Speaking of Service: A Phenomenological Study of How Low-Income College Students Discuss Service-Learning Participation

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Speaking of Service: A Phenomenological Study of How Low-Income College Students Discuss Service-Learning Participation

Qualifying Paper

Submitted by

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September, 2016
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Research Context

Barriers to Low-Income College Student Retention

Post-secondary efforts to expand educational access have led to an unprecedented level of diversity among United States college students (Pascarella, 2004; Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman, 2014). Yet the low-income students who contribute to this growing diversity often face financial, academic, social, and psychological barriers that limit their ability to persist in college. Compared to more affluent students, low-income students often have access to fewer advanced courses in high school, leaving them less academically prepared for college (Corrigan, 2003; Lucas, 2001). In addition, many students face financial pressures that force them to work throughout college (Lehmann, 2009; Walpole, 2003). These financial constraints often require low-income students to spend long hours working in off campus jobs, directly undermining their ability to engage in campus activities. As a result, “students from low-income families tend to be less involved in extracurricular and co-curricular activities than their peers from higher income families” (Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2015, p. 237).

Studies are beginning to explore how post-secondary participation also exerts pressures on low-income students’ social lives and identity development. Many low-income and working-class students experience a lack of belonging and feelings of isolation on college campuses (Aries & Seider, 2005; Cohen, 1998; Lehman, 2009; Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney, & Hau, 2006). For example, Cohen (1998) describes how low-income students who attend elite postsecondary institutions are often confronted with feelings of inferiority when they arrive on the campus and articulate a sense of confusion and uncertainty as to whether they belong in such an elite environment. Aries
and Seider (2005) note how because low-income students make up such a small fraction of the student body at elite colleges, they often experience a sense of marginalization, and feel like cultural outsiders as compared to their more affluent peers (Aries & Seider, 2005). These challenges may be especially acute for low-income first-generation college students, who often have less institutional knowledge of college than their peers (Aries & Seider, 2005; Lehmann, 2009).

While issues of identity development are critical for all post-secondary students, they may be particularly salient for low-income students on college campuses, many of whom undergo psychologically complex identity construction processes as they navigate their way through collegiate and home settings. As part of the transition from high school to college, low-income students often describe assimilating to their higher income peers by adopting new forms of cultural capital while in college. Studies suggest that this process creates tension in students’ sense of self as they experience a newfound sense of social distance from their home communities, which they sometimes describe with a sense of guilt and “class betrayal” (Lehmann, 2009, p. 632) about “breaking away” (Stuber, 2006, p. 308) from their home communities. These pressures impact student retention; low-income students are significantly less likely to graduate from college than their peers. Even when controlling for prior academic achievement, only 36 percent of low-income students earn their bachelor’s degree in eight years, as compared to over three-quarters of high-income students (Bok, 2013). With increases in enrollment of low-income students and persistent gaps in degree attainment, pressure falls to post-secondary institutions to respond to the unique challenges faced by low-income students.
Promising Initiatives to Support Low-Income College Student Retention

Research has begun to identify potential strategies and programs to promote the engagement of low-income undergraduates. These studies call for programs that: (1) generate “social capital, validation, and the development of a student’s multiple social identities” (Gupton, Castelo-Rodriguez, Martinez, & Quintanar, 2009, p. 258), (2) “encourage the use of and participation in learning communities” (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 249), and (3) utilize peer tutors (Gupton et al., 2009) to promote low-income student engagement. Researchers have also stressed the need to address low-income students’ financial barriers to engagement. Experts suggest addressing these barriers by “increasing the availability of grant aid to help students pay college costs” (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 241) and providing vouchers to low-income students to defer the cost of participation in extracurricular activities (Engle & Lynch, 2011).

While existing research regarding programming designed specifically to promote low-income student retention is limited, much can be gleaned from programs that have addressed the college retention challenges faced by a similar population: first-generation college students. While not synonymous, nearly two-thirds of low-income students are first-generation (Corrigan, 2003) and thus, we can draw on some of this scholarship to better understand the experiences of low-income students. Like low-income students, first-generation students face psychological and social struggles of “negotiating multiple layers of identity” (Orbe, 2004, p. 133) and confronting feelings of isolation (London, 1992; Orbe, 2004) that leave them less likely to persist in college (Thayer, 2000). In order to mitigate these barriers, successful first-generation college students have articulated the importance of “scaling down” spaces in college to create smaller
communities that provide academic, social, and psychological support (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Colleges have responded to this call by offering peer counselors and support groups that help students grapple with personal struggles and develop supportive campus communities (Bui, 2002; Hsiao, 1992). Common programmatic elements across promising interventions include an emphasis on creating spaces where students feel comfortable sharing their stories and exploring issues of power through small group reflection (Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014).

Service-Learning: Another Promising Retention Strategy?

Service-learning in higher education often relies on the same programmatic elements of reflective practices and “scaling down” social spaces, which appear to support successful first-generation students. Service-learning is defined as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Outcomes of service-learning in the general student population include improved academic performance, social skill development, and increased self-awareness (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Yorio & Ye, 2012;).

While many studies focus on these aggregate outcomes of service participation (Schwartzman, 2001), some emerging research explores how particular sub-groups of students, such as first-generation students, are experiencing service. Yeh (2010), whose work outlines a powerful case for the need to explore the link between service-learning participation and college retention among first-generation low-income students, found that service-learning participation was linked to the development of a sense of
“resilience,” “critical consciousness,” and “personal meaning” in college among first-generation students (Yeh, 2010). Unfortunately, few additional studies have explored how service-learning programs might support the development and retention of low-income college students, more broadly.

Studies drawn from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data have identified service-learning as one type of post-secondary program that fosters student engagement and subsequent college retention (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). Other “high impact” post-secondary educational activities identified in the report included learning communities, study abroad experiences, student-faculty research, and senior culminating experiences (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). Interestingly, while traditionally underrepresented college students such as African-American students are often underrepresented in most “high impact” educational programs as compared to other demographic groups, service-learning appears to be an exception. For example, African American college students participate in service-learning programs at a higher rate than their peers (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). The report also goes on to note that, “historically underserved students tend to benefit more from engaging in educationally purposeful activities than majority students.” (Kuh & Schneider, 2008, p. 17). Kuh and Schneider identify first-generation and African American students in particular as benefitting from these programs (2008). Since low-income students are drawn heavily from these two demographic groups (Gupton et al., 2009; Morales, 2014) they may also be likely to benefit from engaging in “high impact” activities such as service-learning. These quantitative findings suggest a need for qualitative studies that explore how and why
traditionally underrepresented college students are choosing to engage in service-learning and why, if at all, they benefit from these activities.

Service-learning programs may uniquely benefit low-income students in their identity-development processes, for the reasons already described above. During college, students navigate their way through a new campus environment and identify spaces where they fit in both academically and socially.¹ Co-curricular service-learning programs can provide a set of experiences that successfully address the previously noted psychological barriers faced by these low-income students by creating scaled down spaces for peer reflection and identity exploration in college (Yorio & Ye, 2012). The long-term impacts of service-learning on identity development include “complexity in thinking about self and relationships with others, an openness to new ideas and experiences, and shifts in future commitments” (Jones & Abes, 2004, p. 149). In addition, service-learning influences participants’ conception of future selves, and prompts service-oriented career exploration (Jones & Abes, 2004, p. 157). Because many service-learning study samples are predominantly white and middle class, scholars have called for future research to investigate how service-learning uniquely influences identity development for non-dominant (Carter, 2005) “students who share social identities in common with those whom they are encountering at the service site” (Jones & Abes, 2004, p. 163). This, of course, includes low-income students.

¹ According to the developmental psychologist Erik Erikon, young adulthood is a particularly salient moment in identity development (Syed & Azmitia, 2008; Waterman & Scarr, 1982). Arnett (2000) employs the term “emerging adulthood” (p. 469) to refer to the phase of the life cycle when many young adults begin to engage in postsecondary spaces that expose them to newfound social diversity. Because of this, college is a time when students are exploring various components of their identity.
A small but growing body of research suggests that non-dominant students may experience identity development, community affiliation, and interpersonal relationships through service-learning differently than affluent white peers. Traditional service-learning models introduce privileged young adults to the challenges experienced by individuals living in marginalized communities (Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, 2010). However, non-dominant students often experience a sense of identification with the communities that they serve, influencing their relationships with fellow volunteers and service recipients (Green, 2003; Lee, 2005; Mitchell & Donahue, 2009; Seider, Huguley, & Novick, 2013; Yeh, 2010). Racial and ethnic minority students may engage in service out of a sense of responsibility to give back to communities like their own, as an act of “going home” rather than “serving the other” (Mitchell & Donahue, 2009, p. 176).

Because of this, service-learning programs can provide spaces where non-dominant students feel included and at ease, even as they often experience a sense of isolation in college (Lee, 2005). At the same time, non-dominant students may experience social distress when affluent volunteers use racist, pathologizing language to describe the low-income and racial or ethnic minority constituents (Green, 2003; Mitchell & Donahue, 2009; Seider et al., 2013).

In sum, service-learning programs can function as sites of both social connection and distress for non-dominant students. Programs offer a productive space for identity exploration and small group reflection; however, they can also further highlight the differences between non-dominant students and their peers. While studies have begun to explore this complexity through the lens of race and ethnicity, few focus specifically on how low-income students negotiate their service-learning experiences. Further exploring
how service-learning might shape the identity of low-income students would help us to
better understand the ways in which service-learning might function to support and retain
low-income students in college.

**Study Methods**

This literature motivates the following research questions:

1. In what way, if any, do low-income students talk about service-learning shaping
their general collegiate experience?
2. In what way, if any, do low-income students talk about service-learning shaping
their identity?
3. In what way, if any, do low-income students talk about service-learning informing
their goals for the future?

In order to explore these questions, this study draws from a secondary analysis of
interview data collected as part of a graduate level qualitative methods course. Through
the course, graduate students interviewed low-income undergraduate students who
participated in Reflection in Service Experience (RISE), a service-learning program
housed in the city of Springfield at the predominantly white and highly selective Fairfield
University, which serves financial aid eligible students from Fairfield and other area
universities.

**Context and Site**

Each year, RISE admits a cohort of 40 work-study eligible students to participate
in the program. Each cohort is comprised of a mix of returning and new RISE students.
College sophomores, juniors, and seniors from Fairfield and other local universities are
eligible to apply to the program. RISE requirements include participating in eight or
more hours of community service per week. Participants receive a work-study stipend
for completing these service hours. In addition, RISE enrollees participate in leadership
development activities, written and group reflections, and one-on-one mentoring sessions with program staff. One of the main activities that RISE students participate in is a series of cohort wide reflection meetings that take place several times each semester. RISE is housed within a larger non-profit umbrella organization, the Service Learning Center (SLC), which is home to over 50 smaller service projects that vary from student mentoring and tutoring programs, to programs that serve the homeless and elderly. Students in RISE may choose which of these programs to volunteer at to earn their work-study stipend. RISE students also have the opportunity to take on additional leadership and nonprofit management roles by directing individual SLC programs or serving on a board of student directors that help to run the day-to-day operations of the larger SLC organization.

Data

As part of a graduate-level methods course, pairs of graduate students conducted interviews with sixteen RISE undergraduate student-volunteers and sixteen program alumni in the Spring of 2015. Graduate student interviewers were trained in qualitative research methods and worked in pairs to design interview protocols (see Appendix A). Interview protocols included questions regarding service-learning, identity, future goals, and the college experience of interviewees, themes that are directly aligned with this study’s research questions. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted for about an hour. All interviews were recorded electronically, transcribed, and de-identified using pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

Data for this study, a secondary analysis, were purposefully sampled (Maxwell, 2013) from original study participants, who self-identified as low-income. All sixteen
RISE students who participated in the original interviews were financial aid eligible, yet some students in the sample self-identified as middle class. Because research questions for this secondary analysis revolve specifically around a low-income population, a subset of six interviews from participants who self-identified as low-income were reanalyzed. Appendix B contains further details regarding sample demographics.

Analysis

Because this study’s research questions focus on participants’ interpretations of the phenomena of service-learning, and because little prior research has studied this specific population of low-income student volunteers, a grounded analytic approach was most appropriate. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is well-suited for this type of study. It is a phenomenological, emic analytic approach that focuses on research participants’ current “experiences and/or understandings of particular phenomena” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 46). IPA stresses “open” and “exploratory” research questions that “avoid imposing too many a priori theoretical constructs upon phenomena” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 47). The current study’s sample size of six is aligned with IPA guidelines, which suggest the selection of small samples to promote an in-depth exploration of a few cases (Smith et al., 2009).

The analytic strategy described herein follows the analytic strategy suggested for IPA research. The sequence of steps include: generating a set of “unfocused notes” about each of the cases in the sample that record the researcher’s subjective response to the data, flagging key linguistic phases, and identifying important contexts and concepts that emerge within each case (Willig, 2008, p. 87). These notes are used to identify themes that emerge within the case, and subsequently, themes are grouped into larger conceptual
buckets and a “summary table” mapping the relationship between the themes (Willig, 2008, p. 90). This sequence of steps is first completed within a single case; later, the summary table is used with other cases in the study sample. After the completion of each of these coding steps, the researcher engages in analytic memoing. The purpose of these memos is two-fold. First, they provide the opportunity to critically reflect on how researcher positionality informs data interpretation. Secondly, the memos explicitly and thoroughly document how the researcher made decisions in generating themes and categories throughout the IPA coding process.

Results

I. Feelings of Belonging and Support During College

Overall, these data suggest that participation in RISE provided students with feelings of belonging and support during their time in college. This foundation enabled RISE participants to expand on and explore their existing identities and also provided them with a context in which to explore possibilities for their future selves. Students in the sample often made meaning of their RISE experiences in terms of relationships. For example, developing relationships with RISE peers in college provided them with a sense of belonging in college. At the same time, being in a community of like-minded friends provided RISE students with a “safe” and “comfortable” community to reflect on their service experiences, process issues of identity in college, and explore future career goals in public service. RISE participants also talked about another set of impactful relationships: those that they developed with youth at their service site. Through participating in service with these youth, RISE students recognized the strengths that their social background provided them in service projects. Often, these strengths stemmed from a sense of shared identity and experience that students perceived enabled
them to connect deeply with the youth that they worked with at their service site. This recognition, combined with the skills that they developed through direct experiences of service, often inspired RISE students to pursue public service oriented college majors and careers. Below, I provide evidence to support the findings described above and elaborate on their implications.

In describing RISE, participants often focused on the sense of belonging and social support that the program provided for them in college. Participants explained how they developed friendships with like-minded peers in the RISE community. Some students in RISE also explained how a shared sense of background with other students led them to feel a sense of belonging in college. Students perceived that the peer relationships that they developed through RISE served as a strong foundation that enabled them to be vulnerable and open in group meetings and discussions. They described RISE group meetings as a “safe space” on campus to support their reflections about service work and their exploration of issues of power and privilege. Students also spoke about the RISE financial stipends as a dimension of instrumental support that allowed them to engage more fully in the service work that they were passionate about.

**Opportunity to Develop Relationships with Peers Who Share Values and Common Experiences**

All six students in the study perceived that participating in RISE had led them to deepen their level of connection with other college students. For some students, RISE led to new friendships, while for others, RISE activities helped strengthen existing friendships with fellow program participants. For Alex, a Latino senior Fairfield College student who had participated in RISE for three years, RISE participation presented an
opportunity to connect with a group of students who shared his interest in community service:

I think it was not a new community in the sense that I already knew some of them, but it was still a new community in the sense that I knew them, but I didn’t know them as well as I know them now, like thanks to RISE, because of RISE, I am close friends with them now...it definitely opened up, especially the door to upperclassmen who were interested in the same things that I was interested in, but I would otherwise not have had a chance to meet through any other channel.

Alex explained how participating in RISE allowed him to strengthen existing friendships with students who he had met through prior service in other programs housed in the larger non-profit Service Learning Center (SLC) organization. In addition, Alex saw participation in RISE as an opportunity to “open up” his access to new social networks with upperclassmen who were committed to service. Alex perceived that he did not have access to “any other channel” to meet these older students outside of RISE.

Like Alex, Jessica, a Fairfield senior and fourth year RISE participant who self-identified as Latina, emphasized the important role that relationship development played for her in RISE. She and several other students, particularly the seniors in the sample, described how they kept in touch with the RISE alumni who had graduated from the program. As Jessica explained, without RISE,

my experience at Fairfield would have been completely different. I don’t think it would have been as growth-oriented…for me, RISE has been like another educational, like uh, inspiration, I don’t know how to say it. Like it has been as valuable as any of the classes I have taken here. I still keep in touch with so many of the RISE people who have graduated. They still support me, me and other people who are still here. So, I, yeah, I don’t know what I would have done without RISE. I think I’m really appreciative of that. I can’t wait until my parents come for graduation and get to meet all of the people who have supported me, like all the mentors that I’ve gained through RISE and all of my peers who have grown with me this whole time.
Jessica described her experience of participating in RISE in relational terms. She explained how her experience at Fairfield was “completely different” after joining RISE in large part due to the relationships that she developed through the program. She described how she developed connections with “mentors” who “supported” her and “peers who have grown with [her]” throughout her time in the program. Alex and Jessica’s quotes reflect a pattern of meaning making reflected in other students’ narratives; across the board, students seemed to process the quality and success of their experiences in the RISE program through a relational lens.

**Shared passion for service.** Respondents described appreciating the feeling that they were part of a group that shared common values, including a commitment to service and social justice work. In particular, five of the six students in the study perceived RISE as a scaled down space where they could connect with other students who shared their “passion” for engaging in service work. All interviewees in the sample heard about RISE while they were already participating in a service program within the umbrella of SLC and were told that they would be good candidates for the program through personal outreach from a RISE student participant or program director. Because of the nature of this outreach, students often described how their group was “self-selected” to cater to students who were already passionate about service and who were unlikely to participate in RISE for financial reasons alone. As Alex explained, “These people’s lives’ revolve around service on campus.” This sense of shared passion for service was a common dimension of identity that RISE participants highlighted in their interviews. David, an African American student who was in his first year of RISE and second year of college at Westchester University, explained how RISE students often displayed a passion for
service through small group activities where they discussed which service-learning activities and social justice issues they were most committed to:

Everybody had, like, a passionate voice about that thing, that issue. Especially like, Jackie, from South Springfield, when she spoke about, you know, trying to connect, trying to tackle something in education. She talked about her, she not having enough resources within her school to actually expand or be um, same level as a lot of, maybe, um, I dunno, kids that have money. You know, I mean, the passionate conversations we have with one another, it can’t really be said right now, you have to be there to actually listen to it, to actually listen to the way, the tone of the voice, the way we speak—talk about the stories they experience that we incorporate within the story to explain.

David explained how the passion of RISE members was often fueled by personal experiences. RISE provided a space for students to come together and share the firsthand experiences of service that led them to fight for social justice issues. In that sense, RISE presented a space where students could give voice to a common set of values of passion for service and commitment to social justice together with other participants.

Shared class background. For many students, RISE participation presented an opportunity to connect with a small group of peers who shared dimensions of their identities. For example, half of the interviewees emphasized the shared class identities of the members of RISE. For Jessica, connecting with a group of students in RISE who shared her class identity was an especially valuable experience during her undergraduate career:

I think a lot of us…so, um, all of us were going through similar situations on campus, about, you know, being working class, low-income families, trying to like see how to navigate this space and how to navigate service with our kind of like background and experience, what it meant to be a Fairfield student going into a new community in Springfield, like, what implications did that have. All those things I had been wondering about, but we never talked about it in any other space. So then RISE was like, all of a sudden, I was like, this is the first space I have felt comfortable in at Fairfield.
For Jessica, RISE provided an opportunity to connect with a group of low-income students who were navigating what it meant to attend an elite college. Participating in a scaled down space on campus where she could connect with a group of “similar” students and have conversations with them about issue of “inequality” provided Jessica with a sense of relief. Jessica’s story illustrates how service-learning programs like RISE may function to mitigate some of the feelings of isolation and lack of belonging experienced by so many low-income students, particularly those who attend elite colleges and universities.

It is interesting to note that, while some interviewees, like Jessica, pointed to shared class identities within the group, others also highlighted dimensions of the RISE groups’ diversity in their interviews. For example, while emphasizing the shared commitment to social justice shared by group members, Sophie, a first year RISE participant who attended a nearby public college, Mass College, also pointed to the diversity of personal backgrounds and service interests represented within the RISE group.

I think the main similarity is that we all strive for social justice and see social inequities and we can call them out and see them, but I can say that like one of my good friends from RISE is from Australia, like her experiences are not my experiences, however she still has the same passion that I do. And then there’s another person who is from Detroit, like we all have very different upbringings but whatever those upbringings are, they’ve kind of allowed us to be able to see social inequities and call them out when you see them.

Sophie also saw the program as exposing her to a diverse group of students from all over the world. While she perceived that her friends’ experiences “are not my experiences,” she recognized that her RISE friends “all strive for social justice” and have “the same

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2 Mass College is located in the greater metropolitan area where RISE is housed.
passion that I do.” Here, Sophie stressed that, while she may not share the same background experiences with her friends in RISE, they share common values of dedication to service and social justice issues. Sophie’s interview serves as a reminder that not all students in the sample stressed common dimensions of their class background when describing fellow RISE participants.

**Opportunity for a Scaled-down Space That is “Safe” and “Respectful” for Reflecting**

Study participants perceived that RISE reflection activities provided them with a supportive space in college to process their service experiences and discuss issues of power and privilege. In their interviews, RISE participants talked about a foundation of belonging that was built from their relationships at RISE, which supported and deepened the value of the RISE reflection activities. In particular, they noted how participating in reflection with both their friends and the upperclassmen, who modeled group norms, were especially powerful experiences. Students often talked in affective terms about how the presence of these key actors, coupled with the group norms established in RISE reflections, led to positive group reflection experiences with peers. For example, students described RISE reflection activities in terms such as “safe,” “comfortable,” “open” and “relevant.” Five out of six study participants interviewed used the word “space” to describe the positive attributes of these reflection sessions; they described this as a counter-normative space that provided them with feelings of trust and connection on campus. As students described the importance of RISE reflections in supporting their development throughout college, they also often described a synergy between the actors
in the space, their affective experience of the space, the norms created in the space, and
the topics that were deeply explored in the space.

**Reflection with peers.** The majority of study participants described how the
friendships that they established through RISE served as a foundation that made RISE
reflection experiences especially powerful. For example, Diego, a Latino Easton
University student in his third year of RISE and senior year of college, perceived the
opportunity to reflect with friends to be one of the attributes that made his RISE group
reflections so meaningful:

> Being able to reflect in a group and like feel comfortable, right, in that group is
really great. And not to say that I felt that in the beginning, but after a while being
in the group for a long time and having like your good friends in the group, even
when new people come in it feels like they’ve been there for a long time…it’s
such like a safe space…but also like it feels like reflection always just comes at
the right time and like things we talk about are relevant to what’s going on in my
life right now.

Here Diego stressed how reflecting with particular actors, in this case his close friends,
shaped his experience in RISE. He highlighted having known his fellow participants “for
a long time” and having become “good friends” with them as significant dimensions of
his experience. The opportunity to reflect with a group of friends contributed to his
feeling “comfortable” in the meetings and provided him with a sense that RISE is a “safe
space” for sharing.

Echoing Diego, Alex described the significant role that developing relationships
within RISE over time played in what he took away from his group reflection sessions.
Having participated in RISE for three years, Alex explained how RISE group discussions
allowed him to share in other students’ “growth” from “sophomore year versus senior
year.” For Alex, participating in reflection activities with the same friends over long
periods of time allowed the strengthening of bonds with other students while at the same
time grounded him and reminded him about the “social issues” that he was most
“passionate” about. Alex also noted that coming together with friends to reflect in RISE
group meetings provided him with a counter space in college to de-stress and focus on his
goals and values:

I think, it’s one of the few spaces at Fairfield that I realize it’s possible for really
stressed out college undergraduates to literally put aside anything they’re worried
about right now, all the stuff they’re worried about right now, whether it’s
personal, family, academic, deadlines coming up, whatever…then as soon as like
that process starts…The room’s not rowdy …people aren’t messing
around…people aren’t not paying attention or on their phones. People are actually
paying attention and listening to each other. So it might be a combination of all
these things… it’s a really interesting space where, I feel like for a moment, for
those four hours, the world around Fairfield just stops, and people just come in for
a minute and sit down, relax, and reflect on what they’re doing… after talking to
my friends, after coming out of those things, it helps them keep going, cause
they’re like, “Just when I thought that I was failing as a director for this program
because, you know, this happened and this happened and this happened…why I
got motivated in the first place, why I’m here…” It grounds them.

For Alex, the engaged community of friends in group reflections helped provide space to
take a step back from the everyday “stress” of college to consider larger questions of
what motivated him to participate in service work, which he felt “ground[ed]” him and
reminded him of the reasons behind his commitment to service. Alex shared that
conditions of mutual respect and dedication to the reflection process deepened his
behavioral engagement during group reflection sessions.

Both Alex and Diego’s interviews alluded to deepening the quality of their
reflections and their relationships with other students over time through RISE.
Significantly, both Diego and Alex were seniors who had spent three years in the RISE
program. This raises questions about the power of longitudinal involvement in RISE,
both in terms of relationships and in terms of opportunities to grow one’s reflective practice.

**Reflection with upperclassmen.** Each of the seniors in the study, who had participated in RISE for 3-4 years, emphasized the important role that upperclassman played in deepening their reflection experiences. These seniors reflected back on memories of their first meetings in the group, describing how they had been struck by the ways in which upperclassmen modeled communication and group norms for the younger RISE students. Diego recounted how upperclassman modeled disclosing their personal stories during group reflections, which helped him to feel more comfortable opening up in group reflections.

It’s like ...you know when you’re talking to someone and the person says something that’s like kind of vulnerable. And you’re like, oh, this person trusts me enough to say that. I want to say something like that is going to reveal more of myself. It’s kind of like that but from the beginning, and because I’ve revealed so much in that space it just feels natural to like reveal. So like, kind of when new people come in, they see that and they also want to open up more…And that’s what I got in the beginning, where in the beginning I was just like “woah, what is this?” But then seeing the ol-, the people who’ve been there before share so much, it was like OK, it’s fine to like share a lot and people want to hear it, it’s not this thing where you get to say a sentence and people are going to cut you off, it’s a space where you’re like free to talk, because sometimes, especially when you’re doing service and just like working with people who are in the program, it’s hard to talk about those things outside of that if that makes sense right?

Here, Diego explained how upperclassmen in RISE contributed to his sense of comfort and trust in opening up during group reflection. He also described how older students modeled discussion norms such as showing respect by not interrupting other group members while they were sharing.
Participants also remembered the ways in which upperclassmen had modeled sharing their passion for service and commitment to creating an inclusive and welcoming community. For example, in her interview, Jessica described RISE as an “honest and open” and “comfortable space.” She noted the important role that upperclassmen played in welcoming new students and instilling a sense of community, sharing how “at the first meeting, I remember all of the upperclassmen being so supportive of the incoming people. It just felt like a really bonded community, and, for, I personally felt like I was included in that from day one.” In addition to helping to create a sense of community and inclusivity within the group, Jessica also perceived that the upperclassmen in the group helped to establish group reflection norms. She perceived that the RISE community recognized “ground rules” that were “intentionally” set by the group. These norms included using “labels” and “guidelines” throughout group discussions. Jessica explained how upperclassmen instilled these norms in RISE as they modeled how to have respectful conversations where they recognized the power and privilege inherent in their own experiences and identities.

Um, I think it came from people being respectful and real about those conversations. I remember people talking about, yes, maybe I have more privilege in this area and I acknowledge that, and I am also in allyship with those who don’t have that privilege. And that was very important to me, because being in the Sociology classes, it felt like people were, like, always imposing, like, their ideas about those things and not considering their experiences or how they could be allies in that. So, in RISE, that wasn’t missed. It felt like most people were about, you know, about different experiences, but I am going to be respectful about that and open about that. And I remember specifically this one upperclassman telling me, if I need to be checked, check me, and I was like, whoa, no one has ever told me that I could tell them, you know, if something was disrespectful or I felt something…and not that it was like, I think, it’s not a perfect space. It’s not a perfect space, but I think people were very intentional about making it a comfortable space.
By openly talking about dimensions of their own privilege, Jessica perceived that upperclassmen modeled relationships of “allyship” with younger students in the program. Jessica felt that having these “intentional” conversations created a “respectful” and “comfortable” environment within RISE.

**Opportunities for Financial Vouchers Support Engagement**

Another dimension of support that students perceived that the RISE program provided was financial compensation for their service work, which changed their overall college experience by supporting a deeper level of engagement in service than would have otherwise been possible. Participants explained how financial constraints in their lives often forced them to work at hourly wage jobs during the semester, which impeded their ability to participate in extracurricular activities, including community service. Receiving a voucher to participate in RISE removed this barrier to campus engagement.

**Vouchers as critical to participation.** All six students in the sample described experiencing financial struggles and concerns while in college. Four of the six students stressed that the financial stipend that they received from participating in RISE allowed them to engage more deeply in service work. Alex explained how receiving the RISE stipend helped to support his heightened involvement in the larger SLC organization, as a director of programs and senior administrator:

> I am a low-income student, first-generation low-income student … I think had I not joined RISE in my sophomore year, I would probably got another job, just an on-campus … which would have definitely prevented me from spending as much time in everything … I cannot imagine how different my Fairfield career would be without RISE, both from the personal perspective, like, in terms of my own professional growth, but also just the financial perspective in terms of – the money had to come from somewhere, and it would have come from somewhere – and I wouldn’t have had the amazing experiences doing the different things that I did at the SLC organization had it not been for me finding out about RISE.
Alex stressed how his financial responsibilities “would have definitely prevented” him from spending as much time engaging in service during college because he would have had to have acquired “another job” to make ends meet. Had he not received the stipend to participate in RISE, Alex believed that he would have missed out on “amazing experiences” of “growth” during college.

Mercedes, a Native American and Caucasian first year RISE participant who attended highly-selective Fieldstone College, explained how she relied on her RISE stipend not only to support herself in college, but also to cover the public transportation costs of commuting to her service site as well as traveling to the Fairfield campus to participate in RISE program activities. She perceived this need to earn money in college as an aspect of her identity that she shared with fellow RISE students, noting that “the majority of people – the goal of the program is to have people that – we couldn’t otherwise spend so much time on service because we’d have to have a paying job as well to support ourselves through college.” Sophie elaborated on this sentiment:

There were a lot of times that I was volunteering. And particularly with this program a lot of time is required, and it took away from time that I could be working an hourly wage. So it came down to essentially, like, I still needed money. And I saw that RISE, or, I was told that RISE…actually pays for you to do community service, which is something that I love, and is much better than me scooping ice cream at Ice Cream Store, which is where I work. (laughs). That’s why I do it…I think it’s just partially financial aid, you know being able to get paid and do what I love gives me more time to do what I love. And also meeting other people who are kind of on the same page.

The RISE stipend allowed Sophie to participate in an activity that she was passionate about while meeting her need for financial assistance. Like Mercedes, Sophie also described how this aspect of her identity, needing to earn money during college, was something that she held in common with other RISE participants. Finally, Sophie stated
that her work with RISE was more rewarding than her service sector position working in an ice cream store.

**The limitations of vouchers.** While many students who received the RISE stipend articulated gratitude for being able to earn money for their service, half of the students in the sample emphasized how their motivation to participate in the program was not purely financial. These students stressed that they could earn a higher wage at a number of other on and off campus jobs, but chose RISE because of the service aspect. In her interview, Mercedes took the time to explain the calculation of how students who are less invested in service work could make a higher hourly through a different work-study job at the library:

I don’t see any reasons why someone wouldn’t do RISE. Other than, per se, say they don’t care. No, not that they don’t care – someone’s not as invested in service, you could get a library job…library jobs I think are like are between $12 and $16. I know someone who worked with ASP the first summer and she got paid $16 to work at the…library per hour. And she could do homework during that time because there are not a lot of people here during the summer … So that would be $16/hour to have extra time while you are there to read and do homework you know. As opposed to RISE, if you get paid not on the stipend, if you get hourly it’s $10.25 / hour I believe. I could see someone saying – oh, if I’m going to work, this is more economical if you are getting paid $16 and work. But for me, it’s like no.

As a low-income student, Mercedes was acutely aware of the financial costs of college attendance, and actively chose to participate in RISE because of her level of “care” for service work, even while acknowledging that she could make more money to support herself working at an hourly wage job. Sophie also explained how her love of service caused her to make financial sacrifices in order to participate in the RISE program:

I found myself just being here so much, and you know, when you apply it’s like, “Oh, you get this amount of stipend money,” and you’re like, “Yeah!” And then you like actually break it down to an hourly wage and you’re like, “J/k. This is like below like waitress, minimum wage!” *(laughs).* So, yeah. And it also came
down to my mom just being like, “I understand you love this work, but we ain’t got no money, so what are you going to do?” And this year I’m going to be a director for the same program. This is my third year returning… I mean if, I truly think that if it weren’t for RISE, and its ability to pay me for doing something I love, I would unfortunately have to, because of my financial situation, I would unfortunately have to minimize my time doing what I love to go do something that I’m like, “eh” about.

Sophie explained how she negotiated balancing her desire to participate in extracurricular activities with family pressure to earn more money to support herself as low-income student. In fact, half of the students in the sample still found themselves needing to work at other jobs, or planned to assume additional positions within the next year, in order to support themselves financially, in addition to receiving the RISE stipend. Students perceived the RISE stipend as an essential form of support during college that both relieved them of some of these financial burdens and freed them to spend their time actively engaging in the service work that they were passionate about.

Results
II. Exploring or Expanding Upon Existing Identities

Exploring Existing Identities

In addition to the social and instrumental support that students spoke about receiving through RISE, students also spoke about RISE providing a space to explore issues of identity. As suggested above, conversations with trusted peers at RISE group meetings served as one important site of identity exploration. In addition, RISE participants described how issues of identity shaped the way that they perceived engaging with the youth that they served (through RISE) in the community. Students conveyed how their shared identity allowed them to connect deeply with the communities with whom they worked. Often times, multiple dimensions of students’ identities informed the meaning that their service work held for them; in addition to class, students spoke
about race and ethnicity, immigrant status, and hometown, for example. For RISE participants who were once served by SLC programs as youth, participating in RISE was often particularly meaningful. The program allowed them to connect with youth from a place of familiarity, while also gaining a sense of continuity, agency and growth through service.

**Exploring issues of identity with peers.** Just as strong relationships supported powerful reflection experiences among RISE group members, participants often described how conversations about identity with RISE peers were deepened by the strength of their relationships. Two-thirds of the students in the sample cited conversation with RISE peers as offering important opportunities to explore issues of identity. Jessica explained how participating in these reflections helped her to feel like she had a community of people on campus who could relate to her experience as a first-generation college student:

I am the first person in my family to go to college, and the network back home is, like, college is like this big far-away thing that barely, like, that not many people go to college. And, um, the only people, the only way I had heard of college was through community college, or like, I remember that some of my mom’s friends’ children had gone to community college at some point. Um, so, for me it was very hard to negotiate, like, me getting into Fairfield and feeling like I left people behind. And, like, asking why, like, how did I get this opportunity, and how come, like, my mom’s child, my mom’s friends’ children didn’t have this same opportunity. Coming in, that was like, a very hard question that I was navigating …that is just, like, one example. Like, I knew…I felt the effects of oppression, and things like that, but I didn’t know how to label it. Or didn’t know that other people on this campus were experiencing similar experiences like that. Umm, also, you know, being here in a very prestigious university, like people talking about ranches and mansions and like, their vacations other places, you know, me kind of like, being in the midst of hearing all these things for the first time and not knowing that people like had that many resources. Um, yeah, those culture clashes were like really in my face that first year. And, so, I like guess that’s why I started thinking about education, thinking about communities, uh, service, and how that is tied to changing those systems, or you know, creating more equity,
creating more opportunities. And, so, that is how I started getting more involved with Gateway, but we hadn’t had those conversations, I had never had those conversations until I got to RISE, where other people were like feeling similar ways, or like, were talking about those experiences where they’ve come from and what they’ve experiences. And to me, that was almost relieving. Whereas like, oh, other people are also experiencing this on campus, and I’m not alone, I have a community who can support me as I go along.

Jessica explained how she felt like she was “negotiating” feelings of guilt after leaving behind people in her home community to attend “prestigious” Fairfield College; at the same time, she felt “culture clashes” during her first year of college that prompted her to begin exploring social justice issues. RISE was the first space on campus where Jessica could have conversations about identity, power, and privilege with peers who were “feeling similar ways” as her because of their shared life “experiences.” These conversations provided Jessica with a deep sense of connection on campus.

Just as Alex emphasized the importance of developing relationships over time with RISE members helping to deepen his group reflection experiences, Sophie also emphasized how conversations regarding identity were more likely to happen once students in RISE got to know each other over the course of the academic year:

If you are close enough with that person, you can talk about it, if that conversation comes up, but it’s, I mean, the very first day that we met and we want to do RISE, the question was “Why are we doing this work?” And like you know, like everyone can give a very general answer. But, I mean I was able to like make connections with a couple of people and understand their experiences, and their stories, and understand why they would want to do the program but it wasn’t like “Hi, I’m doing this because like I grew up in a single parent household and like,” you know what I mean, so it is more of like getting to know them more and more and having that conversation open up.

Here, Sophie perceived that it was difficult to open up to process issues of identity upon first meeting other students. Rather, in Sophie’s mind, these conversations developed over time as students started to make deeper connections with each other. This
foundation of relationships opened the door for Sophie to “open up” and connect with other students by sharing personal details of her life story, such as having been raised in a “single parent household.” Sophie described these conversations as reciprocal since students “ma[de] connections” with others and began to “understand [each other’s] experiences.” While Sophie did not emphasize the shared identities of members of the RISE peer community encouraging her to open up to the same extent as Jessica, both participants emphasized the importance of feeling a sense of “community” or “connection” with the other members of the group that encouraged them to explore and unpack issues of identity with peers.

Identifying with youth at community service sites. Echoing themes from existing literature on the service experiences of non-dominant students, students in this study described feeling connected to the students who they served, and spoke about the importance of serving students who were “like” them. In this sense, service-learning played a key role in both shaping their identities and also allowing them to validate various aspects of their identities. Interestingly, the low-income students in this sample described drawing from different dimensions of their identity to connect with the students that they served in SLC organization programs. For example, Mercedes and Sophie both worked with Native American students in the Native Children Mentorship Program (NCMP). Yet these young women emphasized different dimensions of their identity when describing the source of that connection with the youth that they worked with at NCMP.
Mercedes, who identified as both Choctaw and Italian-American, grew up
primarily in the Mid-Atlantic United States. She described how participating in NCMP
allowed her to re-connect with her Native American identity:

The relationships that I developed during the summer working with NCMP was – they were so, I guess, influential to my college experience. And being able to meet such awesome youth, especially within the Native American community, ‘cause that was something that I never – my grandmother’s Choctaw, and I never really connected with my Native American roots because she had moved from the South – or, she hadn’t, but her family had…So that’s what a lot of the kids experience as well, is that they don’t – we don’t really connect with that culture as much. ‘Cause almost I think 90% of NCMP is mixed heritage so, yeah. So just connecting with the youth and just seeing their awareness of kind of not only culture but cultural issues and social justice issues was amazing, and I was like, I really want to get involved and continue these relationships throughout the year, and that’s why I was like OK. RISE is the perfect opportunity, so right now I’m mentoring one of the campers from NCMP.

For Mercedes, participating in NCMP strengthened her feelings of connection to her Native American identity. At the same time, having a “mixed heritage” background and feeling like she had not previously connected fully with her Native American culture were experiences that she perceived as similar to those of the youth she served. Earlier in her interview, Mercedes described the importance of social justice issues in her work; this shared awareness of social justice issues was something else that she perceived having in common with NCMP youth.

Sophie, a self-identified Latina student who grew up in the greater metropolitan area where the SLC organization and RISE were housed, also described how her identity helped her to connect with the Native American youth she worked with at NCMP.

For the past three years, I have worked with the community in Springfield that serve American Native Children. I don’t identify as Native American but I do identify myself as a Springfielder. And the vast majority of our campers are Springfield public schools students…so there are a lot of things that I can relate with them about and understand, that a lot of other people who are volunteering who are let’s say from Kansas or something, don’t necessarily understand. I also
think that my upbringing of not coming from a traditional household allows me to connect with other people from the community particularly low-income communities, because I just know the way it is (laughs). More than let’s say other people, because I don’t want to say like, “I know what you are feeling” because I can’t say that but I can understand the circumstances...I had one more, oh, being an immigrant. That has definitely allowed me to... help the populations that I have been helping, also particularly ... I have been working with populations that I went to, right, so like my high school and my elementary school, like, yes they have changed over the years but like the entity that is my elementary school is still a two-way English Spanish program school.

For Sophie, growing up as native Springfielder in an immigrant, single-parent household helped her to better understand the students she served, many of whom she believed were living in similar families. Further, she stressed how growing up in the same neighborhood as the students she served provided her with first-hand knowledge of local educational resources and community contexts. These shared background characteristics and experiences allowed Sophie to feel empathy for the students that she worked with because she was able to “know what [they]...are feeling.” In this sense, working with youth helped Sophie to assert and embrace these dimensions of her identity as strengths that allowed her to connect with the youth that she served. Interestingly, like Mercedes, Sophie emphasized the pieces of her identity beyond class that allowed her to connect with the students that she served.

These narratives from Mercedes and Sophie reaffirm the notion that student volunteers from non-dominant backgrounds feel a sense of connection with the communities they served and draw from dimensions of their identity to relate to these youths. Mercedes and Sophie pointed to varied aspects of their identities—such as race and ethnicity, cultural heritage, immigrant status, hometown and neighborhood, and family structure—to draw parallels between their own experiences and those of their youth. It is unclear why both Sophie and Mercedes did not emphasize the importance of
class identity when talking about the identities that strengthened their ability to connect with students. Perhaps this dimension of identity felt less salient for them in the context of service. Perhaps Sophie and Mercedes took this dimension of identity for granted as common for all RISE participants. Or, perhaps when college students discuss dimensions of their identities that often co-occur with being low-income (e.g., growing up in a low-income neighborhood, being raised by a single-mother, etc.), they have a tendency to perceive a shared class identity as implied, though not stated directly. Regardless, these data illustrate the need for further research that examines how varied aspects of identity intersect with social class to inform the way that low-income students develop through service-learning.

**Bridging Past & Present Selves**

Two of the students in the sample, Diego and David, grew up in the local Springfield community and had been served by the larger SLC organization as children. For them, participating in the SLC organization’s service programs as young adults provided them with a sense of continuity and connection during the college years, a developmental stage otherwise often marked by rapid transitions. RISE provided both Diego and David with a space to develop a set of close relationships that supported their identity exploration during college.

Both David and Diego described how close they felt to the SLC organization’s students and staff. David explained how he “kinda consider(ed) the SLC organization…my second family.” Diego also used language of connection and family to describe the SLC organization:

The great thing, so the SLC organization has been a constant thing, so it’s a good group of people. They’re just great people who work at the SLC organization, so
it’s hard not to like someone…there are definitely people I go to for certain things. And obviously for the SLC organization people, it’s like, basically all my things. Because the SLC organization has been a big part of my life, a lot of people I share things with are in this building. And Beth and Ryan, they’ve been with me for a long time, so they’re a support group…You walk in and it’s like home.

For David, RISE participation served as a natural extension of the relationships developed through earlier SLC participation. He explained how the “support group” that he developed through SLC served as a “constant” in his life both before and during college.

Both David and Diego had been served by college students in the SLC organization when they were in elementary and middle school, then worked as volunteers with the SLC in high school. RISE provided them with the opportunity to continue to serve in SLC programs as college students. David described how he began participating in the Refuge Outreach Program (ROP) as a child camper and “over the decade I kinda moved my position up.” For David, having a longstanding connection with the organization helped fuel his desire to participate in RISE; “just being involved with the SLC organization—having history with the SLC organization, just like actually gave me…the passion, I just wanted to stay and continue contributing.” He explained, “(I’m) just grateful that…I got a connection with ROP when I was seven years old…I’m still, right now, carrying on that experience, and I hope to do that even after college still be a part of the SLC organization even as a guidance counselor, whatever, still be coming by—coming by here.” David’s desire to give back to his community through service was part of his story of continuity and connection. He saw himself as “carrying on” a legacy that started when he was a boy being served by the program and envisioned continuing to
maintain a connection to the SLC organization from his desired position of a guidance
counselor in the local community in the future.

David’s high school experiences at ROP were especially shaped by a particular
relationship that he developed with Giovanni, his SLC mentor. David explained that
Giovanni had grown up in a similar type of neighborhood in New York, which served as
a shared aspect of their identities that deepened their connection. When asked if he had
ever brought someone from the SLC organization to visit his home, David replied,

Giovanni cause we made that connection….so when I graduated from high
school—funny thing is me and Giovanni have the same birthday, December 14th,
you know we went through this, just a lot of connections. He from … somewhere
in New York, I forgot. But his neighborhood also had the same thing, and he was
able to get himself away from it...So, um… Giovanni, I invited for Thanksgiving
cause I felt comfortable with him, and stuff like that… Giovanni was the only
person really from the SLC organization. Some people understand the situation I
go through, but I never really put them in my shoe, cause I don’t think they’re
ready. I don’t think, you know, they could handle that.

David talked about having lived in a low-income neighborhood as something that he and
his former SLC mentor shared. In turn, David believed that having grown up in a low-
income neighborhood would deepen his connection to the students that he served in the
ROP program after he transitioned from a camper to a mentor as a college student.

Yeah, I’m from Springfield Heights so just knowing that, you know, there’s going
to be kids in that low-income community that probably [are]…connected to
violence and different things, surrounding the community. Knowing that I could
possibly get into that shoe, that they, that my former teachers were in the SLC
organization, and give back, I could give back to the kids, too, in the community.

Here, David used language of “get into that shoe” to describe how he shared a sense of
empathy with the experiences of his campers. This language is similar to the phrase
“really put them in my shoe” that he used to describe the connection that he shared with
Giovanni that other staff members at the SLC organization could not fully understand,
presumably because they did not grow up in a similar neighborhood, as Giovanni had.

For David, RISE provided him with a space of continuity to explore transitioning from a mentee to a mentor within the SLC organization, all while connecting with others from similar backgrounds.

**Exploring Possibilities for Future Selves**

RISE study participants pointed to group reflection sessions and service participation as shaping their future goals, as well as their existing identities.

Participating in reflection activities helped support students’ future goal development in several key ways: First, (1) reflection sessions served as a space for low-income students to voice their concerns about the financial tradeoffs of pursuing public sector work, while at the same time receiving support and validation for those career choices from a likeminded community of students who also shared their passion for public service work. Second, (2) reflection sessions provided students with the opportunity to reflect on their goals at key moments of transition in their college career. These sessions were structured in a manner that was open enough for students to explore the issues that were particularly salient to them. At the same time, mixed grade cohorts provided younger students with the opportunity to interact with upperclassmen to learn about nonprofit career planning vicariously through these senior reflections. Because of the close relationships often formed through the RISE program, (3) RISE alumni also functioned as resources when younger RISE students reached out to them for nonprofit and public sector career advice.

In addition to the reflection activities, the hours of service that RISE students completed helped to shape their selection of college majors and career goals. Nonprofit management and volunteer opportunities provided students with pathways to try out
different roles within the nonprofit and public service sectors, as well as to also develop
the particular skills necessary for success in their chosen career path. For the two
students in the sample who grew up in the local community and planned to continue
working in the local public school system, service work also provided an opportunity to
give back to their community and to connect with valuable networks of social capital that
they might draw from in their future careers.

**Exploring/validating future goals with peers.** Students in the study articulated
how conversations with a group of likeminded individuals helped to reinforce their
commitment to pursuing social justice oriented careers. Two-thirds of the student
participants also highlighted the importance of the shared commitment to social justice
issues within the group. For Mercedes, participating in a group of other individuals who
were passionate about service supported and validated her own interests in social justice:

So, I guess RISE helped reinforce my passion for kind of social justice in general
in all capacities, so before I went into college like I really want to major in human
rights and social justice studies. But everyone was like what is that, like what are
you doing, does that mean law school like after. At home, they had no idea what
that was because human rights and social justice studies is pretty rare for a college
in general. But when you come from a rather conservative area, that isn’t as
necessary socially engaged or socially aware, I was getting a lot of negative
feedback on that decision. But being in RISE, you are getting a lot a lot of
positive reinforcement. Like this is awesome. I don’t know how many times my
friends in RISE or the SLC organization when I tell them what I’m majoring in –
are like, omg, I love that. I wish Fairfield had something similar. So, it’s
definitely really awesome to be surrounding with people that are really passionate
about social justice and having that positive reinforcement, like we can totally do
this. We’re going to go into education or we’re going to go into immigration law
and all of these different things and really try to make a difference and help out
somewhere. As opposed to being discouraged that that’s not a lucrative job or
that’s not a real profession. So yeah, being in RISE, created that community
where everyone is motivating each other to continue within service and really
engage and empower.
Participating in RISE exposed Mercedes to conversations with a likeminded group of peers who supported her choice of college major. Her peers provided her with “positive reinforcement” by applauding her choice of Human Rights and Social Justice Studies, a college major that allowed her to explore issues of “social justice.” At the same time, peers in RISE encouraged her to pursue a career where she could “try to make a difference” rather than a career that was “lucrative,” which stood in contrast to some of the messaging that she received from members of her “conservative” home town. In this sense, conversations that Mercedes had in RISE provided her with a community that supported both her current identity as someone committed to majoring in a social justice oriented field, but also her future goal of continuing to pursue a “service” oriented profession. Like Mercedes, many participants described their participation in the group reflection sessions as nurturing their public service or social justice oriented career goals. Also like Mercedes, two-thirds of the students in the sample emphasized how heavily finances weighed into their decision about future career goals. RISE reflection sessions provided students with a space to air and process these concerns.

The narratives of seniors who participated in RISE illustrate the importance that RISE participants place on older students modeling their thinking and planning for the transition out of college, and their future career goals. These vicarious learning opportunities seemed to shape participants’ perceptions of the types of opportunities that were available after college. In some cases, students also connected with alumni when networking for jobs and career advice. For example, Alex noted that he reached out to several RISE alumni when faced with concerns around his career. These conversations extended beyond the formal space of RISE reflections. In this sense, Alex’s relationships
with RISE upperclassmen eventually provided access to a powerful network of recent alumni who had gained experience in public service careers that he could “reach out to” to explore his options in future career paths.

Space to develop career goals. All three seniors in the study perceived that RISE group reflection activities served as spaces for them to consider their future career goals. They also stressed how the nature of the reflections and the benefits that they received from the activities shifted, depending on their current stage of college. Alex explained how the content of his group reflections in RISE shifted as he made his way through college:

Every year has its worries like sophomore year, you’re trying to fit into your new dorm, and like, you know, socially and stuff like that, in junior year you’re focusing a lot on academics and leadership decisions and senior you’re worried about what you’re going to do next, so every year raises new opportunities to really, really grow a lot from those reflections. So my favorite part is always the way those reflections are structured, not [just] to feel like pushing your boundaries—or that you don’t feel safe to be sharing personal stuff, but that’s also challenging the whole group to grow together.

Alex perceived that his needs around reflection shifted as he progressed through college and that RISE met these needs by allowing him to explore future goals in different domains of his life. Because RISE cohorts were mixed across college years, college seniors modeled the process of reflecting on employment, internship, and graduate school opportunities for younger RISE participants. RISE participants’ described how these vicarious learning opportunities shaped their perceptions of the possibilities available to them after college. Diego reflected on how, as he made his way through college, upperclassmen’s reflections on career choices and the financial sacrifices inherent in nonprofit work became increasingly salient for him:
I don’t remember reflections when I was like a sophomore. But now that, I mean junior year and like this year, that like more, I guess they’ve impacted me more. I guess maybe because I was more intentional about reflecting and being in the space…. I remember in the beginning seniors being stressed about graduating and what they’re going to do in the future. I remember this one reflection we talked about … if you were doing service work that meant that you were like sacrificing basically a lot of money, which isn’t necessarily like, I mean you are sacrificing some money that doesn’t mean you have to be like super-, you’re not making any money. So I remember we talked about that and it didn’t apply to me then but obviously now it does [interviewer and interviewee laugh] because I’m graduating soon.

Alex and Diego’s interviews suggest that reflection activities tied to future goal formation may serve a different function at different stages of college. RISE students perceived that the flexibility of their conversations allowed for developmentally relevant reflections, while also exposing them to the reflections of older students—a preview of issues that would become relevant in the future.

**Skill development and social network expansion through community service.**

Students who participated in RISE often assumed nonprofit leadership and management positions in affiliated SLC programs, as a result of their participation in RISE.

Participation in these programs allowed students to have applied experiences in the nonprofit world that directly shaped their goals for the future. For example, in addition to his volunteer work serving at a homeless shelter and working at a summer camp for immigrant youth, Alex was heavily involved in SLC organization leadership and nonprofit management positions during his time at RISE. In his sophomore year of college, part of Alex’s work with the organization involved overseeing student directors who were “running the day-to-day operation and management” of ten afterschool programs. In his senior year, he worked as a senior administrator at the SLC organization and was responsible for “more management-level things, like visioning, like where does
the organization want to be in five years, fundraising, so like going with the executive
directors to meet with like prospective donors and like making a pitch to donate to the
SLC organization, um, supervising the 20 people who are running organizations.” Alex
described how these leadership and nonprofit management positions within RISE were
instrumental to his career goal development:

[My plans] have shifted a lot from my sophomore year when I would have said I
wanted to be a teacher because of my first summer experience in the summer
program. Then I became president and I was more interested in, like, nonprofit
management as a whole…and then I became really interested in fundraising…so
like I’ve been all over the place…and next year I’ll be working for the Hispanic
Scholarship Fund, back in L.A. So it’s a college access, college funding for
Hispanic students across the country. I’m gonna be working as a development
coordinator, so a lot of raising money for those fellowships. So it’s inspired me to
work for a nonprofit. It’s inspired me to work for some kind of education non-
profit. And it has allowed me to combine those two things with other, with other
things that I was already passionate about, which were Latino issues and
immigration, and introduce me to skills that I never thought that I would have,
like fundraising. So somehow the SLC organization connected everything I’m
going to be doing next year, and by the SLC organization I mean RISE
specifically just because it did provide a whole other level of deep thoughts.

Through these direct experiences in the nonprofit world of SLC organization leadership
positions over the course of his college career, Alex was made aware of a wider array of
career opportunities available in the public sector. After trying out both teaching and
nonprofit management positions through his service work, Alex was able to hone in on a
specific career path as a development coordinator. His “interest” and “skills” in
fundraising led him to explore this particular path. Alex saw RISE and SLC participation
as having provided him with the opportunity to reflect deeply about the issues that he is
“passionate” about, and to develop concrete skills, such as “fundraising” abilities, that
left him well positioned to succeed in his position as a development coordinator in the
upcoming year.
Like Alex, Diego gained experience managing a program during his time at SLC. He twice served as the director of the Springfield Summer Adventure, which entailed “basically leading, running the summer program,” fundraising, grant writing, and “coaching” junior and senior counselors in the program. When asked how he selected his college major—organizational behavior—Diego replied, “The SLC organization. Cause I lov- I mean, people can be frustrating at times but I love working with people, so, and it’s cool how, like, people like work together.” Through his applied management work at the SLC organization, Diego came to realize how “interesting” he found the work of studying how organizations function, which he attributes with helping him select a college major.

Sophie also described how her service work shaped her choice of college major, reflecting, “my experience doing service work has definitely affected my career plans.” Sophie entered Mass College with plans to study marketing, but her experiences teaching children through SLC shifted her future goals towards studying education and cognitive science, and eventually becoming a teacher. She described how her work serving as a counselor for three years with the Native Children Mentorship Program helped her to develop these goals.

My first year I was a senior counselor for the Tadpole clan, they’re like the youngest kids, and it was easily the most transformative experience for me. I was a marketing major for two years, and I had that experience, and I was like, ‘Just kidding. I want to be a teacher.’….so that experience happened, and I fell in love with the program. I fell in love with the kids. I fell in love with doing the work that I was doing. I felt that it was a lot more rewarding than analyzing big data. And then I had every desire to come back, which is why I did come back... It was literally just like, I mean I’m good at marketing, I mean I can analyze big data, I can have innovative ideas about marketing and tactics and all this stuff like that. I’m pretty decent at that, but my experience was leading the classroom and teaching the curriculum and seeing campers learn how to tie their shoes and teach
other campers to tie their shoes... And a lot of our campers like have, they come from different backgrounds right and some of them are not the nicest backgrounds, or I don’t think that they are the nicest backgrounds to come up from. But all those kids are so happy about learning, and so enthusiastic about everything, that they make you want to do the work. And yeah, so with that experience I’m just like ‘Why am I being a marketer, is the money, really like that worth it?’ And then I thought back to my first grade teacher who was like amazing, and I was like, you know what, I’m from Springfield, me eventually becoming a public school teacher for Springfield, that would be a way for me to get back to my community.

Through the experiential aspect of service work, managing a classroom and implementing a curriculum with a group of enthusiastic young students, Sophie came to shift her academic and career goals. Like many students in the sample, Sophie had to weighed finances as she shifted her academic and career goals to pursue a less lucrative career; however, the possibility of serving her own community through teaching made the shift seem worthwhile.

In his discussion of future goals, David echoed similar sentiments of wanting to work in the local school system as a way to give back to the community where he grew up.

A lot of people want to shy away from the Springfield Public School system, don’t really want to fix it, but I actually want to go back in there and see what I can do to help. So RISE is kinda, you know, helping me out with that, you know, understanding like, umm... the way some kids think, by being part of some of the projects that goes on.... [It gives] me perspective of their life and can help me as a guidance counselor in the future. You know, it expands my connections with the coalitions and groups...Teenagers that’s trying to fight for equality in their neighborhoods.

For David, service work provided a pathway to develop skills necessary for his future role as a guidance counselor. Because David was planning to work in the same community where he currently conducted his service, he also felt the connections that he
made to student groups committed to social justice through service would serve as valuable coalitions of social capital that he could draw directly from in his future work.

Discussion and Implications

RISE program participation shaped the overall college experiences of the low-income students in this study in a number of ways: It provided them with a community of like-minded peers who supported their reflections on service, identity, and future goals. It provided them with financial supports, which allowed them to engage more deeply with extracurricular activities on campus. And, it provided them with a space to explore issues of identity. Participants’ abilities to connect and empathize with the youth they served validated their own life experiences as sources of strength rather than markers of difference. From this place of strength and community, RISE also provided students with a space to explore future goals. Many students’ future aspirations were validated by peers who shared their desire to give back. Finally, participants’ service experiences provided them with the concrete skill development that provided them with pathways to meet their future goals.

Social and Psychological Support for Low-Income Students Through Service-Learning

These findings suggest that service-learning may function in important ways to provide sources of social and psychological support for low-income college students. While there are many aspects of RISE that can provide insight into supporting low-income students on college campuses, perhaps the most important is the way in which the program served as a conduit for students to develop and strengthen relationships with
peers who shared their passion for service and social class status. This aspect of the program holds promise for protecting students from some of the feelings of isolation and lack of belonging often experienced by low-income college students, particularly those who attend elite institutions (Aries & Seider, 2005; Cohen, 1998; Lehman, 2009; Nelson et al., 2006). In addition, students described how RISE reflection sessions provided a comfortable scaled down space for them to process complex issues of identity and explore issues of power and privilege in their communities and on campus; these types of conversations have been found helpful for retaining first-generation college students (Jehangir et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2014). RISE reflection spaces provided students with space to reflect on salient college stages and upcoming transitions. Long-time program participants stressed how developing relationships with other RISE members over time added value to these reflection activities. Finally, students perceived that RISE reflection activities exposed them to valuable, otherwise less accessible, social networks, including upperclassmen and students who participated in community service areas outside of their own projects. These findings point to the need to provide low-income college students with consistent sacred spaces on campus to connect with likeminded peers and reflect on their values, including those brought with them from their communities of origin. These findings also suggest that service-learning programs may function as a type of counterpace where students are able to bridge the identities that they bring with them from their communities of origin with those that they are developing in college.
Identity Exploration Through Service

This study also adds to the literature regarding the complex ways that low-income students navigate issues of identity through service. RISE students described community service programs as sites of connection with youth who were “like” them, a depiction that mirrors much of the previous literature on the experience of non-dominant students feeling a sense of identification with the low-income communities with whom they work (Green, 2003; Lee, 2005; Mitchell & Donahue, 2009; Seider et al., 2013). Interestingly, the low-income students in this study often articulated connecting with the students they served over multiple dimensions of their identity, including social class. Future research is needed to explore how social class identity may intersect with other dimensions of identity in creating an experience of affinity for low-income college students who participate in service. For RISE college students who had grown up in the local greater metro area, neighborhood affiliation was an especially salient aspect of identity and connection in service. For students who had previously been served by the SLC organization’s programs as children, RISE participation provided them with a source of familiarity and continuity in emerging adulthood.

These findings draw attention to the need to broaden the conceptualization of the “breaking away” literature (Stuber, 2006, p. 308) to encompass the experiences of low-income students who choose to attend college in their local communities. For example, David lived at home while attending college. He was engaging with a nonprofit that he had worked with since he was seven. His future goal was to work in the same neighborhood where he grew up. He saw service as a way to give back to students who were “like” him. The language that David employed to describe his college experiences
drew from language of connection and continuity rather than of disconnection from his home community. The experiences of the three RISE participants from the local community also raise questions regarding the nature of service experiences for low-income students who are serving in their “home” neighborhood. Little research has explored the effects of serving in a known community and its relationship to low-income students’ identity and future goal development through service. Many individuals in this sample spoke about how being the childhood recipient of services shaped their perception of participating in a service-learning program as an adult, and led them to desire to give back to the local community through their future occupations. Because low-income individuals are more likely to live in low-income neighborhoods that are often targeted to receive social and volunteer program services, low-income college students are disproportionately more likely to have been recipients of service as children, as compared to their more affluent peers, making this topic especially worthy of future exploration among this population.

**Theoretical Implications of Service-Learning and Engagement**

The findings of this study also suggest that service-learning programs may function to provide low-income students with a sense of postsecondary engagement that serves as a foundation throughout college. Engagement theory suggests that key mediators of the extent of students’ ability to engage include their “perception of competence and control,” the alignment of a given activity with a student’s “values and goals” and the ability of a student to feel a sense of “social connectedness” through participating in the activity (National Research Council, 2004, p. 34). RISE provided the students in this sample with the financial resources to feel a sense of freedom and control
over how they spent their time in college. This enabled them to exercise agency to engage in service experiences that were aligned with their values and goals. It also provided students with a community of likeminded peers who enabled them to feel socially connected in college. This community also challenged RISE students to continue to interrogate and explore issues of power and identity related to their service experiences. As a result, RISE students continually reflected on their values and future goals. In addition, RISE provided students with direct service experiences that helped them to develop the skills needed for future careers in the public service sector.

**Implications for Service-Learning Program Design**

This study also has implications for the need for future research to explore how specific programmatic elements of particular service-learning programs shape how students make meaning of service participation. Because RISE fell within the SLC umbrella, RISE students were provided with opportunities to exercise agency and choice in selecting one of the over 50 different volunteer opportunities that were RISE eligible. As a result, Mercedes had the opportunity to choose to work with Native American youth and explore her cultural heritage through NCMP. Sophie had the opportunity to develop concrete teaching skills at her site. David was able to pursue his interest of connecting with a local network of youth organizers through his service. And, Jose and Diego were able to assume leadership and nonprofit management positions in the larger SLC organization that led to skill development that concretized their pathways to future academic majors and careers. These experiences would not have been possible in a service-learning program that stipulated that all of its participants work at a single pre-selected site.
The mixed aged cohort design of RISE also proved to be hugely meaningful for students. Older RISE participants modeled group norms of inclusivity and self-disclosure, as well as the process of weighing career options in the nonprofit sector. RISE alumni served as valuable social supports and guides for RISE seniors. These benefits would not have been present in a service-learning program that served a single grade of college students or a program that did not allow students to return year after year.

In sum, this study provides practical ideas to enhance inclusivity and support for low-income college students through service-learning programs. In part, it does this by suggesting ways in which college administrators can design more inclusive, culturally and developmentally appropriate service-learning programs. Efforts such as these are essential in order for postsecondary institutions to effectively develop college programming that meets the needs of their increasingly diverse student bodies. In addition, this study builds on our knowledge of the potential function of service-learning programs for low-income students. For this population, service-learning programs may function as a site to develop a sense of belonging in college, inform identity development, and support the exploration of future academic and professional goals. Understanding more about the potential function of service-learning participation for low-income students may aid postsecondary staff training for service-learning programs as well as in the field of student affairs more broadly.
References


Hsiao, K. P. (1992). *First- generation college students. ERIC digest*


### Appendix A. Sample Interview Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics &amp; Annotations</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introductions</strong></td>
<td>How is the semester going so far? What classes are you taking? (How are you faring with the snow? Are you from this area?) We heard you are a junior – is that right?</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Interviewer and interviewee will exchange brief introductions and develop an initial rapport before beginning the formal interview.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Motivations for joining RISE</strong></td>
<td>How did you first hear about RISE? What attracted you to the program? Did RISE meet your expectations at that time? (How/Why/Why not?) / What convinced you to come back?</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>These questions will start the interviewee’s focus on RISE and explore her motivation for joining.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Participation in RISE</strong></td>
<td>What are the different activities you’ve participated in through RISE? … reflections … training … mentoring</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>We are interested in learning about key elements of RISE that have been impactful for the participant or that have helped to define her experience.</em></td>
<td>Have the components of RISE changed over the last few years? Which of the different activities in RISE has been the best? (Why?) Did this change for you over the years? (Would you have continued participating if RISE canceled the financial support?) During times like this – midterms and all - how do you balance academics with your service work? Can you tell us more about your service work / sites? (If a candidate were applying to take over your role at the service site, what would you want him/her to know… …about the working environment? …about opportunities for learning and</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>Responses</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>We want to learn what aspects of RISE are most interesting to the interviewee.</td>
<td>How would you describe RISE to friends outside of the program?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other important influences on student’s life</td>
<td>Do you take part in other student groups or activities?</td>
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<tr>
<td>We want to learn about other aspects of life that may be significant for the student.</td>
<td>How have you met most of your good friends here on campus? … House? Classes? Community Service Organization? RISE?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(What kind of academic support is available at Fairfield? Have you taken advantage of any of this support?)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Before you came to X College, what impressions did you have of X College students?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you have the same impressions now? How have your impressions changed? (Do RISE students fit with this impression?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideas for the future</td>
<td>What major did you declare? What led you to choose that major?</td>
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<tr>
<td>We hope to learn about the students’ goals and aspirations. We hope to learn from the answers about any influence RISE has had on these plans.</td>
<td>What types of jobs do graduates of those majors enter? (Do you have a friend who graduated with that major, and what is he/she doing now?)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you were to spontaneously run into yourself five years from now, who would you hope to meet? Why are these things important to you?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What do you think your family wants you to do after college? What makes you think that?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What kinds of careers were you exposed to?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Closing**

*We want to give our interviewee an opportunity to raise any topics that have not yet been covered or to ask questions of her own.*

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to growing up? (What do your parents do?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you think the program coordinators want you to do after college? What makes you think that? (Do you think the program coordinators have that same expectation for you?)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything else you’d like to share with us about your experiences in RISE?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you have any questions for us?</td>
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</table>
Appendix B. Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDONYM First Name</th>
<th>Year in College</th>
<th>Years in RISE</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Self-identified Race/Ethnicity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Senior</td>
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<td>Fairfield</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diego</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Non-Fairfield</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
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<td>Non-Fairfield</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fairfield</td>
<td>Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercedes</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
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<td>Non-Fairfield</td>
<td>White/Native American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Non-degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Non-Fairfield</td>
<td>Latina</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>