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## A Grateful Recollecting: A Qualitative Study of the Long-Term Impact of Service-Learning on Graduates

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# ***A Grateful Recollecting: A Qualitative Study of the Long-Term Impact of Service-Learning on Graduates***

Ann Fullerton, Vicki L. Reitenauer, and Seanna M. Kerrigan

## **Abstract**

Service-learning practitioners design community engagement activities to affect students in powerful and even transformative ways. This qualitative study explores the long-term impacts (3–16 years after graduation) of participation in a senior-level service-learning course. Through interviews with 20 randomly selected participants, the researchers explored whether and in what ways graduates continued to experience impacts from the course, including those that have become interwoven with other life experiences or have catalyzed altered perspectives and/or actions. Graduates were first asked to identify their most significant learning experiences in college in order to gauge the relative importance, if any, of the service-learning course in their college education. Then graduates were asked to recall their experiences in the course and to share what impacts those experiences had at the time and in the intervening years. Findings are discussed through the lens of transformational learning processes and outcomes.

## **Introduction**

Service-learning practitioners operate with the intention of impacting students in powerful and even transformative ways through their engagement with community partners, and they ground programmatic decisions and pedagogical practices on this intention. Although many practitioners sense the power in service-learning while it is occurring—and may even have their own experiences of long-term impacts on both the personal and professional levels—the work of identifying and confirming long-term impacts on graduates has been a more challenging and nuanced task for researchers.

Over the course of the past several decades, increasing numbers of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies have sought to identify the long-term outcomes of service-learning courses on college graduates. The current study adopts a fresh approach in qualitative method both to gauge the relative importance of one particular service-learning course within the full range of college learning experiences and to mine graduates' recollections

of that course for any long-term outcomes still being experienced up to 16 years after college completion.

## Literature Review

### Long-Term Impact of Service-Learning

Researchers have asked if the positive outcomes of students' service-learning experiences in college have any lasting impact on graduates' dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors (*Billig & Furco, 2002*) or subsequent civic life and community engagement (*Astin et al., 2006*). Quantitative studies suggest that college students who engaged in service-learning courses while in college were more likely to engage in community service after college (*Astin et al., 2006; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005; Wharchal & Ruiz, 2004*). Graduates who participate in service during college may attach greater significance to prosocial values such as helping others in difficulty, promoting racial understanding (*Astin et al., 1999*), engaging in the community, and giving charitably (*Astin et al., 2006*). Graduates who participated in service-learning during college also reported that the experience helped them develop leadership, teamwork, and professional communication skills (*Dvorak, Stewart, Hosni, Hawkey, & Nelson, 2011; MacFall, 2012; Newman & Hernandez, 2011*). Service-learning courses that include reflection through writing and discussion are associated with more positive outcomes, not only during college (*Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyley & Giles, 1999; Mabry, 1998*) but also years later (*Astin et al., 2006; Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005*).

Qualitative studies help us understand the significance and meaning that students ascribe to their service-learning course experiences (*Polin & Keene, 2010*). Although there are numerous qualitative explorations of the impact of service-learning courses during the experience or immediately afterward, studies exploring if and how course-embedded service-learning experiences continue to influence graduates years later are scarce. *Kerrigan (2004)* interviewed 20 graduates 3 years after they participated in a variety of required capstone courses in their senior year. Some graduates described how the experience had enhanced their communication and leadership skills, appreciation of diversity, and engagement in "border crossing" into new communities. Others gave examples of tangible professional skills that had contributed to their career development. Still others described a continuing sense of social responsibility and sustained volunteerism after graduation.

Laursen, Thiry, and Liston (2012) interviewed 24 alumni who had participated in a university-based K-12 science education outreach program 1 to 10 years after graduation. The majority of graduates described positive outcomes in personal development, career skills, teaching, communication, and management skills and reported enhancements of their understanding of educational issues within social contexts.

Graduates who completed immersive, international service-learning courses have also been interviewed years later. Kiely (2005) interviewed 22 graduates 1 to 8 years after they had participated in an international service-learning course that collaboratively organized community health clinics in Nicaragua. Thematic analysis revealed that each participant experienced one or more altered or new perspectives in the moral, intellectual, and/or spiritual domains. Bamber & Hankin (2011) interviewed 11 graduates 1 or more years after course-embedded international service-learning followed by local service-related activities. Of these graduates, 75% experienced altered or new perspectives, and 25% “were able to identify ways in which a transformed view of the world related to changes in their social action” (p. 201). Taken together, both the quantitative and qualitative studies indicate that service-learning courses in college can have a lasting impact on graduates’ perspectives, skills, and actions.

## **Service-Learning Processes and Outcomes Through the Lens of Transformational Learning Theory**

Mezirow’s (1997; Mezirow & Associates, 2000) theory of transformational learning has been used to examine the learning processes and outcomes that can occur in immersive service-learning. Broadly, transformative learning involves educational experiences that change students’ frames of reference—that is, their ways of looking at and interpreting the world (Mezirow, 1997). Perspective transformation involves several nonsequential processes, including experiencing a disorienting dilemma, undergoing a critical assessment of assumptions, and eventually “re-integrat[ing] into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective” (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 22). The new or altered perspective transforms “our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive and open... so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that prove more true or justified to guide action” (p. 7–8).

Many caution that because individuals tend to ignore dissonance (*Bamber & Hankin, 2011*) and reject ideas that do not fit their preconceptions (*Jones et al., 2012*), service-learning courses do not necessarily lead to perspective transformation (*Eyler & Giles, 1999*), and altered frames of reference do not necessarily catalyze different actions (*Bamber & Hankin, 2011*). Further study of the long-term outcomes of service-learning is needed to better understand the connection among course experiences, shifts in perspective, and long-term developmental changes in views, skills, and/or actions.

In addition, a deeper understanding is needed to identify the course components that best embed processes resulting in lived experiences of immersion, dissonance, and reflection and how these may lead to transformative learning. In the study cited above, Kiely (2005) developed a transformative learning model for service-learning courses built upon Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation. Kiely identified five learning processes that students experienced in an immersive international service-learning course: contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalizing, processing, and connecting. Jones et al. (2012) suggested that border crossing and dissonance in service-learning occur if a "constructive engagement with otherness" leads to a "deep lesson about connection across difference" (*Jones et al., 2012, p. 203*). Jones et al. (2012) and Nickols et al. (2013) have described learning processes similar or identical to those identified by Kiely (2005) in students during and immediately after immersive service-learning courses.

Qualitative research with graduates years after a service-learning course can shed light on what they experienced at the time and whether and how they believe these course-based experiences have subsequently influenced their perspectives and/or actions. Such research may further our understanding of the links between transformational learning experiences, new skills and perspectives, and the expression of these skills and perspectives through actions and other outcomes. Polin & Keene (2010) called for further qualitative research to understand "what students mean when they say service-learning experiences are transformational" and "what this means in their lives and to the way they made sense of their lives over time" (p. 23).

Researchers have offered several methodological cautions and suggestions for the qualitative study of service-learning. So as not to assume the presence of transformation, Jones et al. (2012) used open-ended interview questions to bring forth students' own perceptions of their learning experiences. It is also important to ascertain, from the graduates' perspectives, the significance of the

learning outcomes they describe (*Chang, Chen, Huang, & Yuan, 2012*). Finally, Bamber & Hankin (2011) noted the need to explore more deeply how graduates name and describe connections between new or altered perspectives and their subsequent actions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study adds to and diversifies the growing literature examining the long-term impact of service-learning in three ways. First, in order to situate the possible impact of service-learning courses among the many learning experiences in college, the critical incident technique (*Bycio & Allen, 2004*) and critical event analysis (*Bowie, Pope, & Lough, 2008*) were modified for use at the start of the interview. Rather than beginning the interview with any reference to the service-learning course, graduates were asked to describe their three most significant learning experiences in college and the impact of those experiences since graduation. This allowed the researchers to explore the relative importance of service-learning among the many college experiences that graduates might recall.

Second, when graduates reported that service-learning had been an important experience, the interviewer explored more deeply how graduates now understand the change that occurred for them at the time and the aspects of the course that contributed to those outcomes. Third, when graduates described change that occurred immediately after the course, they were asked if that change had any subsequent impact in their lives and, if so, to provide examples. These course elements and the short- and long-term impacts students attributed to them were then examined through the lens of transformational learning processes and outcomes (*Kiely, 2005*).

### **Description of the Immersive Service-Learning Course**

Portland State University has offered community-based and service-learning courses as an integral component of the undergraduate curriculum both in general education and across the disciplines for more than two decades. One of these courses is the General Education Capstone course, a senior-level service-learning course that completes students' undergraduate general education requirements. In the capstone course, students participate in a six-credit service-learning course organized around a particular content area and partnering with one or more community entities. Learning objectives in each Capstone connect both to the content

of each distinct course and to the larger goals of the university's general education program (communication, critical thinking, appreciation of the diversity of the human experience, and social and ethical responsibility). Most students may choose a Capstone in any area of interest within or outside their major, and many explore courses that will broaden their experiences and perspectives.

One of the first Capstone courses to be designed and offered—and the single longest-running Capstone at the university—is an immersive service-learning course called Learning From and About Persons With Significant Disabilities (LPSD) that is offered through a partnership between Portland State University and the Kiwanis Camp, Inc. of Portland, Oregon. The partnership was formed in 1972 as a practicum experience for teachers and in 1993 was expanded to support the Capstone course. The community partner and the university have a long-standing shared mission of continually evaluating and improving both the camp program for campers and the educational experience for college students. The university–community partner team carefully examines all student feedback each year and uses it to continually improve the course pedagogy. A cycle of continuous evaluation and improvement is critical in such intensive and immersive courses.

Since 1993, more than 3,000 students have completed LPSD. In the course, students prepare for and then spend 2 weeks as student-counselors for individuals with significant disabilities in an outdoor camp program. The majority of students who choose this course have never before formed a relationship with a person whom they perceive to be so “differently abled” from themselves. In the final reflections they complete for the course, many students have commented that the course was both one of the best and one of the most difficult things they had ever done, as they articulated the ways they accepted and met their responsibilities as student-counselors. On average, students completing more than 30 different undergraduate majors enroll each year. The university and the community partner have engaged in continuous evaluation and development over a period of more than 20 years to hone the learning and coaching strategies that allow the novice student-counselors to develop positive relationships with camper-participants while ensuring that student and camper needs are met.

Students prepare for their immersive direct-service experience through 3 days of training and engagement with readings. The intensive training session includes modules that increase disability awareness, develop counseling skills, address appropriate personal care and supporting communication techniques, teach strategies

for inspiring participation, and deepen capacities for effective relationship-building with camper-participants. Additionally, team-building activities help student-counselors form a community in which everyone supports each other to attain the camp's central goal: to ensure that every camper-participant has a rich and enjoyable camp experience.

Students are organized into groups of eight student-counselors, who are coached and supervised by a counselor-supervisor (a master's-level special educator) and an assistant counselor-supervisor. Each student becomes the counselor for one or two campers. The on-site faculty member checks in with each group and each student-counselor periodically, providing additional modeling, coaching, and problem-solving support as needed. All of the camp staff members have a dual role of providing the camp program for the camper-participants and being teachers and coaches for the student-counselors.

Reflection is woven through the course through small group discussions during the evening at camp and a pre- and postcourse written reflection paper. Students engage with readings in disability studies before attending camp, as they connect their lived experiences with both this theoretical material and their personal and professional goals. Reflection questions are grounded in the exploration of disability as a social construct (*Ben-Moshe, Cory, Feldbaum, & Sagendorf, 2005*) so that stereotypes regarding persons with disabilities are questioned rather than reinforced (*Gent & Gurecka, 2001*).

## Methodology

### Design

An interpretive qualitative research design (*Maxwell, 2005*) was selected to identify the main themes found within graduates' recall of their learning experiences in the course and the later impact of those experiences in their lives. In order to situate the possible impact of this service-learning course under study among the many learning experiences in college, the critical incident technique (*Bycio & Allen, 2004*) and critical event analysis (*Bowie, Pope, & Lough, 2008*) were modified for use at the start of the interview, as described above.



## **Participants and Sampling**

To ensure that the findings were representative of the experiences of the many students who completed the course, stratified random sampling was used to select participants, following the review and approval of the study by the university's Institutional Review Board. Potential participants were identified within the university alumni database. As of 2013, over 3,000 graduates had completed LPSD, about 60% of whom were potential study participants because (a) they had given permission to be contacted by the university, and (b) their current contact information was available. The researchers' goal was to interview 20 graduates from this pool, which previous studies of graduates' experiences in service-learning courses suggested would be sufficient to reach saturation in the thematic analysis (Kerrigan, 2004). Stratified random sampling was used to identify 60 potential participants from three time periods (3–5, 6–10, and 11–16 years after course completion). Members of this pool were contacted until 20 participants had been recruited and had completed the scheduled phone interview.

## **Data Collection**

Using the sampling strategy described, potential participants from each time period were randomly selected, called, and asked to participate in a 45-minute phone interview about their college experience. If a potential participant declined or could not be reached, the next randomly selected graduate was called. A thank-you in the form of a \$20 gift card was issued to each participant after the interview. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

The researchers analyzed the data contained in the interview transcriptions according to the processes described by Creswell (1994). Each transcript was read independently by two researchers, who identified the predominant themes and coded the data according to these themes. Then, the two researchers met and compared the themes and coding of units of meaning in each transcript. Disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. A third reader confirmed these themes through an independent analysis of the data. The team examined the themes for any connections between the findings and the transformative learning process and outcomes described by Kiely (2004, 2005) and others. The use of an audit trail, member checking during interviews, and debriefing

with colleagues enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings (*Guba & Lincoln, 1989*).

## Findings

At the time of the interviews, four participants (20%) had completed the course 11–16 years prior to the study, eight (40%) had completed the course 6–10 years prior, and the remaining eight (40%) had completed the course 3–5 years prior. Eight participants self-identified as male and 12 as female. The participants had completed 18 different majors during college, from areas including business (25%), social sciences (20%), sciences (15%), fine arts or graphic design (15%), preeducation (15%), and speech and hearing sciences (10%).

Findings from the thematic analysis are organized into two main sections: (1) the significance of the service-learning course among learning experiences in college and (2) an overview of the findings related to the learning processes and outcomes. This overview subsumes descriptions of (a) the main themes related to the learning processes that occurred in the course and (b) the short- and long-term impact of the course on graduates' perspectives, skills, and actions.

### **LPSD as a Significant Learning Experience**

Of the 20 interviewees, 12 mentioned LPSD explicitly as one of their three most significant learning experiences in college. In other words, 60% of interviewees cited this service-learning course—which constituted six credits of the minimum of 180 required for graduation—as one of the three most significant learning experiences they had had as undergraduates. Of the eight interviewees who did not mention LPSD as one of their three most significant learning experiences, six made it clear that it had been a significant experience in response to the interviewer's subsequent questions about their Capstone course. For example, one said, “[I]t was the most important experience of my life,” and four described it as a “fantastic” or “incredible” experience that had impacted their life since graduation. In all, 18 of the 20 interviewees—a full 90%—identified a service-learning course among their most significant learning experiences in their college education.

## Findings Related to Learning Processes and Outcomes

When asked to recall and describe their course experiences, 85% (17 of 20) of the graduates reported, with great descriptive consistency, that they had followed an experiential arc during and after their time in LPSD, a trajectory that began in a disorienting dilemma, continued through a positive confrontation with “otherness,” developed into a recognition of difference and the need to modulate their interaction patterns to bridge those differences, and shifted into a heightened engagement with their own capacities as communicators such that they experienced a deeper understanding of and appreciation for human diversity. Interviewees repeatedly framed their learning experiences as “epiphanies,” describing, with piercing clarity, moments during the course that began in a frustrating attempt to connect with “the other” and ended with an undeniable connection having been established.

These moments of human-to-human engagement led to new and altered perspectives, skills, and/or actions. Specifically, 50% (10 of 20) of the graduates reported enhanced interpersonal and communication skills, 70% (14 of 20) described a deeper appreciation for human diversity related to dis/ability, 60% (12 of 20) described gaining a new perspective that human variation is typical rather than atypical, and 35% (7 of 20) described a newfound maturity and gratitude leading to a desire to serve. Examples and analysis of these data are provided in the next three sections.

**The journey begins with a disorienting dilemma.** A full 85% of graduates (17 of 20) reported that their journey began with an initial stage of extreme disorientation and discomfort. Since, as junior- and senior-level undergraduates, they were partnered with campers with relatively severe physical and cognitive disabilities and communicative challenges, there was no denying the differences that were present between LPSD student-counselors and camper-participants, and interviewees clearly remembered how grappling with these differences consumed them in the first few days of their immersion experience. Respondents repeatedly recalled these first days at camp as if they had taken place recently, instead of as much as 16 years before the interview. The fear of difference they described was deeply felt, and many interviewees emphasized that they had never engaged with persons with perceptible disabilities before this experience.

For example, one graduate, a marketing major as an undergraduate, admitted that his discomfort was so great in his first 24 hours at camp that he had wanted to leave:

We were assigned the kids who [*sic*] we were supposed to work with for the first week of the 2-week program.... I have to admit, the kid I had, he was in a chair, and he had some disabilities where I had to work with him... in feeding him and in changing him and other sorts of basic activities.... [H]onestly, had I brought my own car there, I would have left.... [T]his is very shallow of me, [and]... I feel terrible admitting it, but I was like, "Gosh, I'm not cut out for this, I'm not this guy... I'm not this supportive." It was the hardest thing I ever did.... But at the end of the week... it was probably the most rewarding thing I ever did, and I'm so much better for doing [it].... It would have been so much easier for me to write a marketing plan, a business plan.... That would have been so much easier. That's what I was trained in as a business major. Working with these kids at... [c]amp, it forced me to do things I would have never done.

In fact, several interviewees explicitly stated that they realized, upon reflection, that they had not previously considered persons with disabilities to be persons akin to themselves. This realization, painful as it was for many of the respondents, was also cited as deeply meaningful for their ongoing personal and professional growth postcollege.

Many respondents acknowledged the irony in having chosen this particular Capstone because it had seemed a fun and easy way to earn six credits. What they found instead was a profound engagement with their own fear and discomfort around difference, and the ways that engagement opened them up as human beings and allowed them to develop capacities they didn't know they had.

**The epiphany: Being present and patient.** Graduates reported that they fundamentally had to change their typical fast-paced ways of being, doing, and communicating in order to connect with camper-participants. They couldn't multitask, they couldn't text, and they couldn't juggle the multiple demands of their "normal" college life if they hoped to develop a relationship with the camper-participant they were responsible for a week. From one moment to the next, they had to focus completely on communicating with

this particular human being in order to interpret the subtleties involved in addressing that person's needs. Throughout the interviews, graduates overwhelmingly reported that they developed a new capacity for "patience" throughout their camp experience and that they have continued to use their enhanced ability to exhibit patience in both their personal and professional lives.

As one graduate emphatically stated, "I'll repeat it again that patience was very, very dominant in terms of what I learned during my stay at [c]amp." Another concurred, stating that his most important learning was

having patience both with myself and with other people. Things don't often come fast, I think, when you're working with that population, and we live in a society that is quick and here and now.... [I]t's really hard sometimes to step back and have patience and to wait on things... especially with some of the people who have communication issues, to... try to figure out what they're saying, instead of just making assumptions.

In addition to developing their abilities to be patient, graduates reported "being present" as a pivotal lesson in this course. In the following example, the marketing student quoted above remembered feeling that he would never be able to communicate with his camper, until a transformational moment occurred:

[T]he first two days, I have to admit... I was going, "I'm out of here, this is too hard, my guy can't tell me when he's hungry, he can't tell me when he needs to be changed, he can't even go swimming"... But the third day... I'm feeding Tad, and all of a sudden, [he] reached out and grabbed my hand. And I was like, "He's in there! Totally in there!" He's telling me he wants more, and then he started interacting with me, and it was stuff that I was so, honestly, ignorant and naïve [about], right, it was subtleties in his face, because he couldn't talk... But then the third day I started to understand him, and I started to connect with him... [and] I was like, I like this guy!... [H]e knows I'm there, he knows I've got his back.... [W]e really connected on the third day.

This camper-participant reached out and touched the student-counselor, both literally and figuratively—in his own way demanding that the student see and be present to him. The interaction transformed both the student and the dynamic between student and camper.

Another graduate reported a similarly powerful moment:

There was a boy that had cerebral palsy that we took in a canoe. I was in the back, kind of holding him . . . while his counselor . . . was in the front rowing. . . . I wasn't sure if he was really realizing that he was in the boat, and what was going on, because he was noncommunicative. And this bird, this eagle, started flying above us, and he was just tracking it with his eyes, and he got the biggest grin on his face. I was just like, wow, he is really taking in this moment, and he is able to experience this, and I know that something is registering. . . . It was just the most rewarding thing ever.

From an initial state of anticipation about a “fun and easy” Capstone course, to a disorienting confrontation with difference, to an experienced epiphany about the diverse ways that humans can connect to their world and each other, interviewees painted picture after picture of the ways they allowed themselves to be changed by the “live encounter” (to use *Parker Palmer's [2007]* phrase) of their camp experience.

**Short- and long-term impact on perspectives, skills, and actions.** These learning experiences were associated with outcomes such as shifts in perspectives, development of skills and capacities, and the application of both through subsequent new actions. Eighty-five percent (17 of 20) of graduates described key ways their perspectives and/or skills had changed immediately after the course and went on to articulate and provide examples of how those changes had continued to impact their perspectives, approaches to life, and/or actions years later. Analysis of these outcomes revealed four main categories: enhanced skills for communication (50%); greater understanding and appreciation of human diversity (70%); nonjudgmental acceptance that human variation is typical, not atypical (60%); and newfound maturity and gratitude leading to a desire to serve (40%). Each of these four outcome categories is described below, with examples from the interview responses.

**Enhanced skills for communication.** Fifty percent of the graduates reported enhancing their communication skills as a result of

LPSD. Some reported recognizing the importance of listening and the expansion of this capacity through their interactions at camp, including learning to wait for another person to complete their thoughts and finish speaking, rather than assuming that they know what the other is going to say.

One graduate described a communication skill he learned and its importance to his work in a bank:

I learned a great deal about working with people... I [am] now a lot more understanding and... willing to wait, because other people might not be at the same speed as I am... [I learned] that something important to one person might not be important to another... I work in customer service, and this is actually pretty helpful sometimes.

Others reported that it was during LPSD that they learned not to make assumptions about people that preclude understanding, but instead to make sure that they have understood what another is saying:

One of the ways that [LPSD] has helped me... is... hearing people out, and... not making the assumption that... I got the full message, but really making sure that I did get the full message by trying to reinterpret ... making sure that you've understood what they've communicated.

In addition to listening, graduates reported that they enhanced other nonverbal forms of communication through the particular opportunities that their work with persons with disabilities afforded them. Further, they recognized the importance of these nonverbal communication skills in their attempts at relationship-building with all persons. As one respondent noted,

I always make eye contact now, whereas I always stayed away from eye contact before.... I['ve] found... you can reach anyone [through eye contact].... I work at a clothing shelter every [week], and we do clothing drives for the homeless, and they'll come to our door and ask for things like shoes and hats and gloves and sweat-shirts.... I find if you make eye contact... it just makes everything go more smoothly.

Respondents found this learning life-changing, as it not only allowed them to connect with camper-participants and peers in deeper ways than they had previously imagined, but it gave them both a skill and an awareness that they took with them after graduation. They stated that it changed their orientations toward their marriages, their families, their workplaces, their volunteering, and their daily exchanges with people in the world. Graduates gave examples of how they had continued to use their enhanced skills for communication in their work as a flight attendant, an accountant, a military officer, a social worker, and a teacher, and in the fields of customer relations, sales, and international marketing.

***Deeper understanding of and appreciation for human diversity.*** Graduates' reflections on their camp experiences made clear that LPSD enhanced their appreciation of the diversity of the human experience. Respondents learned about the population they were serving and came to value the gifts, abilities, and struggles of those persons. Graduates frequently described this course as their first encounter with persons with significant disabilities, and they articulated that and how they emerged from the experience with greater respect, compassion, and honoring toward persons with disabilities. In many ways, graduates understood the course as an immersion into a new cultural community, an opportunity for a border crossing of sorts, in which they engaged with persons they had never before encountered. They described the ways in which their "live encounters" with campers broke down the negative stereotypes and assumptions that had previously barred them from truly seeing and understanding persons with disabilities as persons similar to themselves. One graduate who framed the course in terms of a cultural border crossing stated,

You build a friendship, and on top of that... it's maybe a part of society you've never really touched on or been a part of. So it's like you go into a foreign country, and meet an Italian person, [and] you get to know the culture. Similar in that sense.

Graduates also reported greater awareness of the social issues that surrounded these persons and their caregivers.

I think [the] impact of having someone in your life that has some sort of disability I never really understood before.... I was in charge of three kids for the entire week, and... it was really exhausting but also rewarding,



and it gives you so much respect for the parents who... take care of these kids 24/7.... [A]lso, [the campers] just impressed me so much. They were so smart! I was awed that I was able to get to know them... I definitely think before the experience... I was a little standoffish, it was kind of fear of the unknown, I didn't know quite how to interact with someone with a disability... [and] I realized that they're smart and great people... I still even e-mail with one of the girls that I had as a counselor there.... I think before I just didn't know what to think, or maybe made assumptions. There'd be people that would be in wheelchairs, and with cerebral palsy, and not even be able to speak, or not even be able to feed themselves, or go to the bathroom by themselves, but they could type out their thoughts... and they were funny and smart and completely with it. It just was kind of amazing to me... because once you actually open up and get to know the kids there, they'll just blow you away.

Throughout the interviews, respondents confessed that, prior to the LPSD experience, they would have simply walked by persons with disabilities and not engaged with—or even really seen—them. As a result of the course, they now engage, and many reported having developed a deeper understanding of the human experience, a broader view of the world that could be gained only by having authentically engaged with a human being they had previously passed by.

The epiphanic moments they experienced at camp have generalized into changed behaviors in relation to persons with disabilities in their current lives:

I didn't really know what to think of kids with disabilities [before].... [I]f we were in a supermarket I might just walk by them and not say anything or notice them, but if we're in a supermarket now and there's a kid with disabilities and they're smiling at me I'll smile right back at them, and go up to them and say, "Hi, how are you doing?"

Not only does this graduate relate differently to persons with disabilities now, but she also may serve as a model for others shopping in the supermarket.

Graduates consistently remarked on how they gained an awareness of their chronic underestimation of persons with disabilities and how capable these persons were not only intellectually but also emotionally, relationally, and interpersonally. Interviewees reiterated that overcoming their assumptions changed them and that this change persisted over time. As one respondent noted, the course allowed students “to be with [persons with disabilities] in an experience outside of their home environment, outside of the school environment, outside of the day-to-day monotony routine experience, [and] you see their amazingness.” Again and again, interviewees spoke to their engaging in a process of overcoming previously held stereotypes and assumptions and how their doing so allowed them to meet the campers in their abilities, rather than in their disabilities.

These fresh perspectives also led to new ways of relating to and advocating for persons with disabilities when the opportunity presented itself. For example, during the course, students had learned how to communicate with persons with autism or physical disabilities who are nonverbal and use augmentative communication systems. Graduates working in service professions, such as a postal worker and a bookseller, described how, since LPSD, they have been able to communicate with their customers with disabilities who use various modes of communication. Another graduate spoke of how her experience with persons with autism made it possible for her to better support coworkers with children with autism and form a relationship with these children. A graduate who later became a college advisor described how her learning in the course made her more effective in supporting college students with disabilities. A graduate working as a mail carrier said that “when I come across persons with disabilities, I am more understanding of what they are dealing with, and I don’t treat them as a disabled person, just... as a human being... [who] maybe just needs a little more time.” Another respondent, who became an art teacher in a middle school, said:

I am a huge advocate for having all of the students that are in our building with disabilities in my classroom.... They are all welcome. Right now I have two students who don’t communicate at all, they are on feeding tubes, and they come in and some days it’s just for observation ... looking around at what other kids are doing, and some days they [are] holding a paintbrush, or poking some clay... or help me pass out supplies, things like

that... I let the special education department know that they're always welcome to enroll their students into my courses.... When you're at [c]amp, you are thrown in with [children] with all different levels of disabilities... so it makes you... comfortable with all the situations.

***Nonjudgmental acceptance that human variation is typical/the norm.*** Of the 70% (14 of 20) of graduates who reported gaining a deeper appreciation for human diversity, particularly in the realm of variable abilities, 12 went on to describe an even broader shift in their view of human variation in general. They said that immediately after the course and to this day, when they encounter a new individual, they “don’t judge a book by its cover” and they “try to understand where someone is coming from.” One graduate described how after the course, she no longer saw variations in how people do things or react to events as somehow negative or “less than” how others (who are perceived to be “normal”) act, and another realized that “everyone needs support sometimes, and that is okay.” These graduates began to view human variation in a new light, to see variation itself as typical rather than atypical. In this way, the graduates spoke to how they now expect to experience human variation and that this new awareness catalyzed a perspective shift that deepens their understanding of human diversity that creates, for them, a new norm.

Graduates went on to describe how they use this new perspective in their work, in their family relationships, and in the community. One said, “I try to be more accepting of everybody and try... to see what it would be like to walk in their shoes.” The graduate who now works as a college advisor noted that because she became aware of the consequences of prejudging people years ago during the LPSD course, she is more empathetic in her work with the diverse group of students she encounters today. Another graduate said that “when I am working with people or supervising them or engaged in customer service, I can’t assume I know where they are coming from. I need to give people some credit.”

An officer in the military said that the course experience contributed to his ability to lead because it allowed him to see for the first time that “everybody... [is] a bunch of grey shades.” After he became an officer and was charged with helping those under his command chart a career path, this insight gave him “more sensitivity to people in the army who might be passed over for certain positions.” He said that he is now “taking that [perspective] with me... as I enter medical school.”

A flight attendant described the ways her learning in the course offered her a fresh lens through which to approach situations:

I think it's just having the awareness that you don't necessarily know where someone's coming from.... [N]ot assuming that you have a corner market [*sic*] on... why they are acting the way they are, because... it could be as simple as someone having a bad day, or as intense as their whole life.... How they are acting doesn't necessarily have anything to do with you or what you are doing. So trying to meet them where they're at and see where they are coming from and go from there.

A speech language therapist described what she learned and currently applies to her work this way: "It helped me to stop assuming the most negative thing, [to] broaden my horizons. Don't assume a negative aspect; give people credit." A social worker articulated what she gained from the course with these words:

It was a really good experience to develop skills for appreciation for what people can do when you think they can't do anything... because the camp has everything a typical summer camp has... like horse riding and swimming, and at first I was thinking how is this gonna work? So many of them need help, like feeding [and] so many basic daily things that we take for granted ... and then they all did it!

She then described how she applies this insight in her profession as a social worker:

You shouldn't assume and you never know what someone can or can't do.... [I learned about] being more open to letting people show me what they can do for themselves without me assuming that they need me to do something for them.... [That] doesn't have to do with disabilities [alone, but has] to do with social work and things... in general. It's easy to try and tell someone what to do instead of finding out what they want and meeting them where they're at.

One particularly powerful example of a learning experience during the course leading to a new perspective and how that per-

spective was used later in the graduate's life was expressed by this participant:

I [counseled] a 30-year-old autistic woman who was completely dependent on me [for personal care]... and it was extremely humbling. Had to do everything.... [W]hen I first started, [I] couldn't believe I was having to do this with my time.... Well, by the end of the week, I actually, for the first time since I was probably 5 years old, wet the bed at camp.... I actually told my 30-year-old camper what had happened, and she gave me the biggest hug and said, "It's okay, I wet the bed too"... I was so mortified that it happened to me, I didn't know who to tell, or what to do. But she just totally embraced me and said, "It's okay"... That's why I say it was the most amazing experience of my life. It just totally took me 360 [*sic*] to an adult. It was just amazing, overnight. ... I was so scared when it happened, but looking back, thank God that happened to me.... I have to say that was probably the ultimate moment, the one thing that I got out of my entire college career that I will never forget.... I would have paid a hundred thousand dollars just to have that experience happen to me, because it has meant so much on how I parent, on how I deal with my husband and my marriage, on how I deal with individuals at the church, at the clothes drive, my neighbors. ... Sometimes everybody needs to be taken care of. No matter how capable they are. No matter how stubborn, how strong-willed. Sometimes everybody needs to be told that it's okay, no matter what.... Even if it's [an] embarrassing thing, or the most awful thing... they just need to be told it's okay... and sometimes that's all it takes.

***Growth in maturity, confidence, and gratitude, leading to desire to serve.*** Forty percent of the graduates described how the course experience helped them grow in maturity and confidence, shifting their perspectives about and/or approaches to life. One aspect of this shifted perspective was a newfound gratitude for their life circumstances and capabilities. These graduates described how they gained perspective and inspiration from the camper-participants. Graduates didn't leave the camp simply feeling that they had served "the other," but rather that they had been transformed

by their encounters with another person and with themselves. As one graduate described it, “I felt I was getting a lot more than I was giving.”

Graduates reported that this shift in perspective and the overcoming of their initial fears provoked a clear sense of their gaining in maturity, as if they had reached a new milestone in life. Interviewees reported feeling more grounded as adults and more confident in their own abilities. One student remarked that the course, with its experiential, real-world context, prepared him for his professional life by reinforcing his sense of self-efficacy:

[Camp] showed you what you could do, what you could achieve even under really intense circumstances.... [I]t shows you what you are capable of as a person, as a student, as an employee. [I]t pushed you to be something that you wouldn't necessarily have tried or accepted that you would have been able to do, if you had just jumped right into an employee-employer situation. So it kind of boosts your self-esteem, makes you realize how capable you really are as a contributing employee.

Another graduate recalled starting to think that “I can live my life better... to help other people.” Another reflected, “I grew as a person just from that experience.” Graduates wanted the interviewer to hear the importance of this in their lives, saying, for example, that the course “really opened my eyes and gave me a bigger perspective that I carry around what, 5 years after college?”

These graduates articulated that and how they developed a new kind of gratitude connected to this sense of perspective and maturity: for life, for their abilities, and for their opportunities to serve others. The confluence of these factors provided the catalyst to a powerful takeaway from the experience for these graduates: a desire to serve in the future, based in their newfound perspective and gratitude for the facts of their lives and the deepening maturity that turns their attention to the needs of others in their communities. One graduate described it this way: “It's like you go into a foreign country. It educates you, it makes you appreciate the life you have... it makes you want to be a better person... and it makes you want and need to give back.”

In many interviews, respondents reported looking up to role models that they saw volunteering at the camp, and they expressed a desire and a commitment to serve others through their own volunteering. Many of the interviewees admitted that prior to

LPSD, they had not engaged in service to their community, and they reported that the course allowed them to find a way to engage in the community and develop a positive attitude toward service. One graduate, who had named LPSD as one of his most significant learning experiences in college, said,

It was pretty impressive working with the community, getting the opportunity to actually volunteer, and [make] my impact outside of the University.... I found [the course] to be an outstanding interaction. Prior to that I really hadn't had a lot of interaction with the community, volunteering and stuff like that. So I would say [it was] really significant.

This graduate was continuing to volunteer actively in the community 5 years after completing the course.

The example of other volunteers at camp (who were directly volunteering and not engaging in the experience for course credit) was highly motivating for many of the respondents, who explained how volunteers at the camp inspired them to consider how they might continue to be of service in the future.

I would say it's definitely been really neat to volunteer, [and] it pushed me into doing different volunteer activities.... I definitely wanted to volunteer after seeing all of the people that were up there, that weren't doing this for their Capstone, that were just doing it to volunteer because, you know, they loved it so much. It definitely opened my eyes, and I thought, "What could I do that I would love this much?"

These graduates remarked that one of the most important impacts of LPSD for them was that it instilled a desire to engage in future service. One business major now working in marketing described how after graduation, he sought out and became a basketball coach with Special Olympics. Instead of focusing on, in his words, "what I'm going to buy next or what's on TV" on weekends, he is doing something "really important to me." He recalls that before the course, he didn't look down on people with disabilities; he just never really looked at them at all. Now, in his relationship with the athletes on the team, he increasingly appreciates their personalities and their "capability... for affection and friendship" that enriches his life. He noted that the athletes on the team truly care

about him, not just who he is in relation to his work status and income, and thus are very important people in his life.

These graduates clearly understood how deeply meaningful and influential their service experience in LPSD had been on multiple levels in their lives. Much like the student quoted above, who said that she “felt [she] was getting a lot more than [she] was giving,” another student summed up his experience by saying, “I didn’t know that the person who benefits the most from service is me.”

## Limitations

One limitation of the study involved the difficulty in contacting an equal number of graduates from each time period sought (3–5, 6–10, and 11–16 years after course completion). Since the university’s alumni database contained accurate contact information for significantly fewer of the graduates from the 11–16 years postcourse time frame, only four of the 20 interviewees represented graduates from this period. In addition, because this research focuses on a qualitative study of one course with its particular features and context, findings from this study may have limited generalizability to other service-learning courses at the most concrete level of shared best curricular practices.

## Implications and Conclusion

One way the current study adds to the small number of qualitative studies on the long-term impacts of service-learning is by using methods recommended by previous researchers to address gaps in knowledge. Open-ended interviewing with time for interviewees to fully reflect and describe seemed to reveal connections between learning experiences, shifts in perspectives, and actions. In addition, the methodological choice to begin the interviews with a broad question about students’ most significant learning experiences in college proved useful for establishing the importance of the long-term impact graduates ascribed to this undergraduate service-learning course.

Graduates described their learning experiences during the LPSD course that reflect components of Kiely’s (2005) transformational learning model of service-learning. Graduates’ accounts reflect border crossing and the experiencing of dissonance as they realized they would need to be patient and present in order to establish communication with camper-participants. The ensuing relationship that formed was a “constructive engagement with oth-



erness” in which a “deep lesson about connection across difference was learned” (*Parks Daloz, 2000, p. 110*).

Through the experiential arc described, in which the camper-participants with significant disabilities were clearly the true faculty for the course, students experienced epiphanic learning moments that they believed were responsible for new skills and perspectives that had been affirmed in importance to them in the years since the course. The significance of these outcomes from a service-learning course for graduates was underscored by the fact that, when asked about their most significant learning experiences in college at the start of the interview, the majority of graduates initially named this course, out of the countless experiences they had in college, of their own volition. These findings confirm the assertion that many important impacts of service-learning are formative and realized long after class is over (*Polin & Keene, 2010*), reinforcing the critical importance of longitudinal and follow-up research.

In addition, prior research has been mixed regarding graduates’ abilities to describe how their transformed perspectives led to actions later in life. For example, *Bamber (2008)* reported that during interviews, “students struggled to articulate ongoing learning that had taken place, resorting to statements such as ‘it’s difficult to explain’” (*p. 53*). Consequently, *Bamber & Hankin (2011)* reported that, whereas 75% of their participants made statements that revealed perspective transformation, only 25% reported any actions that resulted from this transformation. They concluded that this was “evidence of an action gap whereby students do not draw upon perspectives that have been transformed to guide action” (*p. 200*). In the present study, however, when graduates described new or altered skills or perspectives, they were readily able to provide examples of actions that had resulted from this change.

We offer two possible explanations for this difference in participant responses. Previous studies of the long-term impacts of service-learning (*Bamber & Hankin, 2011; Kiely, 2005*) have focused on immersive international service-learning courses and asked whether students’ experience of perspective transformation had spurred them to action in relation to inequity and social justice. The current study also examined the impact of an immersive course that involved border crossing, dissonance, and reflection. This study, in which the interviewer responded to graduates’ responses with integral probes intended to elicit deeply held beliefs, evidences how students’ constructive engagement with difference, and the learning catalyzed by this engagement with difference, resulted in a long-lasting, appreciable, and memorable accrual of skills and

perspective shifts. Transformed perspectives and actions for social justice are very important learning goals, but the findings from the current study suggest that other important long-term outcomes of service-learning courses for graduates can be uncovered through an open-ended interview approach and thematic analysis. Further, allowing graduates to speak for themselves and their experiences in ways that were central to this study revealed shifts in perspectives, skills, and approaches that, in at least some cases, very well could be called positive, justice-enhancing changes—whether the graduates themselves would use that framing or not.

Overall, the researchers found it striking that the graduates were able to look back years later and readily identify and fully describe specific moments during the course where they learned something of value to them and, more importantly, easily link that to their current approach to life and human interaction. It's as if a brief but powerful learning experience expanded into something much broader and more significant over the course of time. This is noteworthy for service-learning researchers because some of the more life-permeating impacts of this pedagogy may be revealed years later and through an individual's open-ended reflection at a point in the future when that transformative kernel has had time to interweave with and be applied to subsequent life experience.

Indeed, one of the most notable aspects of the interview process for the interviewer was the number of interviewees who explicitly thanked the interviewer for the opportunity to again reflect on—indeed, to recollect, or “re-collect”—their experiences in LPSD. These graduates reported gleaning new insights from this fresh remembering, and they indicated that the interview process reignited a direct engagement with their learnings from the class. For the researchers, one of the more poignant and powerful take-aways from this project has been the value of long-term qualitative studies not only for the insights provided to practitioners and future students in service-learning courses, but for the immediate positive benefits to interviewees, who may continue to learn from long-ago experiences through renewed reflection.

The methods used and data gathered in this study may also have implications for the broader study of the long-term influence of college on graduates, which is vital for the ongoing evaluation and improvement of curriculum and pedagogy in higher education generally. As a complement to quantitative follow-up surveys of graduates, open-ended interviews with a small random sample of graduates may reveal what graduates found to be most impacting about their college education, which may differ from what faculty

and administrators *intended* as learning objectives and outcomes. Understanding the experiences of graduates, articulated in their own words long after the completion of those experiences, may provide surprising and useful information for curriculum design, delivery, and evaluation on the one hand, and big-picture pedagogical and programmatic renewal on the other.

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