This qualitative study explored the intersection between social class and college outreach. The service-learning experience was perceived differently by students of different social classes. The benefit was that the interactive classroom forum allowed diverse students to exchange views. Regardless of their personal backgrounds, students shared a heightened sense of civic responsibility. These findings have implications in designing service-learning courses that value multiple perspectives and aim to facilitate social change.

For the past decade, service-learning has been increasingly recognized as an important aspect of the undergraduate experience and has been shown to facilitate students’ personal development as active learners and citizens. National research has demonstrated the positive effects that service-learning and participation can provide for students (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Moreover, the benefits have been shown to extend even beyond the college years (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999).

Jenny J. Lee is an assistant professor in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona.

1Service-learning is distinguished from volunteer work in that service-learning incorporates educational objectives and personal reflections (Schwartzman, 2001).
Although positive outcomes of service-learning participation have been demonstrated in many other studies (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Melchior, 1997), it may be relevant to evaluate the service-learning experiences for students of diverse backgrounds (Chesler & Scalera, 2000) and in this case particularly the experiences of students of low socioeconomic status to determine if those experiences differ from those of students of middle or upper socioeconomic status. While students’ race and gender often shape student interactions and experiences, students’ social class become especially salient when entering need-based communities (Rhoads, 1997). With the preceding in mind, the author sought to explore how students’ personal backgrounds intersect with their service-learning experience and, in particular, service related to college outreach. College outreach is just one of the many forms of service-learning, but it is perhaps the most important in making a direct impact on the composition of the applicant pool and incoming student body in higher education institutions.

**Literature Review**

The following sections explore the benefits of service-learning, the varied experiences that service-learning provides for students, and the theoretical framework that guides the research design for this study. While the benefits of service-learning have been well established, less is known about the nature of the experiences by diverse groups.

**Benefits of Service-Learning**

The national studies presented describe some of the most convincing support for service-learning in colleges and universities. In surveying 1,500 students in over 20 institutions and interviewing 66 students from seven institutions, Eyler and Giles (1999) found that service-learning has the greatest effect on students’ personal development and interpersonal skills. They found that students who performed service had reduced negative stereotypes of groups different from themselves, and increased tolerance for diversity, greater self-knowledge, increased personal efficacy, increased desire to include service in their career plans, increased leadership skills, and increased feelings of being connected to their communities. In terms of learning, the researchers
found increased motivation to learn, deeper understanding of the subject matter and the complexity of social issues, and increased ability to apply course content to real life problems.

In a longitudinal study of 22,236 undergraduates in a national sample of baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities, and a subset for qualitative interviews, Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) found similar outcomes. Service-learning positively affected students' academic outcomes (grade point average, writing skills, critical thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, and interpersonal skills), career plans towards a service career, and plans to participate in future service.

In another national sample, Astin and Sax (1998) reported that students who participate in service achieve better grades, obtain higher life skill development, and a stronger sense of civic responsibility. Their research examined a broad range of service involvement, leading to their recommendation that the benefits of service-learning may be experienced in other forms of service, such as human needs service, public safety, and environment-related service. They recommended service-learning as a powerful vehicle for enhancing student development and for fulfilling the institutional mission of service.

While studies that demonstrate the benefits of service-learning continue to emerge, questions about the reliability of these results remain. Schwartzman (2001) cautioned researchers from generalizing the success of service-learning programs as educational environments are unique. He further noted that the array of activities that constitute service are wide and varied, which makes it especially challenging to produce consistent effects. A similar case can be made about almost any educational outcome study given that no educational environment is strictly controlled. Nonetheless, previous research demonstrated that service-learning can produce many positive effects and that additional research is needed to investigate the dynamics between the program and participant outcomes.

Diverse Experiences
Previous research has documented some differentiated service-learn-
ing experiences based on the backgrounds of the students who participate. Enos (1999) observed that service-learning provides opportunities for university students, who have typically felt marginalized, to attain a sense of validation. Cohen (1995) found that students of color especially benefit from a stronger connection and commitment to their serviced communities because of service-learning. Dunlap (1998), however, warned of particular challenges students face depending on their personal background, including access to particular sites, acceptance by the local community, and negative stereotypes. Rhoads (1997) observed particular issues among White and upper-middle-class students related to positionality and confronting generalizations they had of the other.

Novek (2000) found that students from privileged backgrounds may not interact respectably or comfortably with students of dissimilar racial and class backgrounds. Reflections of 37 middle- or upper-class students in a civic journalism class showed these students realizing “the extent of their own privilege as well as the sheltered nature of their own lives” (p. 8). The study also uncovered mixed feelings of fear, suspicion, guilty, superiority, and condescension. While the study did not compare these findings by social class, the author did call for improved student appreciation for community service and service-learning courses that support social justice issues based on the interpretations of middle- and upper-class students.

Background of the Study

Although the central aim of outreach was to increase access for disadvantaged students, an additional component was training and utilizing college students as advisors, mentors, and extensions of outreach staff. Two Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) courses (with six class sections in total) utilized college students as advisors and mentors to students at under-resourced high schools in Los Angeles. These outreach programs constituted service-learning because an academic course was a required part of the outreach responsibility and because the course dealt directly with the service participation. The course included readings about the population the programs served and weekly reflections based on the readings and on-site experience, as scholars have indicated that service-learning should require some
form of reflection with the connected service (Schwartzman, 2001).

Objectives
This study examined the important role of an outreach program as a vital channel of service-learning for college students by way of investigating and interpreting college student participants’ perceptions of their service-learning experience. The primary research question was: What are the different ways that students describe their service-learning motivations and experience? Other questions included: How does their service-learning experience influence their sense of civic responsibility? What are the differences by social class?

Methodological Approach
This study focused on college students that participated in at least six consecutive months of service-learning. By way of using various data collection methods, the students’ backgrounds, perceived experiences, and interpretations were examined. More specifically, ways their narrations demonstrated the linkages between perceptions of themselves, their service-learning experience, and their sense of civic responsibility were observed. The following describes the research design, data sources, and research procedure to explore these goals.

Research Design and Data Source
This study was conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). This particular institutional setting and its student population are ideal because of its demographic diversity. The campus demographics are approximately as follows: 38% Caucasian, 33% Asian American, 12% Latino, 4% African American, and 13% Other/Unknown. Seven percent include international students and 54% female. The university is known for its ethnically and culturally diverse student population from a wide range of class backgrounds. The service-learning courses being studied were part of the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) at UCLA, which serve some of the poorest and most disadvantaged schools in the nation.

The data collection included (a) open-ended pre-and post-surveys
that were distributed to each of the six EAOP classes during the begin-
ning of fall 2002 and again during the end of winter 2003 (N = 94, 75% response rate) and (b) in-depth interviews (N = 14) during spring 2003. The study questions centered on their service-learning experi-
ences, including their reasons for participating, educational outcomes, and long-term goals. The anonymous surveys allowed for greater security and opportunity to report less desirable traits than face-to-
face interviews (Bernard, 2000), while the interviews permitted for greater flexibility in the sequence of topics and opportunities for unex-
pected topics to arise (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Minimal structure was employed in order to allow the respondents to have as much control during the interview process (Riessman, 1993). There were no incen-
tives offered to participate in the surveys or interviews.

The sample for this study was diverse and reflected a range of racial and class backgrounds. Seventy-five percent were female. This sample reflects national studies that show that women are more likely to par-
ticipate in service-learning programs than men (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Fifty-seven percent of the students were first-
generation college students based upon their parental education lev-
els; and within this group, 30% of the students had parents who did not complete high school. Thirty-eight percent were Latino/a, 35% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 12% were White, 10% were African American, and 5% were Middle Eastern. The diversity of this sample is unique and is an added strength of this study, as Coles (1999) noted that White and middle-class students tend to participate in service-
learning programs. The students were mostly seniors (fourth- and fifth-year students), comprising 55% of the sample. The remaining 22% were juniors, 18% were sophomores, and 5% were freshmen.

The end of the survey included an invitation to participate in inter-
views. The interview sample reflected the survey sample in many ways. Among the 14 students who agreed to participate, 79% were female and 21% male. They also reflected a range of racial and class backgrounds. Fifty-seven percent were first-generation students, and their ethnic backgrounds were as follows: 43% were Latino, 29% were Asian, 21% were African American, and 7% were White. Fifty-seven percent of the interview sample were fourth- and fifth-year students, 22% were juniors, and 22% were sophomores.
Data Management and Analysis

Once the data were transcribed, the open-ended surveys and interview transcripts were coded for emerging themes. The first set of codes was based on themes that emerged from the literature review and questions in the survey and interview protocol. These themes were classified into broad descriptive categories. Additional processes involved modifying the codes and categories. Data analysis involved creating an informal list of codes based on an initial read of the transcripts and survey results and then shifting and modifying the codes through rereading and rethinking the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The data were interpreted by summarizing the themes that emerged from the data.

Themes were interpreted across students’ class backgrounds (i.e., middle/upper class and lower class), which were categorized into two groups based on students’ parental education and occupations (McDonough, 1997). Class is more commonly operationalized to include parental education, parental occupation, and income; but income information was not made available and thus may be a limitation of this study. However, income may be the least important among the three qualities as McDonough (1997) relied exclusively on parental education and occupation to determine class.

Using parental education and occupation for this study, class backgrounds were separated into two groups. Students were categorized as “middle/upper class” if either parent attended college or either parent occupied a job that typically requires a college degree. Students whose parents did not attend college nor occupied a job that requires a college degree were categorized as “lower class.” Responses were compared between middle/upper-class and lower-class students to generate the findings for this study. Exemplar quotes were selected and utilized in the writing up of the findings (Bernard, 2000).

Students’ Perceptions of Service-Learning

The theoretical propositions that guided this study were based on the notion that students’ beliefs are largely accounted for by students’ perceptions of the environment and of themselves. Social psychologists and sociologists, such as Mead’s (1934) pioneering work and later Denzin’s (1989) more recent approaches, theorized that individuals
make sense of their lives in the context of interactions within their particular situations. Mead (1962) described the self as social process being in continuous interchange between “I” and “me.” He also explains that the self can only exist in relation to the selves of others. In sum, identities are understood within memberships of a given community. As the environment changes, so might one’s view and explanation of self.

As related to studying college students, person-environment theories presume that individuals can conceive of the same experience and environment differently (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Lee, 2002). As such, students from diverse backgrounds would view and interpret a shared service-learning experience in diverse ways. Person-environment theories and social psychology theories provided credibility and validity to recognizing diverse perceptions of the college experience. Student development theories have long recognized the complexities of student experiences, yet limited research has addressed the diverse interpretations of service-learning experiences.

Findings
The findings of this case study showed that social class is an important classification in comparing students’ service-learning motivations and experiences. The study also revealed that the commitment to service-learning is not entirely dissimilar by students’ backgrounds but rather that such dissimilarities (i.e., by race and class) provided a powerful vehicle towards increasing students’ activism and commitment to social change.

Diverse Motivations
As anticipated, clear patterns arose based upon students’ personal backgrounds, particularly based on their social class (i.e., parental education and occupation). The desires of lower-class students were two-fold, including to benefit an individual as they had benefited and to “give back to my community.” These reasons served as primary motives and intrinsic rewards for their efforts. Some motivations were personalized to their own communities or direct past experience: “To help my peers and to be able to go back to my high school” and “To give back to the community and help students . . . I was an EAOP stu-
dent.” Others made less reference to themselves but still indicated a general desire to improve the conditions for “minority” students: “I want to learn about the strategies needed to be an effective educator in minority communities. Learn more about the issues and get experience on the field.” In contrast, middle/upper-class students referred less to returning to their own community and more to the larger social good. Some comments included, “I have always wanted to do something like this. I feel as though this would be a good experience. I really wanted to make a change in at least one person’s life.” and “I mainly want to gain experience in the high school environment because I may want to be a teacher.” While most students desired the general experience of working in an educational site, the students who were most familiar with under-resourced school settings specifically reference the value of working in such schools.

Several across socioeconomic backgrounds also noted the inequities of education as a reason to take the class:

The class came highly recommended as a way to get credit for the minor. I want to go into educational reform when I graduate, and I figured this was a good way to become familiar with the schools that need it the most. I like the idea of helping kids who might not otherwise go/get into college.

As demonstrated by the latter comment, not all middle/upper-class students were completely unaware of the inequities of college access; most desired to assist disadvantaged students but were less prepared and understood the particular environments where they would serve compared to the lower-class students. Thus, the middle/upper-class students appeared less fueled to reform these specific communities prior to entering their designated school sites.

Diverse Experiences

When asked about the most memorable aspects of their service-learning experience, students emphasized varying components, including the local high school community where they had served, the high school staff with whom they had worked, and especially the individual high school students they directly served. For lower-class students (and likely those who attended similar schools as the schools they out-
reached), numerous linkages were made to their own high school experiences and to how the students they worked with reminded them of their own situations. Additionally, many students tended to describe their service environments as “comfortable” and “home away from home,” which was likely related to the racial composition of the neighboring communities. One international student from Mexico expressed what bonded many lower-class students to the students they outreached:

Yes, I could relate well to the students because we are working with African American kids and Latino kids. And I have something in common, I have with them because [we’re] minorities, most of [us] are from low-income families, and most of them [would be] first-generation in college.

Many similar comments demonstrated that race and class were both salient commonalities for many lower-class students of color.

While the service-learning participants mentioned race and class similarities and differences in the students they served, having similar racial backgrounds alone did not necessarily strike a close connection with their students. A middle-class Latino shared his doubts about his relationship with his students, “I knew that they had deeper issues than what I’ve ever had. And so, I kind of try to help them out if they said anything. But I knew that my advice only ran so deep because of the difference between our lives.” In comparing the backgrounds of her teammates, one lower-class Latina student reflected on how some middle/upper-class teammates, including some students of color, initially responded to the students they outreached:

I think for people who did not come from the same background, I think at the beginning it might have been harder. Because I did notice . . . some of my other classmates would say, “Oh these kids are punks.” But after a while, the kids win you over and then once someone takes a class like this, they get to see a whole new world that haven’t been exposed to before. So it changes a lot of their mentality, the way they think about things.

Not all of the middle/upper-class students felt as disconnected to the high school students they outreached. One African American student commented:
I think I can just relate to them in terms of experience. Whether I came from a low-income school or not, I still went through the experiences of coming through high school and going to college, and now as I am preparing to go to graduate school I’m doing a lot of the same things they’re doing right now to get into college, besides applications, financial aid, and personal statements.

Although there were no lower-class White students in these programs, these findings suggest that having similar class backgrounds are important in serving need-based communities and that such similarities may be more salient than sharing similar race.

**Comparable Civic Responsibilities**

All of the students acknowledged that their sense of civic responsibility increased because of their service-learning experience. The majority of the students were already committed to social change, but every student indicated that their commitment increased or that they found a viable outlet for their ideological views and aspirations. All of the students also indicated that they plan to continue to be involved in similar efforts, whether directly as a future educator or policy maker or simply as a better informed and active citizen.

Although this sample is a self-selected group of students who are inclined towards service participation, the students felt they greatly benefited from the experience. One middle-class Asian male commented on how the service-learning was his preferred way of learning and more personal compared to traditional courses:

> Actually, this is one of the classes where I actually got to know my fellow classmates in class, and it’s really hands on. [In] most classes you usually just sit there and just take down notes, and to me that seems a waste of time, a waste of my education and what effort I’ve put into it. . . . For me the way I learn is though experience, through doing hands on things. . . . I’d like to have more of these [courses] in the future. The education courses relate back to you, [and then] you feel more personal about what you were doing.

Beyond the personal benefits, this lower-class Latina expressed how
she extended her learning by bridging the class material to her outreach activities:

The readings were a wake-up call. There's a great need for caring teachers. [We] are more aware of the different systems of education. Last week, I started asking [my students], “What happened [to] the higher education system?” I started asking them a lot of questions, this time the Latino kids were answering, because first we were preparing them and giving them this information. And so these are kids, normally they do not pay attention, but [this time] they do pay attention, they really do.

The differences by social class were less apparent when examining students’ sense of civic responsibility. While the upper-middle- and upper-class students had perceived and interpreted their service-learning quite differently from the lower-class students, the middle- and upper-class students indicated no less commitment to future civic participation or social change. Both groups of students, in fact, expressed an interest in returning to these serviced environments in the future. A lack of clear difference between lower-class and middle/upper-class groups might be explained by the ongoing interaction among the service-learning participants. The classroom interaction, in particular, served as a vital forum for students to process their ideas about the challenges in such under-resourced high schools.

One middle-class Asian American student’s comments reflected similar comments from middle/upper-class students by describing how she was affected by the diverse classroom interactions and how this benefited her experience:

[I was affected by] the people that I was in the class with. I didn’t used to really care so much about particular issues, but seeing how passionately people talk about [these issues] or how strongly they feel about discrimination and higher education. That rubbed off on me. . . . There’s certain topics that we talked about, I remember the stereotypes we talked about in class and cultural capital. It just helped me see the students that we were working with in a different light.

A middle-class Caucasian student iterated similar thoughts on the value of diverse class discussions by saying, “[this class] just makes me
want to continue [this service], because it helped me see further that [this service] is meaningful." She then added, “I enjoyed working with my fellow peer advisors. They taught me a lot. They really cared about what they were doing.” This student, who was not as committed to outreach in the past, went on to discuss how she had benefited from the energy and dedication of her class peers.

Lower-class students also enjoyed the group dynamics and maintained their commitment to college access. When asked about what was the most valuable aspect of the class, one lower-class Latino replied:

The people on my team. Yeah, I don’t have very good organizing skills, and one of my group members is excellent at organizing and keeping the group on track, so that was good. And I kind of learned from him too, because I have to be able to organize if I’m going to teach.

In describing the diversity of the class, the same student remarked, “That you know, there are people in there that came from really good schools, and there are people that came from schools like mine.” When asked what he thought about that, he commented, “Actually, that was kind of cool that it was integrated that way.” This student, like the other students in the class, perceived the diverse backgrounds of the class as a positive aspect of his experience.

Such findings can be explained by the work of Eyler and Giles (1999) and Levine and Cureton (1998), who expressed the value of diverse working groups, which can break down negative stereotypes and ethnic segregation on college campuses. As in this study, students utilized their in-class diversity exchanges and experiences as a motivating factor for future service. This finding extends beyond previous research by suggesting that diverse classroom interactions have prolonged effects on the realm of service.

Conclusion

While previous research has already detailed the benefits of service-learning, this study elaborates on the varied experiences based on social class. The motivations and interpretations of their outreach activities differed across social classes, but the extent of learning and
commitment to educational reform were comparably similar. The findings appeared to differ less based on race, although race and social class were closely linked. This study demonstrates that when studying service-learning in need-based communities, it is critical to examine the social classes of the students involved, in addition to their race. This understanding would shed further light on the varying benefits of service-learning beyond the general outcomes already established in large quantitative studies.

The findings of this study have implications for student affairs professionals. The study notes the importance of a diverse service-learning class, particularly diversity by social class, when dealing with socioeconomic inequities. Although the service-learning experience was perceived and interpreted differently across class groupings, the interactive classroom forum allowed diverse students to exchange their views. In the end, students shared a heightened sense of civic responsibility, regardless of their personal backgrounds. This finding has implications in designing service-learning courses that value multiple perspectives and aim to facilitate social change. Most importantly, this study addresses how service-learning benefits students by confronting issues of inequity based on class differences. Thus, administrators should seek to bring in students from a range of backgrounds (e.g., gender, race, social class) in all service-learning activities and especially recognize the role of class in performing outreach activities. As this study has demonstrated, the diversity of students who participate in service-learning yields benefits for not only the recipients of the service, but also for the fellow students who participate.

This study also has a critical policy dimension. Given the continuing financial cuts to outreach programs (Arnone, Hebel, & Schmidt, 2003), so will the population of students who are drawn to this particular form of service. Most of the lower-class students enrolled in the course because they were interested in returning to need-based communities, and some of those who elected to participate in the EAOP courses were recipients of these or similar programs as high school students; these students probably would not have had any service-learning experience otherwise. The desire to “give back to my community” fueled their passion and commitment to this particular form of service and, as shown by this study, benefited peers who were not direct recipients of outreach programs. While other service-learning
programs will likely remain intact, colleges and universities should consider the forms of service-learning they offer and the type of students such programs attract. Given that most service-learning courses draw White, middle-class students, outreach courses, in particular, can bring in considerable participation and contribution from diverse students. More efforts, such as raising these issues to local, state, and federal governments; fundraising; and increasing the awareness of the value of such programs are needed for outreach programs to survive and hopefully flourish. Outreach programs are a vital resource to disadvantaged high schools, and they serve as important vehicles for greater understanding and commitment to addressing inequities and issues of diversity in today's college campuses.

References


Dunlap, M. (1998). Voices of students in multicultural service-


