guidance in how to live their values. Furthermore, after SJLLC they demonstrated greater appreciation for community and capacity for social connections. Students drew on these enhanced capacities after they left SJLLC to continue in their social justice development. Based on these findings, we recommend that social justice understanding and ally development include mechanisms for capacity building and avenues for practice—curricular

and cocurricular elements that advance self-awareness of privilege and illustrate how to live one's values.

Consistent with service-learning literature (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Kendall, 1990; Morton, 1995), students' experiences in SJLLC helped them move from a charity to social justice mindset. The LLC classes and activities provided the requisite curricular and cocurricular connections and opportunities for reflection that Dooley and Burant (2015) deemed necessary for students to draw meaning from their experiences. Like Watterson et al. (2012) surmised, students credited their classes with helping them to grow in their complexity of understanding social justice issues and ability to reflect on them. Thus, practitioners seeking to emulate SJLLC should include the following in the design: avenues for integration of curricular and cocurricular material, time for reflection, and assessment mechanisms to ensure effectiveness of outcomes.

It is worth highlighting the constant peer interactions (both social and academic) prevalent in our first two interviews with students had almost completely fallen away by their third interview. On the surface, our finding might call into question the value of peer interactions touted in the living-learning community research (Pike, 1999). However, it is important to note even though their relationships with peers had changed, several students continued applying the relational skills they learned in SJLLC to new contexts, as evidenced by Zoey's and Sue's willingness to initiate and engage in deeper discussions with peers about justice issues and Andrea's realization she needed deeper friendships to be happy.

Sandra's experience in SJLLC is also important to consider, as she sat on the margins of the community, both philosophically and relationally. Her story provides an important counter-narrative of LLCs as a panacea for all students, illustrating the necessity of providing additional support to marginalized students, and avenues for exiting the community should they wish to do so. Sandra's experience also connects to Broido's (2000) findings related to social justice ally development, as one of the precursors to such development in Broido's model is egalitarian viewpoints, which arguably Sandra did not possess when she joined the community. Further research is needed on how to ensure SJLLCs, as self-regulating communities, do not exclude individuals whose ideologies differ from the group.

Our findings reveal social justice themed LLCs promote understanding of social justice issues and support development of capacity for social justice and civic engagement. Virtually all students in our study demonstrated passion for civic engagement and action, illustrating these communities may enliven undergraduate civic engagement. As stated, more research is needed on the students at the margins of these communities, who, like Sandra, came to SJLLC to find like-minded peers, but instead found isolation. Furthermore, additional research is warranted on whether the enduring impact of SJLLC after one year remains salient throughout students' undergraduate career and beyond.

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