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A Qualitative Approach to Exploring Short-Term Service Learning and Civic Engagement

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┃ **ABSTRACT** ┃

Introduction
A growing number of universities and colleges across the United States have committed to civic engagement activities, particularly short-term service-learning (SL). Limited research, however, is available about the effects of short-term SL experiences on student development.

Objectives
The current study attempts to address research gaps in our understanding of this pedagogical technique by conducting qualitative interviews with students involved in a short-term SL project.

Methods
In this qualitative study, five students (*N*=5) reported on their short-term SL experience as they related to the following outcomes: (1) Community Service Self Efficacy (CSSE); (2) Community Service Group Efficacy (CSGE); (3) conceptualizations about power, oppression and privilege (POP); (4) attitudes towards marginalized populations being served and (5) citizenship outcomes (such as personal responsibility, participatory citizenship, and justice-oriented citizenship).

Results
Students reported changes in their beliefs about the ability to create positive social change in communities, as well as their perceptions of marginalized groups. In addition, spending time with and directly hearing the perspective of individuals who have been marginalized in society helped to reduce intergroup anxiety and motivate students to be involved formally and informally in civic activities that can help to improve community-level outcomes.

Conclusion
Findings suggest that well-designed short-term SL experiences have the potential to shape important student perceptions and intentions regarding civic engagement. This finding is particularly valuable because this pedagogical technique is growing in popularity in higher education. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of promoting best practices in SL and other community-engaged learning experiences.

Keywords
Service-learning (SL); Community-engaged learning; Student development; Qualitative research.

Abbreviations
SL: Service-Learning; CEL: Community-Engaged Learning; CSSE: Community Service Self Efficacy; CSGE: Community Service Group Efficacy; POP: Power, Oppression and Privilege; TVRS: Trenton Violence Reduction Strategy; RAs: Research Assistants; TCNJ: The College of New Jersey; GED: General Educational Development.

INTRODUCTION

Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) and Service-Learning (SL) – important pedagogical techniques in which students learn by engaging in organized service activities – have gained in popularity within higher education curricula.[1,2] For the purpose of this article, SL includes community engagement, civic engagement, and other terms used on across campuses. Although, various definitions of SL have been proposed, most have agreed that these forms of experiential learning involve three critical components: addressing the needs of the local community through service activities, relevant academic material, and critical reflection that allows students to make connections between the service they are doing and the material they have learned.[3,4] Through exposure to communities, oftentimes different from those of the student participants, SL aims to produce civically-minded graduates who view themselves as active citizens with a collective responsibility in resolving community-identified issue areas.[5-7] One of the most common forms of service-learning is short-term SL activities embedded in a regular course (from those that last a few hours to those that last a full semester). Currently, it is unclear whether short-term SL contributes to positive outcomes for the students involved; in fact, some researchers have argued that, if not implemented well, it has the potential to cause more harm than good.[8] To better understand how to promote positive short-term SL outcomes, this study examined the experiences of five students who engaged in short-term direct service, indirect service, and reflection activities. We focused on five outcomes identified as important outcomes in SL research, in general, but have been understudied in the context of short-term SL, specifically: (1) Community Service Self Efficacy (CSSE); (2) Community Service Group Efficacy (CSGE); (3) conceptualizations about power, oppression and privilege (POP); (4) attitudes towards marginalized populations being served and (5) citizenship outcomes. By taking a qualitative research approach, this article provides a nuanced preliminary understanding of how to promote positive outcomes for students involved with short-term SL experiences.

Opportunities and Challenges Involved with Short-Term Service

Generally, SL and CEL experiences are considered high-impact educational practices that contribute to improved student engagement, as well as a variety of other positive academic, social, and civic student outcomes.[9-12] Kolb, as well as Yates and Youniss, argue that SL experiences are likely to have a significant impact on student development to the extent that they involve the following key processes: construction of knowledge *via* student reflection on their experiences, the development of new conceptualizations, and experimenting with these new conceptualizations.[13,14] These high-impact experiences then provide students opportunities to develop the skills and values necessary in democratic building and full civic participation.[11]

A summary of SL research findings in higher education suggests that, overall, participation in SL experiences can foster these valued outcomes. Few studies, however, have examined them in the context of short-term SL.[10] Short-term SL, the most common model of community-engaged learning within institutions of higher education, is defined as SL that requires less than forty hours of service per week and/or takes place across fewer than fifteen weeks.[9,12] Some research suggests that short-term SL can have positive effects on student development – for example, increased social responsibility, meaningfulness of collegiate experiences, and likelihood to enter a service-oriented career.[15] A 2010 study compared the effects of single-credit sustained immersion courses (short-term SL experiences) to 3-4 credit long-term SL courses on students' social responsibility and found that similar positive effects can be achieved across SL types.[16] Conversely, a meta-analysis of SL effects on student outcomes observed mixed results for valued short-term SL outcomes.[9]

Some researchers have argued that, in order for SL to have a significant impact on student outcomes, the experience must occur over a considerable time span.[17] It may be, however, that particularly meaningful short-term SL experiences can have a significant impact on student development, especially if these experiences involve key processes for high-impact SL experiences: construction of knowledge *via* student reflection on their experiences, the development of new conceptualizations, and experimenting with these new conceptualizations.[13,14] The following section identifies five outcomes that, based on previous research, may help students engage in these key processes when involved with short-term SL. While these outcomes have been established as important indicators of civic engagement, they have received little empirical attention in the study of short-term SL: students' attitudes towards marginalized populations, specifically the population being served by the SL activities; students' conceptualizations of privilege (special advantages, benefits, or favors as a result of belonging to certain social groups) and oppression (certain social groups benefiting at the expense of other groups through institutional use of power and privilege);[11,18] students' sense of community service self-efficacy (CSSE, belief that students can make meaningful contributions to their community through service);[19-21] and students' sense of community service group efficacy (CSGE, the belief that groups of individuals can make meaningful changes within communities).[22,23]

Outcomes of Short-Term Service-Learning (SL)

With respect to Community Service Self-efficacy (CSSE) – an individual's confidence in their ability to make meaningful changes within a community – student CSSE in SL "…could increase, decrease, or remain stable during a semester of service-learning, depending in part upon the degree of success or failure during service provision".[21] Students with high-levels of CSSE are more likely to pursue other SL activities and opportunities, which may create a feedback loop that promotes further civic engagement. Among the few studies that have examined CSSE as a short-term SL outcome, Weiler et al found that students who participated in the Campus Corps at-risk youth mentoring program (*N*=390) had significantly higher post-SL CSSE scores than peers who did not participate in the SL course (*N*=258), thus, illustrating a potential relationship between short-term SL student participation and the development of student CSSE.[5] What remains unclear in the

research literature is which aspects of SL promote student CSSE during these short-term experiences.

In addition to CSSE, Community Service Group Efficacy (CSGE) – the individual belief that groups of people can make meaningful changes within communities – may also be an important short-term SL student outcome. General group efficacy consists of three components: (1) the perception of the group meeting its own standards of productivity; (2) the ability of the group members to be able to work together cohesively; and (3) the individual well-being and personal growth of each member as a result of their experiences in the group.[24] In the context of higher education, research on general group efficacy has mostly focused on students in traditional academic courses.[25,26] No research has yet explored relations between short-term SL experiences and community service group efficacy.

SL experiences also have the potential to influence student attitudes towards marginalized groups they serve. In one study, students who participated in a short-term SL course demonstrated higher levels of empathy and compassion towards people of dissimilar social identities. Students identified direct service as the primary reason for the increases.[27] Another SL case study demonstrated the transformative nature of SL experiences in challenging students' stereotypes about minority populations.[28] In this study, college students participated in a class on feminism alongside female inmates. The SL experience helped students connect with the inmates and reduce the negative stereotypes students held about prison populations. Furthermore, reflections of students participating in SL have revealed complex relations between the race/ethnicity of students, socioeconomic status of students, and the impact of the SL experiences on stereotypes. For instance, students who shared the same ethnic identity as the SL group served struggled with existing stereotypes (e.g., upper-middle-class Hispanic student distancing themselves from lower-class Hispanics).[29] In other cases, students reported resistance to challenging their biases and prejudices towards marginalized groups.[27-29] If SL aims to influence students' perceptions of underserved and underrepresented communities – or to help students connect with the community members and understand how communities empower themselves – it is critical to examine what components of short-term SL experiences contribute to these changes.

Research evidence also suggests that participating in SL can influence student conceptualizations of power, oppression, and privilege (POP). Social justice related components of SL can help students learn about, reflect upon, and directly address societal disparities. This can be achieved when SL experiences mobilize students to work with populations where the consequences of inequitable resource distribution are evident.[30] Student who participated in the Einfeld and Collins study indicated that aspects of SL provided them opportunities to analyze how oppression works within their local community by promoting critical analysis of complex social issues within an academic framework.[31] Additionally, professors of SL courses have observed that their students increased their understanding of societal systems of advantage and disadvantage after the completion of the SL course.[32] As an example, students in the Jones and Abes study revealed how the short-

term SL course aided in unearthing their privilege in relationship to others, often citing this increased awareness of their own privilege as a result of an increase in their understanding of societal systems of oppression.[27] Conversely, student reflections in the Espino and Lee study showed the complex ways SL can influence student consciousness of oppression and privilege.[29] While some students reported an improved sense of racial and class consciousness after their SL-course, others (and sometimes the same) students found themselves defensive of their own privilege and advantage.[29] Further research may help to explain these contradictory findings regarding the effects of short-term SL on students' understanding of POP concepts.

Finally, service-learning aims to develop civically engaged student populations. Conway et al noted that short-term SL has limited impacts on citizenship outcomes, illustrating the importance of further investigating what types of SL experiences and components may lead to a civically-minded graduate.[9] In this study, we considered the three citizenship outcomes described by Westheimer and Kahne: personal responsibility (e.g., obeying laws, being a good citizen), participatory citizenship (e.g., voting, active involvement in community improvement), and justice-oriented citizenship (e.g., active involvement in activities that address injustice and/or oppression in society).[33]

Current Study

The use of service-learning (SL) as a pedagogical strategy, particularly short-term SL experiences, continues to grow across campuses.[2] It is unclear, however, whether short-term SL contributes to positive outcomes for the students involved; in fact, some researchers have argued that, if not implemented well, it has the potential to cause more harm than good.[8] The current study focused on the following five outcomes in the area of short-term SL research: (1) Community Service Self Efficacy (CSSE); (2) Community Service Group Efficacy (CSGE); (3) conceptualizations about power, oppression and privilege (POP); (4) attitudes towards marginalized populations being served and (5) citizenship outcomes. We selected these outcomes because they have received little empirical attention in short-term SL research, and yet have the potential to engage students in high impact processes that can result in significant, positive changes in student development. This study used a qualitative research approach which lends itself to exploring the fine-grained details found in students' perceptions about their unique, value-laden transformational experiences.[34]

METHODS

The Trenton Violence Reduction Strategy (TVRS) is a collaborative program located in Trenton, NJ, USA funded by the Office of the Attorney General and run by the Trenton Police Department, local social service providers, and The College of New Jersey (Center for Community Engaged Learning & Research). Trenton, the capital of New Jersey, is home to nearly 85,000 residents with a median household income of $35,647. More than one-quarter of its residents (28.4%) have incomes below the poverty level, and poverty is particularly concentrated in female-headed family households with dependent children (45.7% of households with children under 5).

The city predominantly consists of ethnic minorities with over half of its residents (52.0%) identifying as African American and 33.7% identify as Latinx.[35] Two of the most significant challenges residents face are in the areas of education and public health. In 2015, Trenton reported the lowest high school graduation rate in the state (68.6%), and the city has a history of battling high rates of non-violent and violent crimes, particularly gang- and drug-related violence.[36]

TVRS is dedicated to reducing violence in the Trenton community by changing the criminogenic behavior of individuals who were previously incarcerated or have been identified as at-risk of being incarcerated by the Trenton Police Department. This is done by mobilizing social service and outreach workers into neighborhoods experiencing high-levels of criminal activity, working with individuals and families to reduce violence, and providing job training, life skills, and other aid to young adults and families as an alternative to engaging in criminal behavior. Upon attending a "Call-in" and choosing to enter the program, participants and family members complete a 60-minute baseline assessment to establish initial information about their attitudes and behaviors across various life domains. Based on these baseline assessments, the program provides appropriate social services, including life skills, job training, and overall case management of participants.

Participants

The TVRS project involved service-learning (SL) opportunities during the Spring 2016 semester for three types of students: graduate-level counseling students (N=12), undergraduate criminology students (N=3), and undergraduate students from the The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) Bonner Community Scholars program (N=5). Graduate counseling students had opportunities to participate in the Call-in meetings and conduct the baseline assessments. The undergraduate Criminology students were mostly involved with the assessment of program data collected (e.g., analyzing attendance and participant outcomes of the program). Undergraduate Bonner students were the most heavily involved in the three cohorts, as they facilitated life skills training (including general educational development (GED) tutoring, resume preparation, and job readiness sessions).

Among the twenty students recruited to participate, five agreed to take part in this study. The remaining students did not respond to the invitation. This number (N=5) is lower than the recommended six participants needed to examine specific topics in qualitative data analysis with accuracy. Despite this limitation, these students' perspectives are likely to offer valuable insight, as the constructs under investigation in the current study have received limited empirical attention in short-term service-learning research.[37] The majority of participants identified as women (60%), and the average age of the participants was 21.8-years-old. Additional demographic data are presented in Table 1. With respect to previous experience with volunteer work, 40% of participants reported limited to some previous experience (e.g., served when opportunities were presented), 40% reported a lot of previous experience (e.g., served on a regular basis), and 20% of participants reported a lot of previous experience with related leadership roles. The participant pool was drawn from three TCNJ student groups involved in the TVRS project: undergraduate Bonner Community Scholars with TVRS as their primary service site; undergraduate Criminology students in a service-learning/community-engaged learning course; and graduate-level counseling students in a service-learning/community-engaged learning course.

Participation in the SL activities varied across students during the fall 2016 semester. Bonner students committed about 13 hours per week across the semester, Criminology student committed about 20 hours total during the semester, and Counseling students committed about 20 hours for 1-2 weeks. The nature of involvement varied as well, with Bonner and Counseling students having direct interactions with TVRS participants, while one Criminology student served indirectly *via* program data assessment. Finally, participants reported engaging in a range of formal and informal reflection activities. All participants reported reflecting informally on their SL experiences alone, with peers, and/or with relatives. Among the three student groups, Bonner Community Scholars engaged in formal reflection most frequently (before and after their service activities as well as regularly scheduled reflection meetings). Counseling students reflected formally at three main points during the semester *via* class discussions (pre-reflection, reflection during service, and post-reflection). The Criminology student engaged in a single formal reflection activity during her first and only visit to the TVRS site.

Table 1. *Participant Demographic Information (N=5)*	
Undergraduate student	60%
Graduate student	40%
Age (*M, SD*)	21.8, 1.9
Male	40%
Female	60%
Hispanic/Latino	60%
Caucasian	40%
Socioeconomic status (*M, SD*)	5.7, 1.6

Note: M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation
*SES data was collected using the Scale of Subjective Status.[46] Scores ranged from 1 to 10, 1 indicating participant SES status perceived as lower than 90% of population and 10 indicating participant SES status perceived as higher than 90% of population.

Procedure

Prior to collecting data, this study received approval from The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants signed up for this study *via* email by setting up a one-on-one, confidential semi-structured interview with one of two research assistants (RAs). The RAs were TCNJ undergraduate students, and neither interviewed a participant with whom they were familiar. To prepare for data collection, both RAs completed interviewer training prior to conducting this study, and data were collected during the spring 2017 semester. Each interview took approximately 45-60 minutes to complete. Participants started the process by reviewing and signing an informed consent form. The interview asked general questions about participants' experiences with community service and service-learning, as well as specific questions about students' participation in the TVRS project. Upon completion of the interview, participants filled out a separate demographics questionnaire. Participants were paid $35 compensation.

For the semi-structured interview, researchers used an interview guide, formed around global questions with accompanying probe questions (Table 2). Semi-structured interviews began by discussing memories of and involvement within the TVRS program. Given the time gap between students' participation and the research interview itself, the interview asked specific questions about program involvement to help students orient their memory to the project timeframe and aid with information recall. First, participants were asked to discuss the frequency of their involvement with TVRS. Next, they reviewed and discussed a list of program activities in which they participated (e.g., administering interviews, participating in program call-ins, implementing life skills classes). Interviews then continued with discussions regarding student participant outcomes of interest: Community Service Self-Efficacy (CSSE), Community Service Group-Efficacy (CSGE), attitudes towards incarceration and incarcerated individuals, conceptualizations of power, oppression and privilege (POP), and citizenship outcomes. In contrast to a grounded theory inductive approach – where the researcher allows for the emergence of conceptual categories – we asked participants to reflect upon and discuss our specific outcomes of interest. We chose this strategy to ensure that we explored participants' perspectives about significant outcomes already identified in research on service-learning. Table 2 summarizes the global interview questions and probe questions.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, reviewed, and prepared for analysis. All data analyses were conducted with MAXQDA (version 12), a software package commonly used to conduct qualitative data analysis. Three researchers (faculty member and two research assistants who conducted the interviews) used a line-by-line microanalysis to identify thematic codes based on the outcomes of interest. All three researchers reviewed the coded texts and generated consensus concerning emergent themes.

RESULTS

Emergent themes identified from the collected data are presented according to student outcome variables of interest.

Community Service Self-Efficacy (CSSE)

Students who perceived their service work as a means for TVRS to achieve its program goals felt that they can make meaningful changes within the community they served. Students also noted connection building between themselves and TVRS participants as important in establishing their self-confidence in making meaningful communal changes. Specifically, the nature of face-to-face interactions with TVRS participants allowed some students to easily perceive the impact of instilling positivity within members of the community. Students commonly referred to physical signals (e.g., smiling, laughing, and or "openness" of participants) and social signals (e.g., verbal demonstrations of gratitude, having participants start "closed off" then "open up" and become more honest as their relationship developed) as critical in validating their feelings of CSSE. One student attributed her increased sense of CSSE to:

Table 2. *Examples of Qualitative Interview Questions*

Sample Global Interview Questions	Sample Probe Interview Questions
Now, I want you to think about creating positive changes in our community through the kind of community-engaged work you did with the TVRS Project.	*Can you walk me through the example?*
	When was it?
● Did the project influence your belief **that you (personally)** can create positive change through community-engaged work?	*Where did it take place?*
● Did the project influence your belief **that other people** can create positive change through community-engaged work?	*Who was involved?*
After being involved with the TVRS project, have your views about incarcerated individuals changed? If yes, how have your views changed?	
● If your views changed, what about the TVRS program contributed to these changes?	
In society, we sometimes use words like "power" and "privilege" when discussing community-engaged learning projects.	
● What do these words mean to you?	
● Has your involvement in TVRS affected your understanding of power and privilege? If yes, what about the TVRS program contributed to these changes?	

"*...seeing the guy that I interviewed. Seeing him smile, and laughing, and joking with me. When we first started the interview, he was pretty quiet and a little mellow. It seemed like he really opened up to me. I don't know if it was me or was his mood but it made me feel good that ... It made me feel like me being nice to him and asking him questions, just being personable with him made him feel a little bit better and feel more comfortable.*"

In addition, students reported that having feelings of positive emotion – as a result of witnessing positivity in the TVRS participants – reinforced their sense of CSSE. Bonner students, in particular, noted the perceived sustainability of the connections made with TVRS participants (e.g., building long-lasting relationships, being recognized in the Trenton community for their work) as especially validating of their sense of CSSE. One Bonner student reported:

"*That's the education and the change that I want to create within the [two years involved with] project. I don't want it just to be, "Here's math, okay get in, get out," like GED. I want to develop special relationships with these people, so they can really get a sense of what it is to really be a part of society, be a part of life, and have someone there who has their support. And through that, I think, along with education, I think we can create a positive change. Not only in the Trenton community, but I think if we use this in other locations, we can create a big impact.*"

Community Service Group Efficacy (CSGE)

In regard to students' beliefs that other individuals can make meaningful changes within communities, students reported that having the support of their team assisted in overcoming previous anxiety felt towards working with individuals from marginalized populations. This reduction in service-related anxiety was connected to students' reported elevated levels of comfort serving within an at-risk environment, reinforcing their CSGE. In addition, working with an effective group gave students a sense of competence towards service work. One student reported:

"*We all kind of lined up to get going. The person next to me was halfway to having a panic attack. She was very, very nervous. She was someone who I knew very well so I was comfortable grabbing her, so I grabbed her hand, I said, "You're going to be my partner. Let's go, let's do this." ... I think people's fears exacerbated other people's fears, but once we really got going, we all helped each other to feel more comfortable and know what we were doing.*"

Students also noted that seeing collective efforts between the stakeholders involved in the program reinforced their sense of CSGE. Another student reported:

"*Yeah, going to the call and I realized that people in the community themselves are invested and trying to help the people that come in. I know the grad students that I was there with as well, they were very impacted by what they do there. I think it's a very good program.... Then combined with the community and business staff who were there who were talking about the job readiness program with the individuals. Just seeing the organization between all three of those groups along with the Trenton Police were there, too.*"

Conceptualizations of Power, Oppression, and Privilege (POP)

Students reported applying the framework of POP in US society to understand: their daily life interactions (e.g., with police), their own social position (by using TVRS participants as a reference point to gauge their own privilege), and contradictions in societal narratives (by using TVRS-related experiences to challenge progressive narratives that claim a just society for all). Among Counseling and Criminology students who learned about POP concepts in the academic portion of their SL experience, students reported that participating in TVRS exposed them to the oppressive forces illustrated in academic material *via* interactions with people directly affected by these forces. Commenting on racial profiling, one student reported:

"*I don't know how to explain it. You realize and you look around. You can get such different ideas about what's really going on but at the end of the day it's like, white people commit crimes and they do bad things but do they get caught as often? Are they profiled as often? Are they treated as harshly?*"

As such, most students noted an emotional transformation towards the injustice observed within the population they served. This transformation was described by Bonner students as a transformation from feeling pity and anger towards TVRS participants' life circumstances to impassioned motivation to make a communal change, which stemmed from understanding that situations of injustice regarding the criminal justice system are connected to societal and systemic factors – and not always individual failings. One Bonner commented:

"*That's when I broke down, I was like ... I cannot believe that this [overt racism] is still going on, in our present-day society. You don't know what's he's [our President is] going to do next. And looking at that, it just changed me to feel even worse. It actually changed my tragedy to commitment. It committed me. It forced myself, inside my head, to go and attempt to at least personally change these [systems].*"

Attitudes about Incarceration and Towards Incarcerated Individuals

Moreover, students noted that being exposed to this population, as well as hearing participants' testimonies of the adversity they face, resulted in an attitude change towards these individuals (e.g., original feelings of apprehensiveness to sympathetic understanding). Most students felt a deeper connection towards the population, using phrases such as "they are human too" to reduce the emotional gap between themselves and participants. One student reported:

"*It's like a stigma against them, I guess. A lot of people think they're not human you know, they're not treated like humans. They're locked up in a cage all day. That's not how you treat humans, that's how you treat animals… I guess working with TVRS reinforced that view because these people are neglected basically, by every institution out there.*"

This humanizing change in attitude was connected to students' seeing these individuals as more than just their criminal identity.

Students described being able to conceptualize these individuals as multifaceted people with different, relatable societal roles (e.g., student, father, son). Another student reported:

"*...the man I was speaking... we were talking. He was talking about his kids. He had a couple children. He had been incarcerated for a while and he had just gotten out of the system. He had children and he was talking about Halloween, it must have been right after Halloween then. He wanted to take his kids out trick-or-treating and how it was hard because of the area that they lived in. Because he was a known drug dealer he didn't want his kids anywhere near that. So he was desperately trying to move out. He's trying to find a new place to live so that he can move his kids away from all this bad stuff going on. He talked about how selling drugs was his source of income. He started talking about trying to find a job. Wanting to turn it around and how that opportunity isn't really available anywhere else.*"

Citizenship Outcomes

Overall, students reported that serving this population better prepared them to address societal issues regarding systematic oppression (e.g., racism, classism, and other "isms"). Students reported feeling an increased level of comfort addressing these issues because of their increased knowledge of institutional systems gained through their work with TVRS. Interestingly, students felt responsible for the outcomes of individuals like those they served in the TVRS program due to this increase in knowledge, which influenced their heightened desire to increase their participatory citizenship (e.g., voting for policy changes, electing representatives, pro prison-reform). To illustrate, one student reported:

"*As far as participatory citizenship, I kind of fell off voting, but when I realized I'm in a program that is funded through the AG's office, and we could end up having an administration that does not value helping marginalized individuals and people who have committed crimes become citizens, like productive citizens back into society, it kind of scared me, so I did vote this year and really took an active role in trying to promote everyone else to vote.*"

On an informal level, students also noted the need to share their experiences and knowledge with their peers, family members and others.

"*And I think that through just mentioning it ... even if you just mention it to one person, one of these people are going to go out and go to their friends and just be like, "You, my friend had to go do this today, he solved this today... Maybe we should look more into it." Maybe just create that one spark of change.*"

DISCUSSION

Short-term service-learning (SL), in which students learn by engaging in organized service activities, is an important pedagogical technique increasing in implementation within higher education curricula.[1,2] The findings of this qualitative study suggest that these experiences have the potential to shape: students' beliefs about the ability to create positive social change in communities; how students perceive and interact with individuals from marginalized groups; and the likelihood that students will get involved in social

change efforts in the future. Specifically, undergraduate and graduate students in this study noted how their participation in the TVRS project has strengthened the belief that they themselves, as well as the collective efforts of others, can create positive changes in the community. The TVRS project exposed students to life experiences different than their own, which seemed to help students better understand how societal structures and forces, such as power and oppression, can impact an individual's life outcomes for the better and worse. In addition, spending time with and directly hearing the perspective of individuals who have been marginalized in society seemed to reduce intergroup anxiety experienced – ambiguous feelings of discomfort or anxiety when interacting with members of other groups – and motivate students to be involved formally and informally in civic activities that can help to improve community-level outcomes.[38]

Despite the benefits reported by students, it is critical to consider whether an SL experience is a good fit for all stakeholders involved, including students, community partners, and community residents. Previous research indicates that it is difficult to complete a meaningful project in one semester or shorter period.[8,39] Based on interviews conducted with 67 community organizations, Stoecker and Tryon found that a common concern among agency staff is that students are unable to prepare, carry out, and meaningfully reflect on a project all within a one-semester time frame.[8] In addition, the community agencies noted that the quality of student performance varies from individual to individual, and without careful monitoring and oversight, community partners may receive substandard performance or products, the amount of service provided by students may not produce enough benefits for either the community partner or the student to justify the effort, especially because short-term projects tend to generate less commitment on the part of the student.[8] Also, short-term commitments may not be a good fit for organizations that provide direct services where developing trust with clients is an important component of the work (e.g., group counseling with homeless youth); one of the main challenges is that college/university students likely leave the organization before (or just as) they establish important bonds with clients.[8] Finally, the mismatch between campus and community calendars is a general problem, even for projects that continue beyond a semester. Breaks in the academic calendar (e.g., winter break, summer break) can place burdens on organizations, and agencies have to find additional resources when students are not obligated to work during these "break" periods. The mismatch between the campus and community calendars is especially problematic when projects are not completed or input from the community organization cannot be integrated before a break occurs. Given these concerns, it is critical that SL projects evaluate the fit for all stakeholders involved before, as well as during, the experience.[8,40]

Previous researchers have argued that SL experiences are likely to have a significant impact on student development to the extent that they involve the following key processes: construction of knowledge *via* student reflection on their experiences, the development of new conceptualizations, and experimenting with these new conceptualizations.[13,14] A critical aspect of this study's short-term SL experience seemed to be students' exposure to significant social problems in the local community, in conjunction with

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a promising intervention program that involved community stakeholders. Providing exposure to both components allowed students opportunities to reflect on the depth and complexity of social problems, as well as learn about positive solutions generated and implemented by community members. In this way, the TVRS project could demonstrate to students the interplay between societal structures, individual outcomes, and the role that citizens can play in promoting positive outcomes at the individual- and community-levels. As noted by one student, being involved in the TVRS project allowed him to change "tragedy to commitment" and motivated him to contribute on a deeper, personal level. This type of change is the critical shift that Stoecker has described as important for moving students from an orientation of anger (about social injustices) to action (to create social change).[39]

Another key process that likely contributed to changes in student outcomes involved participants' experience of intergroup anxiety. Collected interviews revealed that students serving the TVRS population commonly experienced intergroup anxiety during the start of their service; however, students also reported developing an increased sense of comfort interacting with participants and, in turn, attributed a strengthened sense of CSSE and CSGE to these enhanced interpersonal skills. Intergroup contact theory suggests feelings of prejudice and intergroup anxiety felt towards marginalized populations can be reduced *via* TVRS and other short-term SL experiences because students and program participants collaborate to achieve the common goal of the program and are further supported by stakeholders within the campus and outside community.[41,42] Consistent with recent research, these findings suggest that SL experiences that align with tenets of intergroup contact theory – specifically promoting cooperation between students and the people they serve and providing institutional support for their service – facilitate the greatest attitude changes towards marginalized populations.[43]

The primary strength of this study was the use of a qualitative approach to examine under-examined research constructs in short-term SL. Qualitative data collection and analysis strategies allowed us to discover nuances not identified in previous reports. The primary limitation of this study was the small sample size. McCracken suggests that at least six cases are needed to accurately examine specific topics in qualitative data analysis.[37] Thus, a larger sample size (as was originally targeted) would have increased our confidence that we reached saturation of themes across interviews; in addition, a larger sample would have allowed for the study of potential moderators of findings, such as gender, ethnicity, type of service conducted. Despite this limitation, these students' perspectives lay important groundwork for future studies, as the constructs under investigation in the current study have received limited empirical attention in short-term service-learning research.[37] Another limitation of this study is that participants reported about program activities that took place in the past (i.e., recall gap). The interviewers asked specific questions to orient participants' memory to the timeframe of program activities, but a more effective technique, but future research might consider using a life calendar approach. Life calendars are used to collect data about different domains of an individual's life and helps to increase data quality by improving people's memory of retrospective events.[44]

CONCLUSION

The study limitations notwithstanding, the findings suggest that short-term SL has the potential to be a high-impact experience that helps students construct knowledge, develop new conceptualizations, and experiment with these new conceptualizations.[13,14] Consistent with previous findings about service-learning, in general, student reflection appears to represent a key process. Indeed, Bowman et al argue that SL reflection opportunities and academic integration play a larger role in determining student gains than the duration of SL experiences.[16] Thus, when designing short-term SL experiences, it is critical to consider the desired learning outcomes, as well as the specific reflection activities.[7,18] Previous research offers valuable guidance in this area, particularly regarding the conceptualization of reflection and critical learning, as well as critical time points to engage in reflection during service-learning.[45,46]

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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