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Honors Alumni Reflect on the Impact  
of a Service-Learning and Mentoring Program*

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**“With the Richness of Their Resources”:  
Honors Alumni Reflect on the Impact of a Service-Learning and Mentoring Program**

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The public university’s role in 21st century American society is in flux. Policymakers, elected officials, and the public writ large are demanding that institutions of higher education foster meaningful and productive partnerships with community agencies (Cherwitz & Hartellius, 2007; Cherwitz, 2012). These partnerships range from complex allegiances with healthcare organizations to simpler connections to small civic entities such as community centers and schools. Whatever the configuration, these partnerships serve as a critical bridge between universities and the communities in which they are located. Higher education then is *a part* of the community, rather than *apart* from the community. While the discussion may be amplified today, the concept is not new: Ernest Boyer (1990) argued that civic engagement precluded higher education from irrelevancy in his landmark report, *Scholarship Reconsidered*.

These concerns address the most essential functions of higher education. Ostrander (2004) notes that universities have historically held the role of fostering democracy and citizen participation, and providing value to society via the knowledge production process. From one perspective, simply having these partnerships is progress; it can be considered a re-engagement of higher education in social contexts. If university faculty and administrators are in part responsible for the personal development of young people, it is imperative to learn how students experience civic engagement experiences. As civic engagement should lead to student learning and active citizenship (Colby & Ehrlich, 2000; Ostrander, 2004), civic engagement experiences should measure and assess how student participants grow in these arenas. It is evident to us that an equally, if not more important, area of research is the impact of mentoring and tutoring on middle school student mentees which will represent a future area of analysis. At present, however, we will delve into the impact that serving as a mentor has on the college student participants. The focus of this paper is a seven-year collaborative civic engagement partnership between a university honors program and an urban charter school in Austin, Texas. Through an analysis of survey data and open-ended responses, we will present honors program alumni perspectives on how serving as mentors and tutors to middle school-aged youth impacted their views on civic engagement, education, and their future career paths.

### **Purpose of the Research**

As the authors of this article, we describe ourselves as researchers with a profound commitment to facilitating growth and nurturing students as they learn to engage in the communities in which they live and study. There has been an increased focus on civic engagement in the last decade, especially among the millennial generation (Gilman & Stokes, 2014; Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2010). College attendance appears to positively impact volunteerism, with one recent survey reporting that 25% of college students volunteer – compared to 19% of all 15 to 25 year-olds, and 11% of non-college attendees (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2010). At the same time, there is an increased focus on the levels of engagement among this generation of students: Psychologist Jean Twenge (2014) wrote a book entitled

*Generation Me* that described millennials as “tolerant, confident, open-minded, and ambitious but also disengaged, narcissistic, distrustful, and anxious” (Twenge, 2014). Twenge (2014b) further noted that “[Millennials] high expectations, combined with an increasingly competitive world, have led to a darker flip side, in which they blame other people for their problems and sink into anxiety and depression” (p. 9). Clearly, there are varied views of how this age cohort perceives service and their role in civic engagement.

We were particularly interested in investigating a long-standing civic engagement project between an honors program and an urban charter school a few miles from the UT Austin campus. Civic engagement became a focus at The University of Texas at Austin when the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE) was established in 2007, providing a divisional home for community and civic engagement (Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, 2016). Specifically, the Longhorn Center for Community Engagement houses subunits for academic service learning, student engagement programs, and community resource development. The scope and reach of DDCE’s activities have helped UT Austin gain national recognition for community engagement: most notably, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching awarded the university the Community Engagement Classification in 2015. The classification is based on a framework provided by the Carnegie Foundation ([carnegieclassifications.iu.edu](http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu)) to document an institution’s activities around community engagement and public service. This places the university in an esteemed category as one of only six research universities designated by the Carnegie Foundation as having very high research activity to receive a classification for the first time (UT News, 2015).

While the Plan II/KIPP Partnership – an alliance with the Plan II Honors Program (further described in “Site”) at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) to provide mentors for KIPP Austin College Preparatory middle school students – is not formally affiliated with any of these initiatives, the authors of this study have informally connected with the Plan II/KIPP Partnership leadership via guest lectures and meetings and initiated a discussion about a research project examining the experiences of Plan II students who had participated in the partnership program. As scholars interested in the impact of civic engagement experiences on college students, we worked closely with the Plan II/KIPP Partnership director and student teaching assistants to assemble the data examined in this study. By examining college student (now alumni) reflections on the experience of mentoring and tutoring middle school students, we hoped to learn how this project impacted the present and future trajectory of honors program alumni in their personal, academic, and career domains. To address these critical concerns, we posed the following question: How do alumni of an honors program at a selective public university describe the impact, if any, of their experiences in a service-learning course that included the mentoring and tutoring of middle school students on their life trajectory?

### **Review of the Literature**

In this section, we define service-learning and present its educational impact on students and student outcomes, both in the immediate term and long-term as students in the sample become college alumni. We then provide background on the partnership between the Plan II Honors Program at UT Austin and the Knowledge Is Power Program Austin College Preparatory middle school, which brought together college students from a prestigious honors program and adolescents at a high-performing public charter school. The partnership is contextualized within a program-wide civic engagement and service initiative, which frames service-learning in the collegiate context.

## Service-Learning Defined

Academic service-learning is often included in the broader definition of civic or community engagement, yet it is a specific pedagogical technique that stands on its own (Gibson, 2006). Frequently cited in the research literature, the definition of service-learning provided by Bringle and Hatcher (1995) is:

...a course-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 civic responsibility. (p. 112)

Service-learning differs from volunteerism because of two fundamental concepts—reflection and reciprocity (Jacoby, 1996). Hatcher and Bringle (1997) defined reflection as “the intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives” (p. 153). Reciprocity requires a mutually beneficial relationship for the community, the students, and the faculty member as each of these partners recognizes how they can contribute to each other’s efforts, as they also come to learn from one another. Through reciprocity, students and communities engage in mutually beneficial learning experiences while students develop a greater sense of belonging and responsibility as members of the larger community (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2011).

## Educational Impacts of Service-Learning

Pedagogical research has indicated that students learn and develop at higher rates just from the simple act of interacting with others in the community (Rhoads, 1998). In particular, quantitative and qualitative research has positively linked service-learning courses with an increase in students’ comprehension of course content, understanding of the issues underlying social problems, sense of social responsibility, and cognitive and cultural development (Astin & Sax, 1998; Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015). Researchers have also reported that service-learning students had higher grade point averages than non-service-learning students (Gray et al., 1998), and showed a greater increase in critical problem-solving skills (Lisman, 1998). Astin and Sax (1998) concluded the more time devoted to service, the more positive the effect on students. More recent research points to benefits via service-learning to not only students, but also to community groups, agencies, and organizations (Rutti, LaBonte, Helms, Hervani, & Sarkarat, 2016). Service-learning, then, has the potential to influence the students who participate in these programs in addition to benefitting community partners and entities.

## Service-Learning and Its Impact on College Alumni

Scholars have noted that service-learning research tends to focus on the short term – the impact of experience throughout the course of a semester (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Fullerton & Reitenauer, 2015; Huisman, 2010; Kendrick, 1996; Winston, 2015). This accommodation of the academic calendar and university-focused priorities creates challenges to sustainable and robust collaborative relationships (Cushman, 2002), and frankly prioritizes the needs of college students over those of the community. Hence, there is a need for studies that examine the long-term impact of such experiences because “few studies demonstrate whether this intensive form of pedagogy pays real

dividends in regard to long-term engagement with the community” (Winston, 2015, p. 79). There is an emerging body of literature examining the efficacy of service-learning among college alumni (Fullerton & Reitenauer, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Winston, 2015) that responds to the claims by service-learning advocates of the transformative nature of these pedagogical experiences (Winston, 2015). Thus far, we can identify that an awareness of community needs increases the likelihood of future involvement (Winston, 2015). Additionally, community engagement and cohort experience not only enhance student learning in the short-term, but further provide reflective opportunities that alumni contemplate for years after the conclusion of their civic engagement experiences (Mitchell, 2015). Indeed, Richard, Keen, Hatcher, and Pease (2016) found that both formal and informal reflection of one’s service-learning experience contributed to civic outcomes, such as civic-mindedness, voluntary action, and civic action. In this study, we examined how the service-learning immersion impacted the post-college journeys of honors students who participated in a mentoring relationship with middle school students.

### **Plan II/KIPP Partnership Program Background**

In 2007, Grant Thomas, a career educator with over 30 years of experience working with youth mentoring programs and a member of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) Austin Regional Board, fostered a partnership with the Plan II Honors Program at UT Austin to provide mentors for KIPP Austin College Preparatory middle school students. Providing academically high-performing students with service-learning opportunities has a longstanding history. Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Donahue (2008) traced its origins back to the 1930s through John Dewey’s philosophy of connecting life and learning embedded in communities. More recently, Makel, Li, Putallaz, and Wai (2011) noted a trend of high-achieving students being involved in service-learning in their free time. However, these studies examined high school-aged participants, leaving a gap in the literature for examining college students.

In 2007, 17 Plan II students were matched with KIPP middle schoolers (“KIPPsters”) (Plan II Honors/KIPP Partnership, 2014). Every year since, Thomas (and later his successor, Jill Kolasinski) has taught a course in the Plan II Honors Program to train college students and provide a space for reflection and planning regarding their mentoring relationships. Key requirements include weekly contacts with mentees, group trips to the KIPP Austin College Preparatory campus, attendance and participation at twice-monthly class sessions, and some readings (many with policy and critical analysis of structural inequity) and short writing assignments (Plan II/KIPP Partnership, 2013). The course is embedded in a larger program in Plan II titled *Praxis*, which is a student-led initiative intended to develop a multifaceted program for civic engagement and service within Plan II (Plan II, n.d.). The Praxis model utilizes the Plan II curricular structure to purposefully embed civic engagement opportunities for students:

Praxis is divided into four components: exposure, immersion, exploration, and synthesis. In their first year, students are exposed to a variety of current social problems and issues through a course entitled “Civic Viewpoints....” The immersion component usually takes place in the second year and is designed to give students practical experience through some form of community service or an internship. Currently the Plan II/KIPP Partnership Program serve[s] as [an] immersion piece... through mentoring students in a college-prep, charter school... accompanied by [a] service-learning course. (*Ibid.*)

Through Praxis, Plan II college students are oriented to social issues in a first-year course, then immersed in the mentoring and tutoring experience in the second year followed by a junior seminar relating to an aspect of their civic engagement experience, and finally the senior thesis project. Cast as a “multifaceted, model program for civic engagement,” the Praxis initiative is designed to present students an “opportunity to examine a social issue in depth, with the hope that he or she will someday engineer social change by turning today’s problems into tomorrow’s solutions” (Plan II, n.d.). As the Praxis experience culminates at the end of Plan II Honors students’ college careers, it is therefore logical to look beyond the student experience to the post-graduation/alumni phase of their lives, and understand the impact of this service-learning experience in their lives.

### Theoretical Foundation

Our analysis of the data collected for this study examines the mentoring work of college students (now alumni) who participated in service-learning experiences during their undergraduate years; therefore, theories that discuss service-learning and its long-term impacts were essential to understand these experiences and to provide a framework for interpreting these relationships. Kolb’s Model of Experiential Learning (1984), with its four-step learning process, helped us conceptualize how these honors program alumni made meaning of their immersion in the mentoring and tutoring partnership with their middle school-aged students.

#### Kolb’s Model of Experiential Learning

In 1984, David Kolb developed an experiential learning theory (ELT), defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41). Kolb’s theory has been widely used by practitioners, professors, and researchers because service-learning has its roots in experiential education—the idea of learning by doing (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). The ELT model consists of a four-step learning process: 1) concrete experiences; 2) observation and reflection; 3) forming abstract concepts; and 4) testing new situations through active experimentation (see Figure 1).

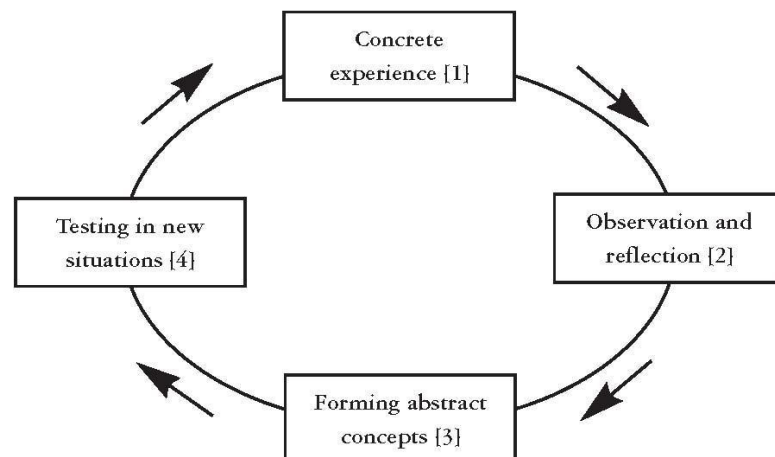


Figure 1. Kolb’s experiential learning theory (ELT).

Jacoby (1996) asserted that a person might enter Kolb’s cycle at any point; however, a student engaged in service-learning would begin with a concrete experience and then embark on a period of reflection that would lead to analyzing their observations from the experience. Students would then reflect on the implications that arise from their observations and begin to integrate this newfound understanding with existing abstract concepts and knowledge. Most service-learning students would find that the acts of service combined with their classroom instruction deepened their understanding of the world and the root causes of larger societal and systemic issues. In the fourth step of the model, Jacoby states that students begin to see ways they can further test these concepts in different situations. “This experimentation leads the learner to begin the cycle again and again” (p. 10). Researchers have used Kolb’s cycle as a theoretical model by which to analyze findings from service-learning classes (Baker, Robinson, & Kolb, 2012; Chan, 2012; Eyler, 2002). Similarly, we seek to identify how alumni who have completed a mentorship experience through a service-learning course may continue to synthesize their learning through this model.

## **Method**

This study utilizes written participant narratives describing how honors program undergraduate students in a civic engagement course perceived benefits from their mentoring relationships. Narratives of this sort are frequently utilized and considered credible data sources in the qualitative research tradition (Sikes & Gale, 2006). The responses in the dataset represent 16 of 62 total Plan II alumni who served as Plan II-KIPP (P2K) mentors in four cohorts over a four-year span. In our review and analysis of these narratives, we utilized a phenomenological approach to understanding how these alumni describe the impact of mentoring in a civic engagement course, allowing us to posit a general theory of what occurs in such educational spaces (Maxwell, 2008).

### **Sample/Participants**

Researchers sent surveys to 62 Plan II alumni who served as Plan II-KIPP mentors in four successive cohorts. Of the 62, 16 (26%) responded with completed surveys. The response rate was likely affected by the challenges of capturing the time and attention of recent college graduates busy starting careers or graduate programs (see Table 1 for a demographic profile of the participants). All participants had completed their initial service-learning experience at least two years prior. To protect participants, we assigned them pseudonyms in the manuscript.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Upon completion of the Plan II/KIPP Partnership service-learning course each semester, the course instructor sent each mentor a survey asking questions reflecting on their experience in the course. The surveys also contained six questions about the impact of the civic engagement course on their coursework and future aspirations, which are also reported descriptively in the findings section (see Appendix A for the survey questions).

Table 1  
*Participant Sample by Cohort, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender*

Total Participants	16
Cohort 1	3
Cohort 2	1
Cohort 3	2
Cohort 4	10
Race/Ethnicity	
Asian	6
Black	1
Hispanic/Latino	3
White	5
Gender	
Female	13
Male	3

Documentary analysis was utilized in analyzing mentor-authored reflections (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Documentary analysis suggests researchers focus on the presentation of information about the setting being studied, the wider context, and key figures or organizations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Prior, 2003), and on the personal and social experiences of participants (Erben, 1993). In particular, solicited written accounts, such as those collected from Plan II alumni participants of the service-learning course, can be “useful ways of obtaining information about the personal and the private” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 127), making them an appropriate information source on alumni perceptions of the impact of their mentorship and participation on their lives.

The researchers read all mentor narratives and discussed the themes emerging from the narrative data. We then collaboratively created a codebook that documented these themes. Next, we re-read and coded the narratives, working individually to compose reflective analytic memos capturing their immediate impressions. Our team met to discuss and come to consensus on the thematic coding, highlighting unique and shared concepts across the narratives. We conferred again to create matrices from the data to identify patterns and points of comparison, in particular identifying key excerpts from narratives that might serve as representative perspectives for the emic themes. Finally, our team discussed each identified excerpt from the data proposed as best expressing the ethos of the identified themes.

Trustworthiness and validity of the data were established by utilizing direct quotes from the participants’ written reflections and our collaborative coding approach to discern the meaning of their statements. Additionally, we protected the privacy of the participants by using pseudonyms.



## Site

The Plan II/KIPP Partnership represents a partnership between an established, renowned honors program at a flagship state university and an innovative, relatively new K-12 education program. The University of Texas at Austin is home to the Plan II Honors Program, founded in 1935 by Dr. H. T. Parlin, who was professor of English and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the time (Click, 1951). Parlin (1937) described the aims of the Plan II program thusly:

[Plan II is] a four-year course in general education free from professional pre-occupation.... Plan II is meant for students who want and are willing to spend four years on a liberal education. The course of study precludes all professional courses as such, and finds its chief purpose in a knowledge of science, a study of society, and finally an appreciation of culture and the arts.

Parlin (1937) further remarked that the program “give[s] a proper perspective, and as much humane experience as a young person can attain.”

Since then, it has become one of the University’s, and the nation’s, premier honors programs (Cobler, 2013; Sullivan, 1994; Willingham, 2012). Plan II alumni are among the most heralded graduates of UT Austin. A listing of prominent Plan II alumni includes former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, poet Dr. Betty Sue Flowers, raconteur Kinky Friedman, former Texas State Representative Ron Wilson, and filmmaker Shola Lynch (McAndrew, 2008). As a degree program that extols “the importance of the individual in society, and finally aims at an exploration of human values that ought to temper learning with human feeling” (Parlin, 1937), Plan II seemed like an ideal intellectual community for a civic engagement partnership.

KIPP is the nation’s largest public charter school network, with over 80 campuses. KIPP schools are specifically aimed at serving low-income students of color; 86% of KIPP students are from low-income families, and 95% are African American or Latino (Plan II/KIPP Partnership, 2014). One of the mottos of the KIPP network is “No Shortcuts, No Excuses” (Mathews, 2009). KIPP schools are notable for their focus on reading and math skills and feature an extended school day and academic year, a selective teacher hiring process, and a focus on rigorous behavior norms and work ethic (Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, & Walters, 2010). Nationally, more than 93% of KIPP middle school students have gone on to college-preparatory high schools, and over 83% of KIPP alumni have gone on to college (Plan II/KIPP Partnership, 2014). The KIPP Austin College Preparatory Academy is the middle school that has partnered with Plan II since 2007 (*ibid*).

## Program Overview

Plan II students must apply to be mentors in the Plan II/KIPP Partnership. The application process consists of a written application, exploring questions such as “Why do you want to be a mentor at KIPP?” and “Do you have any specific experiences, interests, or abilities that motivate you to become a mentor?” The competition for opportunities to serve as a mentor is keen: in the last academic year, over 60 students applied, and only 15 were accepted. Once accepted, students then enroll in the aforementioned one-hour credit course, and are concurrently matched with a KIPP Austin College Prep student. The class serves as a space to discuss the issues that emerge from their mentoring relationships with students (Plan II/KIPP Partnership, 2013).

While the official commitment for the Plan II/KIPP Partnership is a semester, Plan II students are encouraged to continue the mentoring relationship with their KIPPster as long as the arrangement remains mutually beneficial. Additional service opportunities have emerged from the partnership, such as episodic tutoring, college counseling, and writing workshops (Plan II/KIPP Partnership, 2014).

## Findings

This section presents descriptive statistics and emergent themes from the study of student alumni who participated in a mentoring role as part of a service-learning course during their undergraduate years. Data gathered from the aforementioned survey informed our analysis of the research question, “How do alumni of an honors program at a selective public university describe the impact, if any, of their experiences in a service-learning course on their life trajectory?” Analysis of the findings reveal that the effects of this experience spanned three distinct areas: a) academic, b) postgraduate plans, and c) personal. This section begins by discussing 1) how participants described the service-learning experience impact on their academic pursuits; 2) how alumni described the impact of this experience on their postgraduate plans and careers; and 3) how alumni described the service-learning class as a formative life experience that impacted their personal lives.

### Academic Impact

All survey respondents (100%) in the study strongly agreed that this course provided a positive experience in their academic career and gave them a greater appreciation for the inequality of educational opportunity in the U.S. Based on findings from this study, 16 participants reported that the two greatest academic outcomes of this course were its influence on their thesis topics and closer relationships with professors and classmates.

Students enrolled in the service-learning course as an elective, but all graduates indicated that the course impacted other academic decisions they made throughout their time at the university. One of the major ways this manifested was in the focus of an undergraduate thesis paper. For example, Amanda (pseudonym), a Black female Plan II and communications major, said, “The P2K program had a significant positive impact on my academic and career pursuits, as it led to me writing my senior thesis on educational inequity and charter schools.” Through exposure to critical course readings and service-learning, students were able to gain a deeper personal experience with compulsory educational issues that may have been different from their own experiences matriculating through the pipeline. Betty, a White female Plan II major, said:

Having the opportunity to learn about and discuss education reform in a college classroom made the mentoring experience vastly more meaningful. Getting to compare and contrast the academic accounts of educational gaps and failings with the real life mentee interaction was enlightening. But then, it was also challenging, since I felt a much larger responsibility to my mentee... I was supposed to be an educational nurturer and bridger [sic] of the gap.

The service-learning model allowed KIPP students and the Plan II alumni in the sample the opportunity to learn from one another through mentorship and academic exploration. After grappling with educational equity issues and working one-on-one with middle-school students, Carrie, an Asian female Plan II major, said, “Taking this course and participating in this program provided me with exactly what I needed to tackle the right question for my thesis.”

Another academic impact from the course was evident from how alumni described a deeper, more meaningful relationship with their instructor and classmates. The majority of survey respondents stated in their open-ended comments that the course provided a safe place to discuss controversial topics and difficulties they may have encountered relating to their mentee. Dylan, an Asian male Plan II and economics major, said that his favorite part of the course was the relationships he created with his instructor and classmates because:

[T]hey really opened my eyes to what my potential was, and to the problems in our society. I heard some of the most creative solutions discussed in that classroom. We went beyond education and talked about equality and broadening your horizons. I learned more about myself, and was more inspired in that classroom than any other.

In a similar way, Eve, a White female Plan II major, said this class “opened my eyes to the issue of educational inequity in a very real way, [because] it wasn’t simply another theoretical study of issues in our nation, but it made things more real and personal.” Adding to this, Eve said getting to know the instructor was instrumental in her academic future because the instructor eventually agreed to serve as her thesis advisor and encouraged her to pursue an education-related career path.

### **Career Impact**

A second theme that emerged from the data was the strong influence of this service-learning class and mentoring experience on participants’ career trajectories, with three-fourths of respondents reporting that this class had a direct influence on their career choice. Of the alumni who stated this course impacted their career choice, about half specifically listed teaching as their chosen path. Fran, a White female Plan II major, said, “Observing teachers and students at KIPP Austin literally changed my life. I saw what was possible in education for underserved communities and was captivated.” At the time of the survey, Fran reported that she worked as a KIPP teacher in the Southern U.S., sharing that she “makes sure my students have the same and greater quality of education as their peers in high income communities.” Another respondent, Gail, a White female Plan II and area studies major, said that she has been working as an educator in charter schools serving low-income students in the Northeast. “I was always interested in social justice issues but joining [the P2K service-learning class] allowed me to delve deeper into education—a place I didn’t know much about beforehand.” Three other alumni reported how their service-learning and mentorship experience catapulted their interest in securing internships or teaching positions with educational non-profits, such as Breakthrough Central Texas and Teach for America.

In addition to choosing careers in education, 80% of respondents said they have stayed involved in education policy issues since completing the course. Dylan said, “It has motivated [me] to seek to support charities for education reform. I’m a petroleum engineer, so [teaching] was not in the cards for me, but I still hope to make a difference in my own way.” Carrie recalled how the course instructor did not push for students to change their career path because of the course. She said, “The best thing about the course was that [the instructor] didn’t expect us all to become full-time education reform advocates. Rather, she acknowledged that education reform requires leaders in all kinds of fields who could use their job as an avenue for contributing to education in some small way.”

By designing this course so that students could understand fundamentals of educational inequity and integrating them into an environment where they could seek to change the pathway of a student, the

instructor enabled students to see that small interventions can have lasting impact. Thus, the results of this study indicate that this particular service-learning experience had a direct impact on students' career choice—in some instances, inspiring them to become teachers or work for charter schools—and an indirect impact by linking their professional interests to educational policy issues or by motivating them to other mentoring outlets.

### Personal Impact

Unanimously, alumni reported that their personal life was positively impacted through the mentorship interactions, many of which went well beyond the duration of the course: analysis of survey data revealed that 14 of the 16 mentors (87.5%) responded that they had stayed in contact with their mentees past the first year of the course. When asked why she maintained her relationship with her mentee, Fran said:

A one-year commitment to a student will not reflect the kind of impact that can be had on a student's life that I desire, [so] I felt it necessary to continue the relationship to communicate the message that I refused to give up on her.

Lauren, a White female Plan II major, said, "I maintained my relationship with my mentee because it is an important commitment. If I give up, I'm not just stopping an activity—I would also be removing myself from someone's life. That's not something I'm willing to do." These two quotes echo the sentiments shared among the 14 who maintained a relationship with their mentee and called it a personal commitment, rather than one that was tied to a course. On average, alumni stayed in contact with their mentees for more than one year following the program, and at least five of them continued contact via email, phone, and letter after two years.

Tangible mentorship opportunities exposed the participants to inequities in society, and all 16 respondents reported that the service-learning course shaped their personal lens in understanding the world around them. Carrie said:

The P2K course was probably the first time in my life that I, a highly privileged rich kid, actually wondered whether I would have been as successful had I grown up differently. Those kind of eye-opening experiences are one in a million.

Another former student stated that the course "does wonders in building character and concern for the future of public education." Amanda summarized the experience by saying:

The class has been even more valuable to me in [the] years since [finishing]. Learning about the American education system in an academic context completely changed how I view my public school experience and has made me so interested in the national education debate.

By designing this course so students could understand fundamentals of educational inequity, while integrating them into an environment where they could seek to change the pathway of an individual student, the instructor enabled students to identify the impact of micro-level interventions. Thus, results of this study indicate that this particular service-learning experience had a direct impact on students' career choice—becoming teachers or working for charter schools—and an indirect impact by keeping their professional interests linked to educational policy issues or by finding other mentoring outlets.

Not all of the alumni continued their relationships beyond the service-learning course. The two respondents who indicated “no” explained that they had moved away after the semester was over, which made it difficult to stay in touch with their mentees. One of the two respondents, Carrie, stated it was because she moved away to attend law school.

I discontinued my volunteering when I began law school, which I definitely regret now. I certainly had the time. I think maybe the rigid nature of linking the mentoring experience to the KIPP campus made it more forbidding at the time.

Carrie noted that some of the other classmates felt an independent connection to their mentee, rather than viewing it as a course component that ended with the class.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The three broad areas in which the mentoring via service-learning impacted the alumni participants in this study – the academic realm, postgraduate plans, and the personal realm – suggested that service-learning opportunities were impactful both for students as they experienced their coursework, and in the long-term, as evidenced by the alumni involvement in education-related careers and issues. The applicability of Kolb’s (1984) ELT four-step model is apparent in the outcomes as described by the study participants. Their initial experiences of interacting with a young student at the KIPP academy led to a process of observation and reflection—most often with the alumni noting how their experiences in school, in their home communities, and in their socioeconomic strata contrasted with those of their mentees. These reflections led to the third stage, where the participants considered issues of educational inequity—and ultimately, in the case of many respondents, testing via active participation through their choice of an education-related career *or* a commitment to work to improve educational opportunity for students in under-resourced communities through volunteer work. We found it interesting that the vast majority of the alumni participants continued to interact with and mentor their student mentees—and among the minority of participants that did not, there was an expression of regret that the relationship did not continue.

We also now understand that the service-learning experience refined and sharpened many of the participants’ academic trajectories, such as by influencing undergraduate thesis topics and forging a strong bond with the course instructor. A senior thesis project with very broad parameters might be somewhat overwhelming for an undergraduate student; the findings explain that for some, mentoring in the service-learning context provided clarity and direction for their research projects. Additionally, the engagement and zeal of the instructor led to a highly satisfactory experience for the participants, with many noting the incredible impact (s)he had on their careers and even lives. The findings illustrate how the various components of a service-learning experience—the act of mentoring a younger student, exposure to literature with a critical and/or social justice lens, awareness of conditions that affect the lived experiences of the students the alumni interacted with, and a caring and engaged instructor—are distilled in outcomes that have impact on the lives of alumni years after the course.

### **Limitations**

While having the potential to make significant contributions, we acknowledge that there are limitations to this study. First, the findings are derived from self-reported data and hence some responses might be biased toward social desirability. While this study cannot represent the full range of perspectives on the impact of the Plan II/KIPP Partnership, these narratives can be understood as

presenting *some* conceptualization of theories regarding how this experience affects the life trajectories of participants. Second, the application procedure to serve as a Plan II/KIPP Partnership mentor may attract a pool of participants who are particularly predisposed to and invested in civic engagement, mentoring, or otherwise supporting young people. As such, they may be more inclined to view the impact of the course and their mentoring favorably and associate more positive outcomes associated with the relationship.

There are caveats, of course to these outcomes. First, it is not entirely clear if the impact of the service-learning experience was equally robust for the KIPP student mentees as they appear to be to the alumni participants. We clarified that our research was focused on the Plan II alumni in this study; we are eager to conduct further research that also considers the effect of service-learning on mentees and community members impacted by the work of college students (and endorse others extending the research in this area).

One potentially troubling outcome could be that service-learning opportunities, if not supplemented with an understanding of structural inequity and the role of race, ethnicity, class, national origin, and socioeconomic factors in creating contextual realities that thwart and challenge success for marginalized members of the community, could become examples of “cultural tourism” (Hartman, 2012). “Cultural tourism” occurs when mostly White, affluent, and educated elites briefly immerse themselves in cultural milieus and then purport to have intimate knowledge—and policy solutions—to the challenges facing those who live in these contexts every day. The readings and discussions (e.g., Hochschild and Scovronick’s *The American Dream and the Public Schools* [2003], and discussions about Austin’s history of segregation and integration in schools and civic life) mentioned by participants in this study suggest that the instructor challenged such interpretations; it seems evident and important that strong community- and family-based support is essential to ensure that service-learning students come to understand that they too have a great deal to learn, and approach their experience with humility and respect for those in the community with whom they interact.

Even with these cautions, we posit that the voices of privileged and advantaged alumni of an honors program reflecting on the impact of their service-learning experience have significant implications for universities and the communities in which they reside. When writing this article, we were keenly aware of racial and ethnic tensions on predominantly White campuses across this nation. Students, staff, and faculty—primarily of color, and many with roots in low-income, marginalized communities—are holding up a mirror to institutions challenging their racial and socioeconomic composition.

Our interpretation of the experiences of these alumni and their service-learning engagement and mentoring across race and socioeconomic lines is that these opportunities are the ones in which we narrow the distance across those axes of difference. Policy quandaries and political debates become less caricatured, and their subjects become real people with real lives. While this particular service-learning partnership is small, we suggest it meets the standard that Boyer (1990) set forth in *Scholarship Reconsidered*, in that it is “crucially important to the health of our communities, the nation, and the academy for scholars to use the knowledge in their fields to benefit society, and that universities and their graduates must connect with the concerns and challenges faced by the wider community” (Coye, 1997, p. 22). This partnership and its impact on the alumni of the program might be one answer to Boyer’s challenge that American colleges and universities, “with all the richness of their resources, be of greater service to the nation and the world” (Boyer, 1990, p. 3).

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*Appendix A*  
Open Ended Questions from Survey

- I have kept in touch with my mentee past the year commitment of P2K (Explain why or why not below).
- If you agreed or strongly agreed with the first question above, what part of the P2K experience has resonated most strongly with you in your time since leaving the course?
- Do you feel that your classmates had similar experiences?
- Do you have any additional comments on the effect of P2K on your academic, career or personal pursuits, or suggestions for the program?