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CONTINUED SERVICE:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF IMMERSIVE SERVICE-  
LEARNING COURSES

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business  
Department of Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Jonathan T. McIlvaine

May 2015

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Jonathan T. McIlvaine

entitled

Continued Service:

A Qualitative Study on the Impact of Immersive Service-Learning Courses

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
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### Abstract

The present study sought to understand the impact of service-learning courses on students' attitudes and goals toward education and future civic engagement. The research gathered responses from eight college students who participated in a service-learning course titled "Small Island Sustainability" that took place in the Bahamas. The following three research questions guided the study: 1) How do immersive service-learning courses impact attitudes toward future civic engagement? 2) How do immersive service-learning courses impact goals of future civic engagement? 3) How has a service-learning experience impacted the view of the importance of education? The study utilized a grounded theory design, resulting in a core theory emerging from participant responses: experiential learning impacts the way students view their major and the contributions they can make in the world. By engaging in course content alongside meaningful service, students gain a broader understanding of how to contribute to their community. Major themes supported the theory: benefits of experiential learning, cooperative learning, increased engagement of course content, increased community involvement, and changed behaviors. Implications for higher education practice include more service-learning courses that allow students to discover ways to renew their community through their education.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*“The modern discovery of inner experience...implies a new worth and sense of dignity in human individuality, a sense that an individual is not merely a property of nature, set in place to a scheme independent of him...but that he adds something, that he makes a contribution.”* (Dewey, 1938, p. 172)

### Service-Learning

According to Boyer (1990), education and citizen ship strive to “help students develop responsible ways of thinking, believing, and acting” (p. 5). For students to become active citizens in their community, they must receive the basic knowledge of the issues facing the world around them (Boyer, 1990). Higher education often employs an interdisciplinary pedagogy known as service-learning (SL) to help students connect academic theory to intentional community service work (Molee, Henry, Sessa, & McKinney-Prupis, 2010). According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (2011), the pedagogy of SL builds relationships between course work, class discussions, and reflections to meaningful civic service. Ultimately, this discipline seeks to connect course theories and ideologies for practice and to help students develop an inner commitment to the community around them (Stepteau-Watson, 2012).

Service-learning has become a prominent piece of modern American higher education. However, the emphasis on college as a preparation for life long service has not developed recently. In fact, the earliest colleges in the United States had deep roots in educating and preparing students to have a concern for the public good. Colleges

prepared leaders with skills to solve community needs in their colonial towns (Felten & Clayton, 2011). Currently, SL courses prepare and equip students to interact with the greater community in and after college. Common outcomes of these SL courses include a development of personal identity and beliefs, a clarification and or adoption of social responsibility, and civic-awareness (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). SL courses help fulfill the institutional missions of modern universities, which often involves a contribution to the public good. Therefore, students must engage more in courses that cultivate a sense of civic-mindedness (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

Defining service-learning proves complex, because it overlaps with commonly held notions of volunteerism, community service, internships, and practicums. An accepted definition that includes these concepts put forth by Bringle and Hatcher (1995) stated the pedagogy as a

. . . [c]ourse-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (p. 4)

The pedagogy of service-learning, as aforementioned, connects academic theories and ideas to meaningful service (Molee et al., 2010). This pedagogy typically has an academic component that corresponds to a specific major or program (Rhoads, 1998). For example, a learning objective for a Spanish education course might consist of learning the specific tools for teaching Spanish to children. The SL experience teaches Spanish to children in an afterschool program in the local community. As another

example of SL, a Biology course has students learning how to test water for contamination. Instead of sitting in a lab with jars of water gathered by a lab assistant, a student could work with the local parks and recreation department to test the water for the county. The department would offer specific training and access to the water, and the students would then share their results and analysis in class. In these examples, students participate in meaningful service with the community that helps them better conceptualize course material (Coulter-Kern, Coulter-Kern, Schenkel, Walker, & Fogle, 2013; Seider, Rabinowicz, & Glimor, 2012). By engaging in course content, students begin to understand their role in the world and the contributions they can make to it.

SL courses benefit learning because they help inform personal and psychological student development. According to Scott (2012), “Service-learning courses that intersect academic learning in the context of relevant community partnerships are potentially rich opportunities for students to wrestle with moral-related issues” (p. 30). Through guided reflection, students develop new ways of thinking about their identities and beliefs.

### **Civic Engagement**

Universities increasingly emphasize the importance of civic activities and the contributions young people can make in their communities (Perry & Katula, 2008). Through SL, students use their academic knowledge to meet specific community needs and, in doing so, become exposed to a greater sense of citizenship. Avalos, Sax, and Astin (1999) reported college students who served and volunteered six hours a week more likely became active citizens in their community post-college. This involvement meets the goal of citizenship and community engagement. Therefore, service-learning courses assume to benefit not only college students but also the greater community.

These benefits reflect the learning objectives for SL courses: developing students into responsible citizens and connecting them to their community through service (Eyler & Giles, 1999). These courses also help emerging adults personally grow and mature as citizens. According to Flanagan and Levine (2010), “Civic engagement is a key part of the transition between adolescence and mature adulthood” (p. 160). Adults involved in service-learning courses actively participate in communities and have a stronger desire to work with others, volunteer time, and work toward social change or for non-profit organizations (Astin & Sax, 1998). If desiring to educate students as active citizens of the world, college campuses must prioritize service-learning courses.

The experience students have in SL courses proves important to understand. With the application of course ideas and theories through meaningful experiences and guided reflection, specific elements and best practices shape student attitudes and behavior toward future civic engagement. Little research has addressed the transformational process students go through during and after an immersive SL course. Therefore, learning what re-directs or strengthens students’ desires for community service necessitates study.

Higher education professionals need a study that 1) highlights the importance of these courses and 2) determines if the courses in fact have an impact on attitudes and behaviors toward future service involvement. Thus, the current study explores students’ immersive service-learning course experience to answer the research questions: 1) “How do immersive service-learning courses impact attitudes toward future civic engagement?”; 2) “How do immersive service-learning courses impact goals of future civic engagement?”; and 3) “How has a service-learning experience impacted the view of the importance of education?”

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Service-Learning**

**Experiential learning theory.** Dewey (1938), an education philosopher, laid the groundwork for experiential learning in higher education. In particular, he described the correlation between education and experience as a necessary relationship for student learning. Experiential learning offers students the ability to infuse their personal experiences, ideas, and outlooks into the coursework (Molee et al., 2010). In American higher education, this style of learning has existed since the colonial colleges, when students prepared to serve the public good (Felten & Clayton, 2011). Because of this history, there remains an established relationship between service and education and how they complement one another.

For several decades, higher education professionals understood learning through experience in the context of the Experiential Learning Theory of Development, which students individually developed through external activities (Kolb, 1984). Kolb (1984) expanded on Dewey's work and presented experiential learning as "the transaction between internal characteristics and external circumstances" (p 133). Over the past few decades, a new phenomenon of experiential learning in American higher education surfaced known as service-learning, in which student learning becomes enhanced through meaningful service experiences focused on meeting a community need.

**Service-learning defined.** Service-learning operates as the tool used to connect academic knowledge to intentional community service (Molee et al., 2010). It integrates course concepts with practice and provides students the ability to fully understand the reason why ideas and concepts apply (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Through SL, students can in community work, reflect on the given experience, and often bridge a connection to academic coursework (Scott, 2012).

Guided reflection in SL courses proves essential for producing course learning outcomes. Reflection on the service by way of personal journaling and classroom discussion remains important to the overall learning experience of students (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Conrad & Hedin, 1980; Eyster & Giles, 1999; Rutter & Newman, 1989). Reflection gives students the chance to process and describe their experience and form a position on what they see as community needs and assets (Molee et al., 2010). Feenstra (2011) noted that, through reflection, students can understand the world and identify ways their skills and education can contribute to meeting those needs.

**Service-learning outcomes.** Student participation in service-learning greatly increases academic competency, personal development, and civic awareness (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin et al., 2000). Students learn transferable concepts in the classroom and see those concepts developed in a community service setting. Students participating in these courses report feeling more academically challenged and understanding course material better (Coulter-Kern et al., 2013). Students gain valuable life skills and can experience an increase in moral growth, cultural understanding, and career direction (Astin et al., 2000; Chun & Evans, 2009; Coulter-Kern et al., 2013; Scott, 2012).

Application emerges as another important learning outcome for these courses. Eyler and Giles (1999) defined application as “the degree to which students can link what they are doing in the classroom to what they are experiencing in the community and vice versa” (p. 170). Students learn more effectively if they take material discussed in the classroom and connect it to a social problem or service experience. Application proves one of the most significant learning outcomes for SL courses because it allows students to draw these connections (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Other outcomes include problem solving, civic-mindedness, self-esteem, personal efficacy, and enhanced critical thinking skills (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler and Giles, 1999; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001).

Through learning outcomes focused on applicable service work and intentional reflection, students can develop their identity personally, professionally, and even spiritually. Past research broadly covered the relationship between SL and identity development (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jones & Abes, 2004). Service-learning courses and experiences often develop internal dispositions such as self-awareness, reflection, and gratitude (Jones & Abes, 2004). As previously mentioned, reflection functions as an important tool for SL experiences, allowing students to spend time linking their own personal connection to society and the world (Sikula & Sikula, 2005). Student participation, application, and reflection help validate the practicality of service-learning courses for higher education.

#### **Academic service-learning courses vs. immersive service-learning courses.**

An important distinction exists between academic service-learning courses and immersive service-learning courses and experiences. Academic service-learning courses, by design, help students engage with course material and expose them to applicable civic



service (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). Through academic courses, students receive college credit for completed assignments and mandated reflection.

Immersive service-learning courses and experiences often prove more holistic. Immersive service-learning courses and experiences typically engage the cultural context with co-curricular approach (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Fenzel & Leary, 1997). These courses and experiences can include mission trips, studying abroad, volunteering, and fundraising. Eyster and Giles (1999) stated service-learning courses and experiences typically “immerse students in situations designed to allow them to live the life—if only for a short period of time—of the people whom they are serving” (p.143). This model of SL proves typically common for alternative break/mission trips that remain short-term (such as one week) and lack the academic component (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

**Service-learning partnerships.** Community partners act as important co-educators in SL courses (Bringle & Hatcher, 2004). Community agencies and organizations frequently offer training and access to meaningful work that help students conceptualize course material. These partners must participate in the creation of course syllabi and materials with professors because they too act as teachers throughout the semester (Bringle & Hatcher, 2004).

**Service-learning courses best practices.** Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, and Fisher (2010) suggested one must utilize class discussion as a means to reflect on service work. Tools such as journals and weekly assignments help students process learning experiences and academic courses. By utilizing these tools, students experience the course together, have appropriate space to reflect, and discuss with others what they have learned.

One notable best practice takes place at Georgetown University, where they use a community-based model for service-learning courses. Blending community issues and classroom learning together frames courses in a way that focuses on specific community needs (Guebert, 2009). At Georgetown, students can understand topics such as homelessness by serving at local soup kitchens and food shelters on a weekly basis (Donahue & Huntley, 2013). These regular activities offer students the chance to study community development while immersing themselves in specific community issues.

As another best practice, students can receive credit for learning and not for service (Guebert, 2009). This best practice provides students the opportunity to use service as a tool to expand their view on their major and what they would like to do after college. Through an explored understanding of self and set learning goals, SL can offer both a short-term and long-term impact personally, professionally, and civically (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Jones & Abes, 2004). Based on social issues, these credit-based courses often cultivate in students a greater empathy for civic equality (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

One noteworthy best practice at the institutional level provides incentives for faculty to include service-learning in their courses. Portland State University utilizes service-learning courses to problem-solve in the community, a practice supportive of the institutional mission (Ward, 1998). These positive initiatives, along with bonuses and promotions, encourage faculty to incorporate a service component in their courses. Portland State stands as just one example of an institution that utilizes faculty rewards as a means to encourage service-learning in the classroom.

In addition to faculty rewards, another best practice involves access to faculty and administrative support structures to help advance service-learning programs. Campus

Compact, a national organization of 1,100 college and university presidents, encourages campuses to prepare their students for life after college (Campus Compact, 2014; Ward, 1998). By having senior-level administrative support through Campus Compact, institutions learn how to build stronger community partnerships (Campus Compact, 2014). These partnerships strengthen the learning outcomes for service-learning courses and ultimately strengthen the learning experience for students.

### **Civic Engagement**

Civic engagement refers to a concern for and commitment to community affairs (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Specific levels of participation include political involvement, charity work, and community service (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Whether this participation includes voting or working closely with a specific non-profit organization, those committed to their greater community often have an educational experience that increased their desire to remain civically involved in the future (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003) discussed the purpose of higher education and its relationship to civic engagement:

If today's college graduates are to be positive forces in this world, they need not only to possess knowledge and intellectual capacities but also to see themselves as members of a community, as individuals with a responsibility to contribute to their communities. They must be willing to act for the common good and capable of doing so effectively. (p. 7)

If higher education strives to prepare students as educated citizens who serve the public good, those students must acquire the knowledge and willingness to do so. If courses

align with service and utilize a SL model, students likely will feel prepared to make a contribution in society (Colby et al., 2003).

**Civic engagement and service-learning.** SL courses have several influences on students and their ideas toward civic engagement. Quality educational activities often influence what students do after college (Astin, 1993; Astin et al., 2000). To this end, Kuh (2003) presented student engagement as “the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside the classroom” (p. 25). In relation to civic engagement, students become immersed in meaningful community service and can process their role in the world in which they live (Astin et al., 2000; Sikula & Sikula, 2005). Through this processing, students more likely develop a sense of purpose, grow personally and professionally, and engage fully in their communities (Carson & Domangue, 2013). Some students leave these courses with a broader view of the world around them and what they want to do (Eyler & Giles, 1999). If an impact happens on students’ behavior and attitudes toward future work, what shapes the impact?

Astin and Sax (1998) found participation in service-learning courses has positive, short-term effects on students. Such influences include increased critical thinking skills, self-confidence, and leadership ability. In a follow up study, Avalos et. al (1999) sought to see if academic service-learning participation had a long-term impact for students. Results demonstrated “undergraduate service participation continues to have direct effects at least through the first five years following the completion of college” (p. 200). Thus, during the first five post-college years, a significant difference in service participation proves evident in students’ lives when compared to students without such experiences.

**Civic engagement and diversity.** SL courses help students develop interpersonal skills in relation to working with those different from them. According to Eyler and Giles (1999), “Students reported that service-learning courses helped them work better with the other, and over the course of a semester . . . there was clear leadership and communication skill development” (p. 161). Through the use of communicating to different types of people and taking ownership of projects, students develop skills that prepare them for future interpersonal situations. Eyler and Giles (1999) also noted the practical skills students develop in a SL course over a semester, including conflict-management, discernment, critical thinking, reasoning, and dealing with ambiguity. These skills evidently prepare students for future professional environments and civic responsibilities. Students also gain the ability to interact in culturally diverse settings.

Service-learning typically prepares students for a diverse work place by helping them to form well-rounded cultural understanding (Chun & Evans, 2009; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Through SL courses, students get the opportunity to explore the different issues and elements of other cultures (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Campuses become more diverse as the nation constantly shifts culturally; thus, students must learn how to work with people from different backgrounds. Through service-learning courses, students continue to develop their understanding of the world. By developing relationships with people of different backgrounds, they develop new cultural competencies and knowledge valuable for post-college work and civic engagement (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Current literature showed a strong connection between service-learning and civic engagement. Often, SL courses lead students to a greater sense of empathy or

commitment toward the public good. Therefore, institutions must prioritize these courses and assess the formative impact service-learning can have in the lives of students.

The present study sought to explore one of the gaps in the current literature: the transformational impact of immersive service-learning courses on students' attitudes and behaviors toward future civic engagement. By looking at an experience, the current qualitative study investigated the impact of SL courses on participants.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Methods**

The present qualitative study primarily aimed to discover, through a grounded theory design, how immersive service-learning courses impact attitudes and behaviors toward future civic engagement. With grounded theory, researchers attempt to understand and “explain the feelings of individuals as they experience a phenomenon or process” (Creswell, 2008, p. 439). The design seeks to understand the growth in certain beliefs and values in a specific experience and “explains an educational process of events, activities, actions, and interactions that occur over time” (p. 432). This design also explains the development or change of one’s ideology and beliefs (Patton, 2002). Once discovered, the theory develops over time through methodical data collection of the specific phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The present study used a grounded theory approach to identify how the interactions with other students during an experience related to a certain outcome (Creswell, 2008). The researcher identified themes that informed the transformation of attitudes toward future service. Moreover, the researcher intentionally selected an immersive service-learning course that had a significant amount of time between its completion and the timing of the current study. In doing so, the researcher discovered the impact of the course and what re-directs or strengthens students’ desire for civic service.

## **Participants**

The study took place at a small, private faith-based liberal arts institution in the Midwest. All students participated in an honors program service-learning course during a January term in the Bahamas. Students in the course investigated the topic of “Small Island Sustainability.” This course fulfilled a general physical and natural sciences education requirement. In order to understand the significance of the course, the researcher identified the specific “sequence of activities, actions by people, and interactions among people” as themes (Creswell, 2008, p. 441).

Twenty-eight freshmen students participated in the course, and one senior student acted as a teaching assistant. The class spent time on two different islands: one undeveloped and pristine and the other a popular and tourist intensive setting. The students spent most of their time learning about waste management, water treatment, the tourist industry, the benefits/challenges of this industry, and other related topics. While most of these topics proved new to students academically, many students felt enlightened by the experience and reported conceptualizing their ideas and work in new ways. The course also focused on sustainability education applicable both internationally and domestically.

## **Procedure**

The researcher made initial contact with participants through email and included a description of the purpose of the study and a consent form. The researcher sent out the email to all 28 students from the service-learning course four different times, and eight students responded with a willingness to participate. The researcher proceeded with these eight participants and conducted 45-minute phone interviews with each of them.



The researcher collected data through these semi-structured interviews. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher poses questions but remains open for the interviewee to take them and respond as desired (Creswell, 2008). To understand the experience, the researcher in the present study asked five standard questions with various follow-up questions. These follow-up questions allowed the interviewees to interpret the questions and articulate their thoughts in a way specific to their personal experience. For a theory to emerge, the researcher needed to listen for specific themes from the personal experiences of students (Creswell, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The researcher conducted the interviews over the phone because participants were on summer break and geographically scattered. In conducting the telephone interviews, the researcher used an adaptor and tape recorder. The researcher then transcribed, coded, and analyzed these themes from the interviews and highlighted repeated words. Within one month after transcribing the interviews, the researcher destroyed the recordings.

Through these interviews, the researcher identified categories, key phrases, and experiences as central themes to the study. After coding all the interviews, the researcher listened to the interviews again at a later time and confirmed the accuracy of the emerged themes. Through this process, a central theme emerged that developed into the theory identified in the study (Creswell, 2008).

### **Benefits**

Through the present study, the researcher identified the development of attitudes and behaviors related to future civic engagement. As one common learning objective, service-learning courses seek to develop students personally and professionally by connecting them to the greater community around them (Eyler & Giles, 1999). By

examining this experience in a service-learning course, the current study investigated whether or not students cultivated a stronger desire to be civically involved through the course. The study proved beneficial to higher education because it highlighted the validity of this course and determined that this course impacted students' attitudes and behaviors related to future civic engagement.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The present study aimed to discover how service-learning courses impact the attitudes and goals regarding education and future civic engagement. The findings of the study included thoughtful reflection and discussion on experiential learning, cooperative learning, course content, community involvement, and changes in behavior. Participants identified these topics as the main lessons learned in their service-learning course. The section below discusses the five themes—experiential learning, cooperative learning, increased engagement of course content, increased community involvement, and changed behaviors—In greater detail with corresponding sub-themes

From eight transcribed interviews, a core theme emerged as the importance and value of experiential learning. This theme frequently surfaced in the data, and the other four themes informed this central theme. Through the coding process—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—all five themes clearly highlighted the attitudes and goals of civic engagement and education.

Table 1 displays results from the study based on the five themes and their corresponding sub-themes listed in order of frequency.

Table 1

*Summary of Themes*

Theme	Subtheme
<b>Experiential Learning</b>	Increase in retention of course content Value of engagement with the topic through experience Application
<b>Cooperative Learning</b>	Group dynamics Learning alongside others creates deeper learning
<b>Increased Engagement of Course Content</b>	Appreciation for holistic education and the liberal arts
<b>Increased Community Involvement</b>	Be civically involved Raise awareness for sustainable practices Use major to serve the community
<b>Changed Behaviors</b>	Behavioral changes can impact others

**Core theme: Experiential Learning – A Greater Appreciation**

Seven out of eight participants expressed a greater appreciation for experiential learning. They enjoyed learning about environmental science through various service projects in the Bahamas. They recognized this style of learning allowed them to retain course content, value physical engagement with the topic, and apply newfound knowledge to their lives. One participant expressed the benefit of this learning style:

I learned that I do better with hands-on-type learning. The fact that we were completely immersed in the topic and constantly discussing it. . . . I came away with a whole lot more knowledge than I do with a typical course.

Other participants expressed that immersion in the topic allowed the topic to “come alive,” making the learning experience even more meaningful.

**Sub-theme: Increase in retaining course content.** Sub-themes refer to themes that emerge from some, not all, participant interviews. Several participants expressed physically engaging with the topic helped them retain course content. Through experiencing the topic hands on, participants better retained what they learned. One participant said,

As for different courses that I've taken in college and throughout my time, I remember portions of those, but there wasn't the experience that was paired with it and so that course just came alive so much more than all the other courses I had. The long hours studying the topic paired with the service experience allowed for participants to remember specifically what they learned.

**Sub-theme: Value of being engaged with the topic through experience.** Many participants mentioned that immersing in the topic with a service experience offered more space for them to understand it. One participant stated,

I learned that I don't learn very well by hearing. I need to actually be present and see it, whether I touch it or not is one thing, but this idea of seeing what I'm learning is incredibly important and that's how I learn.

A greater awareness of their personal learning styles emerged for participants. Instead of listening to a professor in a classroom or reading a textbook, participants acknowledged that experiencing the topic hands on helped them better learn the subject.

**Sub-theme: Application.** Applying classroom content proved difficult for students because content can seem to lack practicality. Putting content into practice can better facilitate application. One participant stated,

I think it's a great way to apply what you learned in the classroom and just do something with it so it doesn't just become stagnant and you forget about it. But it comes something real and active and meaningful in your life.

Participants discussed the practicality of the topic and seeing its transcendent purpose in their lives as a significant benefit to the course.

## **Theme 2: Cooperative Learning**

Six of the eight participants acknowledged teamwork and group dynamics as important components of their service-learning experience. Participants reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of community learning. In the service-learning course, participants realized the importance of teamwork, group dynamics, and how learning alongside others facilitated deeper learning. One participant said, "It fosters a team; it exercises team building. It fosters your ability to work with other people, whether you get along with them or not. It also helps you learn what you bring to the table." Despite the long days with the team, participants acknowledged that cooperative learning provided an opportunity to learn more about themselves and the world around them.

**Sub-theme: Group dynamics.** Participants in the course learned about the effect of diverse opinions on group dynamics. One participant sensed, "What one group or person thinks is a good idea or best idea, another will think that's the worst option or not as good." In a service-learning course, students work together to use what they learn and apply it through service. Participants learned the importance of relying on each other, despite disagreement.

**Sub-theme: Learning alongside others creates deeper learning.** Participants acknowledged that the learning did not stop after a long day of service or in the

classroom. Participants learned lessons through reflection and in-depth conversation with one another. One participant said, “We were so submerged in what we were talking about and so it just came out in our conversations all the time so we just had conversations on a deeper level.” Participants discovered that living and working with a team created space for reflection, which resulted in a deeper understanding of the topic.

### **Theme 3: Increased Engagement of Course Content**

Five participants willingly admitted initial disinterest in the course topic. One participant mentioned, “Going into the course, I wasn’t passionate about. It’s not like I wasn’t excited about it at all, but it wasn’t something I would have been thrilled to be talking about all the time.” The five participants felt “ambivalent” toward the topic of environmentalism.

After taking the course and immersing themselves in the content, participants gained an appreciation for and found themselves more engaged in the topic. One participant stated,

I’m not terribly excited about science . . . but seeing that come alive and seeing how that had important implications for me . . . it became something that I am interested in learning about and I can see applications for my daily life.

Through the service-learning course, participants discovered that environmentalism applies to several areas of their lives and can prove interesting to learn.

**Sub-theme: Appreciation for holistic education and the liberal arts.** The small island sustainability course helped participants appreciate the liberal arts. One participant mentioned,

I've always felt that liberal arts learning is one of the most important ways to learn. I think education should recognize that all kinds of learning is connected and that we need to draw from different aspects of our lives to really learn and grow and develop as people.

By taking the course, participants recognized the significance of the liberal arts and the positive implications these courses have for their lives.

Another participant mentioned recognizing all subjects as valuable to learn. You realize you can't just cut off and segregate parts of yourself or parts of the world and say I don't need to learn this. You see why liberal arts are more important...it can help make you a more rounded person and discover things about yourself and help other people.

Participants acknowledged that, even though they had a specific major or discipline, other courses and topics still impact their education.

#### **Theme 4: Increased Community Involvement**

One protocol question specifically targeted attitude and future goals toward service and the community. As such, all participants believed the course fostered a new passion to get involved. The small island sustainability course highlighted the need to become civically aware, increased engagement of sustainability practices, and helped participants see how they could use their major to positively impact their community.

**Sub-theme: Be civically involved.** Six of the eight participants discussed increased desires to become civically involved in their community, but the responses varied by degree. Some reported feeling more "compelled" to do something, and others have seen significant changes in their dedication to their community. Most participants



admitted they could make small changes in their behavior that would impact how they live and interact with the community around them.

**Sub-theme: Raise awareness of sustainability practices.** Most participants expressed they still promote sustainable practices as a result of the course. All participants reflected on returning to their campus and wanting to make immediate changes to their lives regarding what they learned about environmentalism. These changes included establishing sustainability assistants. Students in these positions live in each residence hall on campus and dedicate their time and energy to promoting and advertising positive sustainability practices for other students. These students also facilitate sustainability month in the hopes to encourage the campus to “practice recycling and sustainable practices every day.” Participants agreed that the changes made have positively benefited the campus community.

One participant mentioned, “I basically felt really excited and really convicted about sustainability issues and I really want to help people see that sustainability isn’t just a political issue, but it’s something God calls us to do.” Participants made the connection between taking care of the earth and their religious background. Many described caring for the world and promoting sustainability as “emphasized in their faith.”

**Sub-theme: Use major to serve the community.** Participants acknowledged that, although their majors had little connection to environmentalism, they could still make an impact in their community with their majors. One participant said,

One of the things I did when I got back was I got involved in an ESL tutoring program . . . it’s not related to the environment, but it’s related to one of my strengths, which is English, and it’s something I could do to get involved.

The service-learning course increased the participant's desire to become involved in their community. Despite most participants not pursuing an environmental studies major, they recognized what they learn through their major can impact the world around them in a positive way.

### **Theme 5: Changed Behaviors**

Participants acknowledged what they learned during their service-learning course could apply to their daily lives. One mentioned, "Being more aware and caring for creation . . . is something really important and . . . I can . . . integrate for the rest of my life." Some reported that small changes impact those around them and change the way they live in the world.

**Sub-theme: Behavioral changes can impact others.** Four participants reported that their service-learning course increased their desire to make behavioral changes. From using less water to monitoring electricity usage, participants implemented the lessons they learned in their course into their daily lives. One participant spoke of the need to faithfully commit to these changes:

There is so much value in choosing to live my life faithfully in the smaller things like recycling or just everyday choosing different things to be more aware of.

And as a result . . . it has such an impact. And even though that can kind of be discouraging to look at, that it's so small, that was something I really came away with. This is something really important that I can integrate in the rest of my life.

Participants realized they could make practical alterations in their lives through small and simple behavioral changes. This choice would not only change the resources they used on a daily basis but would also influence the environments around them.

**Conclusion**

For participants, the service-learning course informed them on how use their major as way to contribute to their college community. Although little conclusions appear between the impact of the course and post-college civic engagement due to the lack of longitudinal data, the following discussion addresses the parallels of the present study and service-learning literature.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The range of positive responses from participants regarding their appreciation for experiential learning aligned closely with the service-learning literature. Dewey (1938) discussed the relationship between learning and citizenship and how together the two renew the educational experience. In the present study, students expressed overwhelming gratitude for civic engagement and course content that “came alive,” which helped inform the benefits of experiential learning.

The growth participants experienced in their service-learning course aligned closely with the Experiential Learning Theory of Development by Kolb (1984). Participants recognized growth in their attitudes and goals toward education and future civic engagement. Similar to the discussion by Astin and Sax (1998) on service-learning course outcomes, participants in the present study appeared to develop stronger academic engagement and civic awareness. This finding contrasted with research by Clague (1995) on the decrease of civic engagement after a service-learning course. In light of the present study’s results and literature on service-learning and civic engagement, the discussion below describes implications for higher education professionals.

#### **Experiential Learning – Learning in Community**

The study’s themes highlighted the importance of learning through experience: topic engagement and developed knowledge; learning outside the classroom; practical

application; and cooperative learning. According to Eyler and Giles (1999), effective learning occurs in connection to an experience. The small island sustainability course allowed participants to learn in a smaller group setting and in a more intensive environment, which encouraged them to discover more about the topic and themselves.

**Topic engagement and developed knowledge.** Participants in the present study realized the intrinsic value of a discipline in which they had little initial interest or knowledge. This realization aligned closely with research on students understanding and appreciating course content after becoming actively involved with it (Coulter-Kern et al., 2013). Students recognized the discipline's significance in their lives and its application to the college experience. Eyler and Giles (1999) suggested engaging in the topic can inform students' ability to draw connections between classroom and community. By taking time to explore sustainability, participants recognized its meaning for their lives and connections between the topic and their community.

For most participants in the study, the course also gave significant meaning to the liberal arts. By learning outside the formal classroom and in community, participants recognized how this topic informs the way they live their lives. One participant stated, "The knowledge itself can help make you a more rounded person and help you discover things about yourself." For participants, engaging in the topic through experience benefitted their overall learning and developed knowledge applicable to their lives.

**Learning outside the classroom and practical application.** Eyler and Giles (1999) suggested service-learning courses offer students a broader glimpse of the world around them. In fact, most participants in the current study recognized that experiencing a topic they never explored provided room to discuss its practical application. By learning

outside the classroom, participants could take a topic they had little interest in and apply it to their lives. Aligning closely with Avalos et al. (1999), the service-learning course influenced the way students viewed their role on their college campus and in the world.

Educational activities outside the classroom can shape what students do during and after college (Astin, 1993). For participants, the activities they experienced during their service-learning course informed their future campus involvement. The course led them to become civically involved in their community through local organizations or on-campus programming. Corresponding with Carson and Domangue (2013), participants recognized their values, came back to campus, and engaged with their own community through various leadership roles.

Another discussion point presents itself by how much students remain unaware of the community involvement opportunities that connect to their major. Most students entered college with some service involvement yet failed to see their education as a way to get civically involved on campus. This lack of connection between service and education raises some questions, given that the institution emphasizes civic involvement in its mission. Most participants mentioned taking the service-learning course exposed them to ways of getting involved in their community. However, opportunities already exist on campus for students to connect their interests to service. More research should address whether the course served as the propulsion for their civic involvement and if participants had not known of existing service opportunities on campus.

**Cooperative learning.** Upon entering college, students often expect to learn in community. Professors and peers act as co-educators in the university setting and frequently inform student learning. In the present study's service-learning course,

reflection with these co-educators enhanced the educational experience for participants. Students mentioned this type of cooperative learning as a means to think deeply and discuss ways to apply learning. Reflection often offers a way for students to process the overall learning experience (Levesque-Bristol et al., 2010). In the current study, participants utilized reflection as a means to draw connections collaboratively and begin discussions on the application of the content to their lives.

Through cooperative learning, participants became aware of ways to apply what they learned in their college community. With thoughtful discussion on course ideas and theories, participants discussed ways to bring sustainable practices to campus. They discussed practical solutions or problems to solve that dealt with and raised awareness of environmental issues. Cooperative learning allowed students to draw connections between their course and their community and discover changes they could make.

Thoughts on negative group dynamics also frequently emerged in participant responses. Through learning as a group, participants could see their peers as detrimental to their experience. Participants acknowledged learning in community as a benefit to the overall experience, but specific individuals in their course made it difficult for participants to fully engage and work alongside one another. These difficulties possibly corresponded to certain personality issues; however, this theme demonstrated that group dynamics do shape and inform the overall learning experience for students.

### **Limitations of Research**

Gender imbalance within the participant sample most notably limited the present study with a female to male ratio of seven to one. Although gender ratio did not play a significant role in the study, responses may differ slightly with gender balance.

Although one objective of the study sought to discover the impact of an immersive service-learning course over time, a second limitation also came with the length of time between the service-learning experience and the interviews with participants. Over 20 months had passed since the participants left the Bahamas. Therefore, some participants felt unsure or could not remember certain aspects of their experience. Participants may have had more insight to offer the research if the study took place six to nine months after the completion of the course.

However, the length of time did prove beneficial in solidifying some of the behaviors resulting from the experiences. Students from the immersive service-learning course still appeared committed to promoting positive sustainability practices to their campus body and using their education to impact the community around them through tutoring and teaching. Although the time between the experience and the study resulted in a lapse of memory for some participants, behavioral change clearly had occurred.

Lastly, the lack of longitudinal data with the participants also created a limitation worth noting. The researcher could not confirm if the impact from the experience resulted in either short-term or long-term behavioral changes because most of the participants still attend college. If the researcher selected students who participated in a similar course and had graduated five to ten years out ago, the data could prove beneficial in understanding a longer-term impact of immersive service-learning courses.

### **Implications for Practice**

Despite these limitations, the data showed service-learning courses enhanced student learning. As reported by Astin and Sax (1998), service-learning courses have a positive influence on students' overall college experience. Participants expressed that



engaging with the topic experientially helped them retain course content and gain a greater appreciation for the topic and the liberal arts. Perhaps the greatest implication of the present study appeared in how much experiential education influences learning. Participants entered this course knowing they would learn about environmentalism and sustainable practices but did not realize how much they would learn about themselves and the world around them. While participants mentioned learning substantial amounts of material at once, they never expressed any dissatisfaction.

Through experiential education, participants gained a stronger awareness of their purpose and what they could do with their major. They recognized that, although their major had little to do with environmentalism, they could still serve their community with their education. One participant mentioned, “As a Spanish education major . . . I would take my students to a Spanish speaking community and serve the community with them . . . serving food in a food bank.” Students realized their education and scholarship could transcend the classroom and act as contributions to the community around them.

Service-learning courses influence how students view and practice scholarship. As mentioned by Boyer (1990), if students seek to renew their education, they also approach their community the same way. Service-learning has the potential to reshape not only the future of communities but also of higher education as a whole.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Having only collected responses from eight participants at one institution, more research proves necessary. The results from the current study provided thoughtful discussion on the impact of service-learning courses. However, the study lacked a report on the impact of these courses after college. Replicating the study quantitatively with

alumni from the institution would begin to reveal the long-term impact of service-learning courses on civic engagement. Moreover, facilitating a similar study could increase responses from both men and women, unlike the unequal responses by gender reported in the present study. Finally, a quantitative study utilizing a pre and posttest would increase the depth of responses from participants and provide significant meaning to some of the themes that emerged in the current study.

### **Conclusion**

The impact of service-learning courses appears broadly highlighted in the context of higher education research. The present study endeavored to add depth to and a more practical understanding of how service-learning courses impact attitudes and behaviors toward future civic engagement. The study's results repeatedly reinforced the importance of experiential education in higher education. Through practical and tangible education, participants of the present study gained an appreciation for the topic, saw the need for service, and became more inclined to make changes in their community. In the study, the service-learning course motivated students to use their education to make small changes that would impact the community around them. The study's implication for institutions of higher education promoted the integration of service-learning into the campus culture. This integration could manifest as more courses designed with a service-learning focus or as more departments offering intentional components of service experiences for students. By doing so, students become challenged to renew their thinking and see their education as a way to contribute something meaningful to the world around them.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Protocol Questions**

- 1) Please briefly tell me about your service-learning experience (i.e. where you went, what program you went with, what was the course, etc.).
  - a. What did you know about service-learning before the course?
  - b. What was your motivation to take the course?
- 2) Describe your attitudes toward service/civic engagement before the course.
- 3) Describe your attitude of education and your major before the course in the Bahamas.
  - a. What type of preparation did you have before going to the Bahamas?
- 4) Describe what you learned during your service-learning course.
- 5) Please describe the service work you were involved in.
- 6) How did you feel when you got back to campus?
- 7) How has the service-learning course to the Bahamas affected your attitude and future goals toward service and your community?
- 8) How has the service-learning course to the Bahamas affected your view toward education and your major?
- 9) What would say are the benefits to service-learning courses?
- 10) What are the challenges to service-learning courses?
- 11) What has this service-learning course done for you?



