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A Privileged Pedagogy for Privileged Students? A Preliminary Mixed-Methods Analysis Comparing First-Generation and Non-First-Generation College Students on Post-Evaluations of Service-Learning Courses

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Service-learning is frequently described as a high-impact teaching activity that benefits students in numerous ways. However, fewer studies explore how underserved students respond to service-learning courses, and fewer still look specifically at first-generation college students. First generation college students face numerous documented obstacles to persisting and achieving in college, and a need exists for more systematic study of whether service-learning pedagogy supports or challenges first generation students as they face and overcome those obstacles. This study compared 260 undergraduate students, approximately half of whom were first-generation college students, and their self-reported gains in three student learning outcomes: academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement. Through a mixed-methods analysis, findings indicate that first-generation college students responded at least as well as their peers to service-learning. In areas of difference, first-generation college students responded more strongly than their peers. Overall, results indicate surprising similarities between the first generation students and their peers, as well as important differences regarding compassion, motivation, agency, and sense of solidarity.

Keywords: Service-Learning, First-generation Students, Underserved Students, Privileged, Compassion

Numerous research articles demonstrate the many positive effects service-learning has on college students' learning outcomes (e.g. Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000**;** Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008; Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2013). While this line of research affirms service-learning as a high-impact teaching practice, a reasonable follow-up inquiry is whether all groups of college students are similarly impacted. Indeed, a recent Association of American Colleges and Universities LEAP report (Finley & McNair, 2013) investigated underserved students' responses to high-impact practices and asked for whom are these practices most beneficial.

As student diversity in higher education increases, scholars are now calling attention to the value of social justice education and service-learning not just for traditional undergraduates but also for underserved students to "transform them into powerful learners" (Rendon, 2009, p. 92). The Association of American Colleges and Universities recently sounded the call for a renewed commitment on the part of higher education to developing the civic learning of *all* students and cited service-learning as a powerful pedagogy to that end (National Task Force, 2012). This new focus on underserved students and their participation in service-learning is essential as the diversity of college students

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continues to grow.

First-generation college students, typically defined as students whose parents did not attend college, are one subset of underserved students. Yet, with a few exceptions (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Henry 2005; McKay & Estrella, 2008; Yeh, 2010), service-learning literature largely neglects first-generation college students even as this population is receiving increased attention in higher education research (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, De'Sha, & Yeung, 2007). Even when first-generation college students are included in a study's sample, few studies exclusively consider how first-generation students respond to service-learning courses. While numerous articles describe the challenges that first-generation college students face in higher education compared to their peers (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Amaury, 1996; Thayer, 2000), the literature does not adequately describe the effects that a high-impact educational practice such as service-learning has on first-generation college students' learning outcomes. The present study compared first-generation college students and a group of peers (non-first-generation college students) in key student learning outcomes emphasized in service-learning literature in order to explore the extent to which service-learning's benefits apply to first-generation college students.

Review of Literature

One reason for the increased interest, on the part of researchers and educators, in first-generation college students centers on concerns about the academic preparation, work/school balance, and overall opportunities for success for this population (Saenz et al., 2007). First-generation college students work more hours off-campus, have more commitments outside of school, and perceive faculty members as being less concerned with student development and teaching (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Amaury, 1996). In a U.S. Department of Education (2005) longitudinal study of 9,600 students, first-generation college students were less academically prepared for college compared to their peers and were less likely to persist to degree completion. First-generation college students were also more likely to need remedial courses in college. Finally, this study indicated that first-generation students had lower GPA's throughout their undergraduate studies and were more likely to withdraw from and repeat courses. "Overall, the picture suggests these students come less well prepared and with more nonacademic demands on them, and they enter a world where they are less likely to experience many of the conditions that other research indicates are positively related to persistence, performance, and learning" (Terenzini et al., 1996, p. 18). Because first-generation college students may enter "an uncertain world where they already know they do not fit" (Thayer, 2000, p. 5), they may be susceptible to personal doubts regarding their academic and motivational ability (Mitchell, 1997; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Yet research indicates that first-generation college students experience greater success when connected and engaged with others at their college (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuotaco, 2005; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Saunders & Serna, 2004). In a study examining student transition from high school to college, Saunders and Serna (2004) found that Latino first-generation students who successfully created new networks or relationships in the college achieved higher grade point averages and appeared more at ease than students who continued to rely on their old networks. In their comparative study between first-generation and "continuing generation" students, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005)

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suggested that the increased frequency of interactions between first-generation students and faculty can have a positive effect on a student's college experience and ultimate persistence. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuotaco's (2005) study on ethnic minority first-generation college students found both family and peer support to be predictive of academic outcomes (such as GPA), with peer support to be more strongly predictive. In a study on college student engagement across 321 institutions, Pike and Kuh (2005) recommended that advisors to first-generation students encourage those students to engage in activities both inside and outside the classroom since this may result in greater academic and social integration. Service-learning is an engaging, experiential pedagogy which provides opportunities for students to connect outside the classroom with community members, professionals and in many cases, classroom peers and instructors as well. Thus, service-learning courses may help first-generation students connect to peers, faculty, and community members in ways that can foster academic success.

Indeed, Finley, and McNair's (2013) AAC&U project found that first-generation college students who participated in one or more high impact practices (the authors identified six high impact practices: learning communities, service-learning, study abroad, internships, capstone courses, and student research with faculty) reported more gains in learning, practical competence, and personal/social development compared to first-generation college students who did not participate. These three areas are the student learning outcomes identified for investigation in the present project: academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement. These outcomes were chosen based on the following definition from Ash and Clayton (2004): service-learning is "a collaborative teaching and learning strategy designed to promote academic enhancement, personal growth and civic engagement" (p. 138). In addition, Clayton, Bringle, and Hatcher's (2013) comprehensive series compiling current service-learning research has chapters focused on these same outcomes (termed cognitive outcomes, personal development and civic learning).

One of the most important learning outcomes for students enrolled in service-learning classes is academic enhancement or cognitive outcomes (Fitch, Steinke, and Hudson, 2013). Students in service-learning courses often state that they learn more, gain better understanding and application of the course material, improve writing and critical thinking skills, and can better apply course principles to new situations (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). The positive impact of service-learning on objective measures of academic learning outcomes has also been empirically demonstrated in a quasi-experimental study (Reeb, Sammon, and Isackson, 1999). Preliminary evidence suggests that first-generation college students also describe improvements in academic learning when enrolled in service-learning classes. In one of the few studies specifically investigating first-generation college students and service-learning, McKay, and Estrella (2008) utilized a survey design to examine the quality of interactions between service-learning faculty and 43 first-generation students enrolled across 20 service-learning courses. Survey questions focused on student interactions with faculty, academic experiences in the service-learning course, and student academic goals. Results indicated that quality of interactions related to students' social and academic integration in college. These interactions also related to first-generation students' perceptions that they would accomplish short and long term academic goals (e.g., successful completion of community projects, retention, and graduation).

Two of the other service-learning studies that focused specifically on first-generation

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college students also investigated academic enhancement. Conley and Hamlin (2009) utilized a qualitative analysis to investigate the impact of social justice curriculum on student engagement and academic enhancement. The researchers surveyed and interviewed three first-generation female students across a term in a seminar-style course and also conducted observations at the service site. Results indicated that the students critically challenged their pre-existing assumptions about social justice and ended the course with new interest in social justice issues. Finally, Yeh (2010) interviewed six first-generation college students enrolled in service-learning courses to examine their experiences in the courses. Findings indicate that first-generation college students benefit from service-learning experiences in terms of bringing academic knowledge to life, building skills to engage academic work, and discovering non-traditional learning opportunities.

In addition to enhancing academic learning, service-learning pedagogy is designed to promote students' personal growth (Ash et al., 2005; Brandenberger, 2013; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997). For example, service-learning students report becoming more compassionate compared to their peers in traditional courses (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008). Similarly, rigorous reflection exercises in service-learning courses seem to help students think more critically about personal growth over time (Ash et al., 2005). First-generation students also report improvements in their resilience, find personal meaning, and develop critical consciousness as part of service-learning curriculum (Yeh, 2010). McKay and Estrella (2008) reported that first-generation students' interactions with their peers and faculty members provided them with opportunities for personal growth. As one student noted, "In a project like this it takes a load off my chest explaining [to my instructor] my struggle and how I'm on a journey of self-discovery" (p. 367).

A third important objective of service-learning is to increase students' levels of civic engagement (Battistoni, 2013). Specifically, service-learning pedagogy aspires to enhance student awareness of social issues and sense of agency in social change, as well as think more critically about civic engagement over time (Ash et al., 2005). Participation in service-learning can enhance student interest in pursuing a career in service or engaging in service in the future, more so than participation in community service that does not connect directly to academic work (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). When students participate in service-learning courses, they also report positive perceptions toward helping others (Eyler & Giles, 1999), and seeking careers that focus on helping others (Eyler et al., 1997). "Service-learning is a powerful tool in that it offers the chance to work with others from different class backgrounds, thus allowing individuals to reflect on their own personal class orientations" (Henry, 2005, p. 46). Henry's (2005) interviews with three first-generation female students indicated that, through service-learning, first-generation college students may recognize their status as privileged in terms of access to college. However, prior research has not explored first-generation students specifically in regard to student awareness of their own agency in social change.

A better understanding of first-generation college students can help to dismantle an implicit assumption that college students engaging in service-learning are privileged *in relation to the communities that they serve*. Modification to this model is necessary as the body of college students becomes more diverse. Butin (2006) notes that service-learning research has assumed "the students doing the service learning are White, sheltered, middle-class, single, without children, un-indebted, and between the ages of 18 and 24" (p. 481). Henry (2005) states that "service-learning is often framed as a pedagogical perspective

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and instructional tool that can help '*privileged' students gain greater insight into the life experience and perspectives of 'others,*' namely those 'served' in the service-learning arrangement. Given this assumption, *service-learning is viewed as a binary concept between the 'privileged server' and the 'underprivileged recipient*' or an 'us/them' dichotomy" (p. 45). Henry's (2005) work illustrates a service-learning model in which first-generation college students can come to see themselves not solely in terms of being underserved but also as agents of change.

While the few prior studies specifically investigating first-generation college students do indicate encouraging trends for this student population, the studies are of limited generalizability for two reasons. First, most of the sample sizes were very small; although appropriate to a qualitative design, researchers only studied a total of 12 students in three of the studies combined (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Henry, 2005; Yeh, 2010). A project with a sizeable group of first-generation college students would help illuminate whether or not the results are due solely to idiosyncrasies of a particular sample. More importantly, studies on first-generation college students and service-learning lack comparison groups (i.e., those students who are not first-generation), making it difficult to determine if these benefits of service-learning experience are unique to the population of first-generation students. Thus, the current project investigates the following research question: *Do first-generation students benefit from service-learning courses with respect to academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement, in comparison to their peers?* Prior research seems to suggest that service-learning is a pedagogy that should resonate with first-generation college students. On the other hand, the significant time commitment for service-learning may result in first-generation peers responding less favorably. This study seeks to determine whether the positive outcomes of service-learning are as prevalent for first-generation college students as their peers.

Method

Participants

We surveyed 277 undergraduate college students from Carlow University, a small, Catholic, predominantly women's masters-comprehensive university located in an urban setting in the northeast. Of the 2,063 students at this university, 93% of the undergraduate students are female and approximately 30% are first-generation college students. The University defines first-generation college students as individuals who do not have a parent who has more than a high school education. The university has a long tradition of service to the community which stems from its founders. This commitment to service is an integral part of its mission statement: the University "…empowers individuals…to embrace an ethic of service for a just and merciful world."

The University requires that all undergraduate students complete a service-learning course as part of the general education curriculum. A wide range of service-learning classes from diverse disciplines are offered to meet this requirement including Art, Art History, Biology, Business Management, Communication, Education, English (Professional Writing), Interdisciplinary Studies, Nursing, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, and Social Work. The present sample reflects students across each of these discipline-based service-learning courses as well as one service-learning course offered by the director of campus life. Instructors designed each course in accordance with the following: (a) organized community-based learning activities through which students had direct, hands-on

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learning activities that directly responded to community needs; (b) structured opportunities for students to connect their service activities to course content through reflection before, during, and at the conclusion of the service-learning component; and (c) students spend a minimum of 15 hours at the service-learning site in addition to classroom time.

Approximately 83% of students surveyed for the study were between the ages of 18 and 25. While the literature suggests that ethnic minority students are more likely than their peers to be the first in their family to attend college (Zalaquett, 1999), minority students in this sample were not significantly more likely than Caucasian students to be first-generation. Indeed, percentages of Caucasian students (79% of first-generation college students and 81.3% of peers) were comparable. Participants were primarily female (96.7%). The majority of the participants were upper level (junior, senior) students who enrolled in the service-learning class to satisfy a graduation requirement. More specifically, 28.5% of the students identified themselves as seniors, 48.2% as juniors, 15.4% as sophomores, and 5.5% as first-year students.

Of the 277 students surveyed, 260 (94%) answered survey questions on the educational level of parents, and it is these students on which study analyses are based. Of these students, 121 (43.7%) self-identified as first-generation college students, compared with 139 (50.2%) who stated that at least one parent completed college. Both first-generation college students and their peers were represented in every service-learning course included in the analyses.

We also asked students to assess whether their families' economic situations were similar and/or more stable than those families with whom they interacted for their service project. Small percentages of each group (32.2% of first-generation, 26.1% of their peers) agreed that their financial situation was similar to those they helped. Consistent with prior literature, we found that first-generation students in this study were more likely than their peers to work while enrolled in classes (86.8% compared to 76.3%), $\chi^2(1) = 4.68$, $p = .031$. However, there was no difference between first-generation college students and their peers in terms of regular volunteer experience prior to enrolling in a service-learning course. Approximately, 30% of each group reported outside volunteer work.

Instrument

The survey (see Appendix) used for this study was part of a course evaluation given to all students when they completed the requisite service-learning requirement for their university coursework. Data presented here were collected in all 18 service-learning courses offered during three consecutive semesters. Eighty-seven percent of students enrolled in these service-learning courses during these terms completed the survey. This percentage reflects all of the students who were present in attendance at the end-of-the-term assessment. The survey was developed for students to both evaluate the service-learning component of the course as well as provide perceptions on how well the courses contributed to their academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement. The survey also included demographic questions. Since the service-learning requirement was implemented at the same time this study began, each student is typically represented in the data once. Although it is possible that some students enrolled in multiple service-learning courses over this time period, they would be a very small subset of the total population. The survey was designed as a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 3 = Neutral; 5 = Strongly agree). It also included three open-ended questions querying students on what they considered to be the most valuable aspect of the course, the least valuable aspect, and

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then allowing students to write in additional comments. As a survey developed for internal use by a service-learning program, reliability and validity analyses are not available for this instrument. However, the instrument was revised over a period of few years to more reliably assess student evaluations. Questions asked similar content in multiple ways to assess student response consistency. Questions yielding inconsistent results (i.e. students rating "strongly disagree" and "agree" for similar questions) were revised or removed. The survey in the Appendix is the final version of this process and represents the version used for this project.

Results

We utilized Chi Square analyses to compare first-generation college students and their peers on the three outcomes: Academic Enhancement, Personal Growth, and Civic Engagement. For these analyses, Likert scale questions were collapsed into Agree, Disagree, and Neutral categories to maintain minimum required cell sizes to run the Chi Square analyses. We analyzed open-ended questions (querying regarding the most valuable and least valuable aspects of the service-learning course) using a mixture of descriptive and qualitative analyses. We used an iterative qualitative process (Crabtree & Miller, 1992), allowing emerging student themes to drive research aims and conceptualization of constructs. Two coders, comprised of one student research assistant and one faculty investigator, read all student comments pertaining to the two open-ended survey questions. Inter-rater agreement was assessed using Cohen's Kappa (for Most Valuable codes, Kappa= .975, $p < .001$. For Least Valuable codes, Kappa= .974, $p< .001$) and is considered to be outstanding, according to Landis and Koch (1977). All discrepancies were discussed and resolved prior to further analysis.

Table 1 offers a short summary description of each emergent theme regarding the "most valuable" question, the percent first-generation college students and their peers who described each, examples of each theme, and the student learning outcome with which the theme aligned. The latter was determined by rater consensus. Raters concluded that "Helping" and "Interacting" comments, which focused on helping and interacting with community members, aligned best with Civic Engagement. "Learning" comments clearly aligned with Academic Enhancement. Finally, "Experience" and "Growth" comments focused on either internal or external personal changes in response to the service-learning and thus constituted Personal Growth.

Coders independently rated all student comments in the dataset using the emergent themes. Overlap among themes was permitted (for example, Helping and Interacting). "Experience" was the theme cited by the highest percentage of the sample (28%), followed by "Helping" (22%), Interaction (14%), Learning (10%), and Growth (6%). No statistically significant differences were observed between first-generation college students and their peers in terms of frequency of emergent themes.

Emergent theme examples from open-ended questions:

Helping: *Helping to provide organic food for those who are ill...*
Interacting: *Meeting new people*
Learning: *I learned about a situation I never knew existed.*
Experience: *The hands-on experience in the classroom.*
Growth: *I learned a lot about who I am as an individual.*

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Table 1
Emergent Student Themes Regarding What Students Considered to be Most Valuable

Theme	Description of theme	Outcome	% FG	% Peer
Helping	Emphasize the service aspect; helping others in the community	CE	25.6	21.6
Interacting	Focus on social interactions: community partners and classmates	CE	11.6	17.3
Learning	Focus on knowledge gleaned	AE	8.3	10.8
Experience	Focus on activities & practical skills obtained	PG	29.8	27.3
Growth	Reflect self-knowledge; personal and inner changes	PG	7.4	6.5

Note: Percentages are based on the number of respondents in each category: 121 first-generation college students and 139 peers. CE= Civic Engagement. AE= Academic Enhancement. PG= Personal Growth.

Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Questions

While 76.2% of the students reported what they viewed to be the most valuable aspect of the course, 59.6% reported what they considered to be the least valuable. Of the latter group, 11.4% actually stated that *everything* was, in fact, valuable. Therefore, only 48.2% of the sample stated that some aspects of the course were not valuable. The following statements reflect the most common responses to this "least valuable" question: prohibitive time requirements, disliked the course being mandatory for graduation, had trouble arranging transportation to the site as well as other practical details, felt unneeded and unappreciated by community partners, disliked course assignments, and believed that they were unprepared for service activity. A higher percentage of first-generation college students compared to their peers (19% compared with 12.2%) stated that *everything* in the course was valuable (that is, there was no "least valuable" aspect of the course). However, this was also not a statistically significant difference.

Academic Enhancement

Quantitative results.

Both first-generation college students and their peers offered favorable responses and comments regarding academic enhancement obtained in their service-learning courses. Table 2 presents key comparisons between the two groups regarding academic aspects of the service-learning course. Although differences between the groups were nonsignificant, first-generation college students were more likely to report that service-learning increased their understanding of course content, and slightly more likely to indicate that the service-learning course required more time compared to typical courses.

Qualitative results.

First-generation college students were just as likely as their peers to state that knowledge gained (coded as "Learning") was the most valuable aspect of the service-learning course (8.3% of first-generation students compared with 10.8% of their peers). For example, below are two responses from students enrolled in a service-learning art course. Each student cited both academic learning and helping others as the most valuable aspects of the course.

"Learning the academics while practicing and engaging it for a good cause." --

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Female First-Generation Student, Art Course

"Learning how to use what I learn in class to help people."-- Female, Non-First-Generation Student, Art Course

The above quotations, which are consistent with statements made by other students in the sample, show that students from both groups were able to understand how the service work connected to the academic purposes of the course.

Table 2

Comparisons Between First-Generation Students and their Peers on Academic Issues

Survey Question	% First-generation	% Peer group
Increased understanding of course content	76.7	72.3
More aware of how service connects to subject	76.0	74.7
Increased my interest in the subject	65.5	62.8
I learned more in this course than in other courses	54.7	55.4
Required more time than a typical course	84.0	82.7
Service-learning was a valuable part of course	74.6	67.5

Note: Percentages reflect statements of both "agree" and "strongly agree."

Personal Growth

Quantitative results.

Both first-generation college students and their peers agreed that they experienced personal growth as a result of the service-learning course. Table 3 displays comparisons between the two groups regarding aspects of personal growth. Higher proportions of first-generation college students expressed experiencing personal growth in every area, compared with their peers. Most notably, a higher percentage of first-generation students, compared to their peers, reported feeling deeper compassion for people served as a result of the course. This was a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(2) = 8.72$, $p<.05$, $\varphi=.18$. Specifically, 76.7% of first-generation college students stated that they experienced greater compassion, compared to 63.5% of their peers. Furthermore, only three (2.5%) first-generation students did *not* think that the course helped them to feel greater compassion (compared to over 10% of their peers).

Qualitative results.

As shown in Table 1, *Experience* statements were the most common responses regarding what students considered to be the most valuable aspect of the service-learning course. Both first-generation college students and their peers noted the skills obtained and personal growth experience as a result of the course. Thus, both groups of students focused on inward and outward aspects of growth. For example,

"Improving my confidence in my teaching abilities…"—Female, First-Generation Student, Education course

"Getting prepared for my future career." –Female, Non-First-Generation Student, Education course

"Increasing my awareness of the true world." –Female, First-Generation Student, Art Course

"I learned a lot about myself and others."—Female, Non-First-Generation Student, Nursing Course

The primary distinction in terms of personal growth between the two groups was that a higher proportion of first-generation students reported that the course helped them to feel greater compassion toward people served.

Table 3
Comparisons Between First-Generation Students and their Peers on Personal Growth

Survey Question	% First-generation	% Peer group
I feel greater compassion	76.7	63.5
Required me to develop leadership skills	62.5	61.2
I experienced personal growth	75.2	72.1
I developed new insights about others	67.5	67.4

Note: Percentages reflect statements of both "agree" and "strongly agree."

Civic Engagement

Quantitative results.

First-generation college students and their peers offered similar and positive answers on civic engagement questions. Results of survey questions related to civic engagement are presented in Table 4. Although no statistically significant differences were observed between first-generation college students and their peers, first-generation college students were less likely to state that the service exposed them to an unfamiliar environment or that they became more aware of community needs.

Qualitative results.

However, qualitative analysis indicated that the first-generation college students emphasized feeling empowered via the service-learning course; many seemed to take pride in being someone who could be counted on to help. The following statements of what students enjoyed most from the course exemplify their sense of agency and, in some cases, identification with the community.

"Getting to help other students who are in the same shoes as me getting to where they need to be." –Female, First-Generation Student, Sociology Course

"It allowed me to give back to the community and help people like me because I didn't have people to help and guide me." –Female, First-Generation Student, Sociology Course

In contrast, many non-first-generation college students instead focused on a subtly different benefit from the service-learning course: filling a need that existed in the community.

"Being exposed to [an] underprivileged high school and how to connect with them. It is a nice way to learn, especially from each individual that I met." –Female, Non-First- Generation, Social Work Course

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"Getting the chance to help someone else's lives who happened to be in much need of the help." -Female, Non-First-Generation Student, Political Science Course

Thus, while both student groups enjoyed helping others as part of the course, subtle differences in their rationale for helping can be observed. First-generation college students were more likely to articulate a sense of agency that seemed to coincide with empathy with community members.

Table 4

Comparisons Between First-Generation Students and their Peers on Civic Engagement

Survey Question	% First-generation	% Peer group
I now want to incorporate service into my career	52.5	49.7
I became more aware of community needs	65.3	67.4
I want to engage in future service	65.0	67.6
The service project met a community need	74.4	74.1
The service exposed me to unfamiliar environment	59.5	62.3

Note: Percentages reflect statements of both "agree" and "strongly agree."

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to compare first-generation students and their peers in three service-learning outcome areas: academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement. Research profiles first–generation college students as being generally less academically prepared for college compared with their peers, more likely to need remedial courses in college, and more likely to earn lower GPA's (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Given this profile, one would expect first-generation students' performance in service-learning classes to be lower than their peers and to encounter more difficulties with these classes. However, this study demonstrates that first-generation college students' outcomes as a result of service-learning courses were remarkably similar to their peer's outcomes. Furthermore, when the two student groups differed, it was the first-generation college students who appeared to receive the most benefit from the service-learning courses.

Regarding academic enhancement and the overall experience of the service-learning course, first-generation college students either answered similarly to their peers or responded with more favorable comments. While a higher percentage of first-generation college students, compared to their peers, stated that the time commitment required in the course was greater than in other courses, this difference was very small. These results are consistent with prior research indicating that when first-generation college students participate in classroom and out-of-the-classroom activities that foster engagement and relationship, they feel more at ease academically (Saunders & Serna, 2004) and more integrated into academics (McKay & Estrella, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Results are also consistent with prior research on first-generation college students and service-learning in terms of students' increased interest in the academic content as well as bringing academic content to life (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Yeh, 2010). Consequently, universities seeking to increase the success of their first-generation students should invest in offering more service-learning classes as a pedagogical strategy that engages first-generation students in the learning process which could enhance their academic success.

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Responses regarding personal growth were particularly encouraging. Both groups reflected on both internal (changed worldview, greater insight into others) and external (development of career-ready skills) growth, yet first-generation students reported developing more compassion toward the people they served than did their peers. Prior research finds this to be a key outcome of service-learning studies in general (see Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008). Crocker, Olivier, and Nuer (2009), in a study of college students' interpersonal goals, stated that students "with compassionate goals may feel more interested in their classes, seek help more, and self-regulate better, and their learning goals may increase" (p. 260). The three students in Henry's study (2005) found that they shared common experiences with their service-learning partners, such as feelings of isolation, being treated poorly by many in the community and being assumed to be unable to do academic work. The present study suggests that service-learning courses can give first-generation college students opportunities to reflect on these feelings and apply them in action. It is possible that the first-generation college students began the course with greater compassion toward communities served; however, in their own phrasing via the closed- and open-ended questions, more first-generation college students compared to peers articulated improvement in this area. This connection with others may enhance the students' interest in the content of the course, and contribute to their success both in making connections in an unfamiliar university environment and in persevering through challenges with academic work. As York (2013) notes, faculty who teach service-learning courses with first-generation students should be particularly conscious of these students' "encounters with 'self' in their interactions with community partners" (p. 148) and should utilize critical reflection to assert the importance of community partners as well as the students' ability to become change agents. Thus, educators and researchers should further explore this finding and consider adding self-reflection components into service-learning courses that specifically target student empathy and compassion toward, and even identification with, their service-learning partners. Structured opportunities for reflection was a required component of all of the service-learning courses utilized in the present study and may account for the gains made particularly by first-generation college students in this outcome area.

Regarding civic engagement, first-generation college students and their peers differed in their areas of emphasis when discussing engagement. While many in the peer comparison group enjoyed helping solve a problem or fill a need in the community, first-generation students seemed more acutely aware of their personal role in the process. They were also more likely to self-identify with community members. No statements from the peer group suggested this type of identification. Overall, first-generation students in our sample exhibited a greater sense of agency in bringing about social change. While this is a key goal of service-learning courses, research to date had not explored whether first-generation college students experience greater agency as a result of this course. Results from this study suggest that not only did the first-generation students experience agency, but the particular "flavor" of that agency was one of empathy and identification with the community. In essence, the students' phrasing indicates less emphasis on "doing-for" and greater emphasis on giving back. This suggests that first-generation students may become more engaged in service-learning classes compared to their peers because they see and feel connections between the course content, their experiences, and their community partners.

Therefore, service-learning is a significant pedagogy that empowers the first-generation and underserved students in our institutions of higher education. Building upon Henry's

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(2005) work, these findings are the first to-date to show service-learning courses as instrumental in helping first-generation college students to reflect on their privileged status in the academy, identify with communities served, and become empowered to give back to the community. It is intriguing to consider that first-generation college students, comparable to some other underserved populations (see Rosenberg, Reed, Statham, & Rosing, 2012) may be particularly well-suited to "build stronger relationships in communities" (p. 174) as well benefit personally from service-learning courses. Such findings dismantle binary models of privileged service-learning students serving a group of "others" (Henry, 2005). Instead, first-generation college students may come to see themselves as privileged in some ways but still identify with community partners in a way that supersedes older models of service-learning. As higher education becomes increasingly diverse, administrators and educators must attend to the growing numbers of first-generation college students within some underserved minority groups (most notably, Hispanic/Latino; Balemian & Feng, 2013) and support the development and funding for high-impact pedagogies such as service-learning.

Limitations of the Study

Methodological limitations in this study include the absence of a pre-test measure, which would help to answer whether some students already evidenced high levels of civic engagement prior to taking the course. In addition, self-report data are reflections of the student's attitudes, satisfaction, and perceptions rather than actual performance. As a survey for internal institutional use, reliability and validity data was not available for the instrument. Future research should triangulate the findings with objective measures such as double-blind instructor and/or community partner evaluations as well as validated instruments. Also, interview and focus group designs could also be used to further explore the extent to which first-generation college students become more aware of social justice issues, and whether this corresponds to an increased sense of agency.

While our findings are consistent with other studies showing that first-generation students benefit academically from taking service-learning, slight contrasts between our results and others are likely attributable to differences in the student populations. Conley and Hamlin (2009) and Yeh (2010) specifically looked at first-generation college students with low incomes while we did not. While demographic comparisons in our sample indicate that many of the first-generation college students were low income, many of their peers were as well. These results are reflective of the overall student body at the college utilized for the study, where many of the students are from an urban, low-income background and work full- or part-time throughout college. Thus, socioeconomic comparisons between first-generation and other students in our sample may not look as stark as comparisons in another sample. It is important to note that first-generation college students are not a homogenous group and there is great diversity within this designation. As national reports indicate (e.g. Balemian & Feng, 2013), first-generation college students may come from low, middle, or high income brackets. Thus, one would expect to obtain different results in terms of compassion and agency depending on whether the students actually did grow up in comparable communities to those served via service-learning courses. In addition, race and ethnicity are important intersecting areas for first-generation students and require further attention in the literature on service-learning outcomes (Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012). Thus, future research should study the population of first-generation

college students in more depth, attending to the diversity within this group.

Conclusion

This study extends prior research by showing that first-generation college students receive at least as many educational benefits, and perhaps more, than other students taking service-learning courses. These preliminary findings are consistent with current research (Finley & McNair, 2013) indicating that high-impact practices like service-learning may be particularly powerful for underserved students like first-generation college students. Teachers and administrators alike can be encouraged that in this large sample comparing first-generation students and their peers, both groups felt they experienced gains in academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement. With the increasing diversity on college campuses, service-learning pedagogy may be a vehicle for engaging different types of students in key purposes of higher education – deepening knowledge, developing compassion and becoming attuned to critical social justice issues. Finley and McNair (2013) recommend greater intentionality when articulating the importance of high-impact teaching practices, as well as ensuring that such practices are pervasive on campuses. Our work supports this recommendation, which would also help to ensure that service-learning is not a privileged pedagogy for an elite few.

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Appendix

SERVICE-LEARNING and Outreach Center

Thank you for completing the following brief survey evaluating your service-learning course. DO NOT write your name on this form. Your responses will only be reported in aggregate.

Course Number and Name:_____

Semester: Fall   Spring   Year: _____

Service Site or Community Partner:_____

Major: _____

College Classification: First Year Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate Other

Gender: Female Male   Racial/Ethnic background: _____

Age group: 19 or younger 20 -25   26 – 30 31 – 35 36- 40   41 or older

Father's occupation: _____   Mother's occupation: _____

Father's highest level of school completed: Mother's highest level of school completed:

- □ Less than 9th grade
- □ Some high school
- □ High school degree
- □ Some college
- □ College degree
- □ Graduate degree

- □ Less than 9th grade
- □ Some high school
- □ High school degree
- □ Some college
- □ College degree
- □ Graduate degree

Do you work while in school?   Yes   No

If yes, total hours per week you work: _____ Your job type : _____

Before taking this course, did you volunteer regularly? Yes   No

If yes, how many hours per week? ____

Total hours you engaged in service in this course: _____

Did you take this course to fulfill your Service-Learning requirement?   Yes   No

Did you reflect on the service experience through at least one written assignment in this course? Yes   No

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Background					
B1. My family's economic situation is similar to the people we served in this course.					
B2. My family is more financially stable than the people we served in this course.					
B3. The people I served in this course deserved my support.					

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Academic					
A1. The service-learning project increased my understanding of course content.					
A2. Service-learning increased my interest in the course subject.					
A3. I am now more aware of how service connects to this academic subject area.					
A4. Written assignments, discussion or course projects were helpful in connecting the course content to my service experience.					
A5. I learned more in this course than in a typical course.					
Service					
S1. I felt adequately prepared for the service project.					
S2. The service project met a need in the community.					
S3. The service project exposed me to an unfamiliar environment.					
S4. I was supported by the community partner staff at my service placement to meet my course goals.					
S5. I became more aware of community needs through this course.					
S6. This course made me want to continue to engage in service in the future.					
Reflection					
R1. I experienced personal growth as a result of the service-learning experience.					
R2. Reflection assignments were helpful in connecting my service experience with the course material.					
R3. I have new insights about others as a result of the service-learning experience.					
R4. I feel deeper compassion for the people I served as a result of this course.					
Overall					
O1. Service-learning was a valuable part of this course.					
O2. The service-learning experience made me want to incorporate service into my career choice.					

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	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
O3. The service-learning component required more work than a typical course.					
O4. The service-learning component required more of a time commitment than a typical course.					
05. The service-learning component in this course required me to develop leadership skills.					
O6. I'm likely to take another service-learning course in the future.					

Open-ended survey questions:

What was the most valuable part of participating in a service-learning course?

What was the least valuable part of participating in a service-learning course?

Additional comments:

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