



**Illuminare:**  
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on Undergraduate Teaching  
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Approach to Discovery**

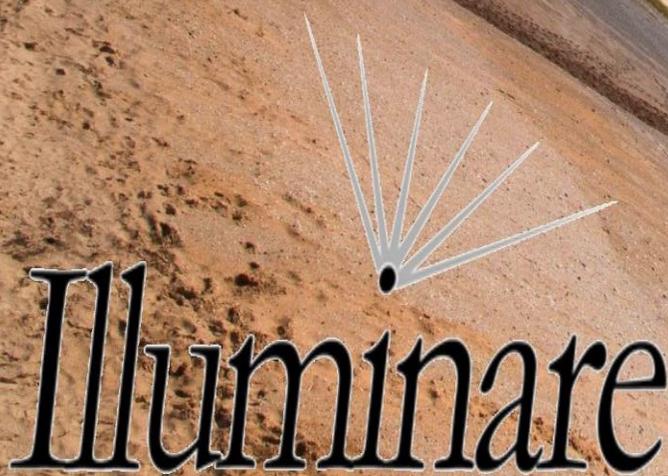
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# **Impacts of Service Learning on Undergraduate Teaching Assistants in an After-School Program: A Qualitative Approach to Discovery**

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study took a phenomenological approach to examine undergraduate teaching assistants' experiences with CARE Now, a service learning after-school program. The purpose of this study was to identify impacts of the service learning program on the teaching assistants through semi-structured interviews. This study expands on prevalent service learning research by exploring the experiences of students' leading their peers in a service learning project. Findings suggest that internal motivations, personal challenges and support, resiliency, contextual challenges, transformational experience, growth, and advocacy are all perceived impacts teaching assistants encounter. Suggestions for future research are provided.

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**Keywords:** service learning, teaching assistant, qualitative approach

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## Introduction

Across the country, universities are incorporating service learning courses into their curriculum (Desmond, Stahl & Graham, 2011). From 2002 to 2005, among the 18 million college students in the United States, participation in community service and community service learning jumped from 2.7 million to 3.3 million, according to the Cooperation for National and Community Service (Dolte, Cramer, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006). Service learning in higher education has expanded rapidly. Campus Compact is a national coalition of more than 1,100 colleges and universities enrolling almost 6 million students; it is the only national higher education association that is dedicated exclusively to campus-based civic engagement (Campus Compact: Who We Are, 2013). Out of 557 member campuses across the United States that responded to the Campus Compact survey, an average of 66 service learning courses were offered per campus and 68% of these campuses rewarded their faculty for service learning and community based research (Campus Compact, 2013).

Most colleges and universities reference the civic preparation of younger generations in their mission statements (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). According to Meacham (2008) the two most common goals named in university mission statements are as follows: For students to experience and acquire a liberal education; and for graduates to contribute to their communities. It is important for institutions of higher education to assess the impacts of their institutionalized engagement efforts. This allows the institutions to demonstrate their role in fulfilling institutional missions and strategic plans with regard to student learning and community outcomes (Campus Compact, 2013).

The purpose of this research is to explore the actual and perceived impacts of service learning on undergraduate teaching assistants participating in a resiliency and character based service learning program. Little evidence suggests that students who

engage in service learning as a teaching assistant will be more resilient than their peers. The current study seeks to understand this phenomenon. The following research questions were addressed: “How is resiliency manifested in Teaching Assistants working within a resiliency based program?” And “How are undergraduate teaching assistants impacted through service learning in the CARE Now program?”

## Literature Review

### Service Learning

There are varying definitions of service learning. Bringle and Hatcher (1995) defined service learning as: A course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students: (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs; and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (p.112).

Service learning can also be defined as “a structured learning experience that facilitates the acquisition of awareness, knowledge, and skills while promoting a commitment to personal, social, civic, and professional responsibility” (Burnett, Long, & Horn, 2005, p. 158). Through community service and service learning, students interact with other cultures and engage in active citizenship in their surrounding community. Engaging students in service learning programs increases awareness of diversity, ultimately leading students to become better and more effective citizens in a democratic society (Colby, Bercau, Clark, & Galiadi, 2009).

Service learning can be categorized as a high impact program. Students have the ability to apply concepts learned in class, have the community be their textbook, and reflect on their experience in a classroom setting (Finely & McNair, 2013). “Service learning instruction is aimed to increase the understanding of concepts studied in a classroom envi-

ronment by providing students with opportunities for direct exposure to problems, issues, and strengths of communities” (Burnett, Long, & Horn, 2005, p.158). Service learning pedagogy aids students in transforming community service experiences into intercultural and global understandings with the ultimate goal of building on these understandings in ways that promote active citizenship and leadership (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Stephens, 2003; Eyler & Giles, 1999). These service projects are often challenging.

A consequence of service participation according to Astin and Sax (1998) is that “students become more strongly committed to helping others, serving their communities, promoting racial understanding, doing volunteer work and working for nonprofit organizations. They also became less inclined to feel that individuals have little power to change society” (p. 256). Service learning emphasizes working with the community rather than for the community (Burnett, Long, & Horn, 2005, p.158). Lastly, service learning can be categorized as a high impact program. Students have the ability to apply concepts learned in class, have the community be their textbook, and then reflect on their experience in a classroom setting (Finely & McNair, 2013).

### Resiliency

Definitions of resiliency have varied over the years. According to Hurtes and Allen (2001) the study of resiliency emerged from the field of developmental psychopathology. Basic research in this area sought to answer the question of why some individuals from high-risk or adverse backgrounds seemed to thrive while others failed (Anthony & Cohler, 1987; Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Garmezy, 1990; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982). It was found that those individuals who had protective factors and support systems, and were able to thrive were considered “resilient” (Hurtes & Allen, 2001, p. 334). Wolin and Wolin (1993), as a result of qualitative analysis,

identified several characteristics of resilient individuals including insight, independence, creativity, humor, initiative, relationships, and values orientation (morality).

Relationships, for these purposes, can be defined as having the ability to form and maintain healthy relationships and being able to understand how to interact appropriately with different individuals and groups. Insight is being able to understand another’s verbal expression, body language, and situational cues and to modify behavior accordingly. Independence occurs when one is able to separate one’s self from risk factors or negative consequences and to focus on reflection or avoid making peer pressured decisions. Initiative is the ability to lead, be self-determined, and overcome challenges by meeting obstacles head-on. Creativity is the ability to generate healthy options and/or alternatives, in order to cope with hardships. Humor is the ability to play and stay light-hearted, by focusing on and recognizing positives and ignoring harsh realities. Values orientation is recognizing one’s own values or outcomes and the ability to think long-term about the impacts of decisions to support a healthy lifestyle (Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

### Resiliency Based Programming: CARE Now

CARE Now (Character and Resilience Education: Now) is a comprehensive in- and after-school program designed to promote the resiliency and character of K-12 students, with the primary goal of enhancing academic achievement. CARE Now has been implemented in elementary, middle, and high school settings in southeastern Virginia. The CARE Now program focuses on the enhancement of resiliency and character due to of the established, inextricable link to academic achievement and positive youth development. CARE Now is a partnership among the city’s school division, university, and the city’s Bureau of Youth Development (Williams, Gomez, Hill, Milliken, Goff, & Gregory, 2013). League 56 Academy, a similar resiliency

based after-school program, found that just 17 days after the program ended, school referrals for aggressive behaviors increased by 112% (Brown, Hill, Shellman, & Gomez, 2012).

CARE Now and similar resiliency based programs emphasize character traits in relation to issues of honesty, trustworthiness, rule following, and conscientiousness. CARE Now would be part of Rest's (1986) third component of moral behavior: ethical focus or motivation. The other components are ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment and ethical action. CARE Now encourages the seven resiliency traits defined above

The CARE Now program is part of the researchers' university's Park, Recreation and Tourism Studies (PRTS) mission to achieve accreditation through The Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism and Related Professions (COAPRT). This accredited program aims to teach college students how to utilize theories related to recreation and youth development and apply them in a real-world setting; thereby meeting the goals of one's university by creating more experiential and service learning opportunities for students. Two classes in the core curriculum that have an identified service learning component, meeting COAPRT accreditation standards, lay the foundation for CARE Now. For example, one course syllabus states, "Students graduating from the program shall be able to demonstrate the ability to design, implement, and evaluate services that facilitate targeted human experiences that embrace personal and cultural dimensions of diversity" (COAPRT Standards, 2013). CARE Now is a school prevention program impacting both the university students and public school students in a campus model; by design, it relies heavily on undergraduate teaching assistants to facilitate the program. Public schools selected for the project are in very high need of this attention. The sites are typical of many urban schools with a high number of underrepresented students who lack the basic resources and skills essential to academic suc-

cess. The student population exhibits higher-than-average rates of failure, truancy, dropout, disciplinary infractions, and poor relationships with school personnel, family, and the community at large. Many of the students live in government-subsidized housing and receive free or reduced meals (Virginia Department of Education, 2012).

## Methods

### Research paradigm and tradition.

The researchers used the critical theory paradigm to guide their research practice. Critical theory allowed the researcher to ask reflective questions concerning the participants' current experiences. The theoretical approach used for the topic of impact of service learning would be phenomenology. The phenomenological research tradition allowed the research to "discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants' lived experiences and knowledge as it appears to consciousness" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p.50). The research is looking at the phenomenon of the experience that teaching assistants have through service learning in CARE Now.

### Sampling, participants, and setting

Ten participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on their role as a teaching assistant (TA) working with the CARE Now after-school program for the fall 2013 academic semester. To ensure confidentiality, participants have been given pseudonyms. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 22 years. Participants were all undergraduate students at an urban university in southeastern Virginia. Nine participants were park, recreation, and tourism studies majors, and one participant was a human service major.

In response to racial/ethnic identification, participants responded as follows: Five Caucasian; four African American/Black; and one Biracial. There were eight female and two male participants. Finally, prior to their role as a TA, all participants were Advocates with CARE Now. Advocates are

persons who represent and work with a group of people who may need support and encouragement. Participants reported that the average number of semesters they worked with the CARE Now program as an Advocate was three.

### **Data collection**

Participants were asked to participate in the study on a voluntary basis. It was made clear that participation in the interview would not impact them during or after their service experience. No remuneration or other incentives were given for participation.

Individual interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews were semi-structured and included several questions surrounding personal experiences and feelings relating to the research topic. Interviews were conducted following the review of the informed consent document and a brief researcher designed demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire assisted the researcher in gathering information such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, number of semesters with CARE Now, and declared major.

The use of individual interviews enhanced and supported the goal to explore and understand the lived experiences of participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). Individual interviews lasted approximately 15-25 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for the coding process. Interviews also included probing questions as necessary. Sample questions from the interview protocol included: "How have the character and resiliency traits been developed in your role through the program?" "Explain how you relate to the children you are serving"; and "How do you feel the community conditions, such as the environment and social conditions, have affected the college students at your site?"

### **Strategies for trustworthiness**

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of this research study, criteria considered were credibil-

ity, confirmability, ethical validation, substantive validation, and transferability (Hays & Singh, 2012). Several strategies were used to address these criteria in order to ensure trustworthiness. First, triangulation of data and triangulation of investigators was used to encourage credibility, confirmability, and transferability. Further, multiple researchers were involved in coding data, extracting key themes, and manuscript writing. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process. This provides evidence of the study's progression and ensures credibility and substantive validation.

Member checking was utilized as a strategy guaranteeing confirmability and substantive validation. Member checking was important to assure that the researchers were correctly representing each participant's voice. Member checking included having each participant review his/her transcribed interview for authenticity and reviewing drafts of the manuscript for true representation of his/her voice within the manuscript. Finally, thick description is a strategy that ensures a detailed account of the research process and results. This strategy supports the credibility, confirmability, substantive validation, and transferability of the study. Thick description has been incorporated throughout the research process; it was present from the beginning phases of creating a purpose statement and research questions to the final stages of incorporating participant quotes into the final draft of the manuscript. Thick description is a key part of embracing the unique and equally significant experiences of each participant, ensuring meaningful representation of each participant.

### **Data analysis**

In qualitative data analysis, phenomenological researchers aim to find an overall essence of the phenomenon being studied (Hays & Singh, 2012). The researchers initially reduced the data by performing an unobtrusive data collection, determining research questions, outlining appropriate methods for enhancing trustworthiness, and making sure the

entire research team understood and bracketed any assumptions and biases surrounding the research topic.

During data collection, several interviews were conducted before any formal data analysis began; therefore, adjustments were not made immediately to interview protocols. Questions that were perceived as slightly leading were changed, but the integrity of the questions did not change. For example, “Why did you apply to be a Teaching Assistant for CARE Now?” was later changed to “What led you to decide to apply to be a Teaching Assistant for CARE Now?” Following transcription of interviews, the researcher used horizontalization, reduction, and elimination to code all organized data into a textural description. Through consensus coding with the research team, broad groupings of themes were reduced or completely eliminated in an effort to create new, more meaningful, deeper categories of codes to better exemplify the essence of the phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). From these larger themes and patterns, the researcher created an overall codebook in order to identify individualized structural and textural descriptions within the data (Moustakas, 1994).

### Results / Themes

There were several themes that were salient across all teaching assistants (TA’s). Seven main themes were especially important to understanding and exemplifying the lived experiences of participants—internal motivation, personal challenges and supports, resiliency, contextual challenges, service as a transformational experience, growth as an individual, and advocacy. Detailed examples for each theme will be provided below. Please refer to Table 1 for generalizations regarding themes.

#### Internal motivation for service

Each participant expressed unique motivations for their interest and dedication to service with CARE Now, but every motivation mentioned was

internally driven. Two subthemes were made evident as the participants discussed their reasons for deciding to become a TA with CARE Now: A positive previous experience as an advocate for CARE Now; and a personal connection to the population being served. For example, in support of a positive previous experience, Beverly stated:

*I really liked being an advocate in CARE Now, and being able to tutor and mentor the students. I thought it would be good to go on for another year and just expand on my facilitation skills and to get that extra experience.*

In addition, personal connection was a strong motivator for students. Through data collection, some personal connections were recognized, such as racial and ethnic similarities, contextual and environmental similarities, and socio-economic similarities. John expressed several instances in which he felt very connected to the children.

*I am a minority myself and coming from possibly the same situation, same backgrounds as the youth that we cater to... You know, I don’t really see any differences [between me and the children]. I found myself as a youth doing the same things, having my mind in the [same] place. I wasn’t able to see beyond the next day or the task at hand, so I found myself in the same situations. [Same] shoes as they are in.*

Annie also expressed feeling a strong connection to the environment of the population she serves. Annie stated, “I grew in this same place as them...I can remember how I felt during certain situations.” Every participant expressed some internal motivation that drives them to engage in the service that they do for the program.

**Table 1: Categories and Subcategories by Occurrence**

Categories	Subcategories	Occurrences
1. Internal motivation	1.1 Previous experience	13
	1.2 Personal Connection to Population	13
2. Personal Challenge & Support	2.1 Dual Role	4
	2.2 Life Balance	1
	2.3 Motivating peers	6
	2.4 Faculty Support	6
3. Resiliency	3.1 Resiliency	8
	3.2 Relationships	28
	3.3 Insight	9
	3.4 Initiative	6
	3.5 Creativity	8
	3.6 Humor	6
	3.7 Values Orientation	2
	3.8 Individual responsibility	7
	3.9 Rule following	3
4. Contextual Challenges	4.1 Low Socioeconomic Status	24
	4.2 Unstable Home	16
	4.3 Unhealthy Relationships	7
	4.4 Bullying	9
5. Transformational Experience		31
6. Growth	6.1 Experiential Learning	20
	6.2 Personal/professional	58
7. Advocacy	7.1 Promoting change Now/Role Modeling	13
	7.2 Promoting change in the future	17

### Personal challenges and supports

Participants expressed some personal challenges that they faced during their service experience. These included struggles with creating appropriate boundaries for their multiple roles, learning how to motivate their peers, and having to develop a balance between their roles.

Creating appropriate boundaries for the multiple roles, each TA discussed the importance of having their advocates, who are also their peers and friends, respect them and be able to differentiate between the various roles they play. Elizabeth clearly expressed this challenge:

*Having a relationship with our Advocates outside of CARE Now, but then stepping in to the role more so of an authority figure when we are in the program and having there be a clear line between when I'm your friend and when I'm your TA.*

Annie also states a concern with the multiple roles she plays: "Not being listened to by the advocates. Even though I'm above them, I'm still the same age as them so it's kind of hard to get them to listen to me."

Finally, Maddie talks about her personal struggle with peers who lack the motivation and passion to work with the populations being served through CARE Now:

*[It's a challenge] working with people who don't care about what's happening. [This] has impacted me, made me think about, why don't they care? How do you motivate people that haven't necessarily bought into this and what can we do better moving forward?*

The importance of faculty, CARE Now directors, and fellow TAs were explicitly stated as examples of support during challenges that each participant had faced throughout their service.

*My team; the other TA's, [my professor], and [the site directors]... having a good support system and understanding that at the end of the day everything we do is to promote resiliency in kids [that we serve] and teach other kids to go do good in the world.*

It was clear that despite any personal challenges, the interpersonal support the TAs received from colleagues and faculty was powerful in shaping perceived outcomes.

### Resiliency as developed through service

Each TA related his/her experiences to the fundamental principles of the CARE Now program, the resiliency and character traits. The theme of resiliency can further be broken down into several sub-themes, directly relating to the resiliency traits: relationships; insight; initiative; creativity, humor, and values orientation. There were also two subthemes relating to character traits, individual responsibility and rule following. An overall arching theme of resiliency emerged which was clearly stated by Timmy: "Different students have different needs. You know, some days go really well and some days have some speed bumps. And, we have to get through those speed bumps."

The importance of relationships, is described by Jessica when she discussed the positive and healthy relationships developed through her experience as a TA:

*[The TAs] fall back on each other so when I feel like I'm not doing something right, I go directly to my [fellow] TA's. They are always going to have my back and I'm the same way with them. I wouldn't change it... [Being a TA is] a great experience and to have the three other women by my side is like the best, so I do enjoy it.*

Diego discussed her ability to use insight to change interactions appropriately based on whom she is talking to.

*We're all students. We're all learning, different things, but we're all learning together. Learning about one another. And I think in any situation you have to interact with people differently. So, I'll interact with you differently than I interact with one of the kids, or someone that's our age.*

Elaina describes the ability to take charge and be self-motivated. Elaina uses this trait through her service learning experience by stating: "I have to take the initiative to assist with anyone that needs my help."

Elaina also talks about her ability to use creativity, the aptitude to generate different outcomes, which she feels is essential when leading an after-school program.

*The situations I've been put in [have taught me] how to be flexible in demanding situations, situations that are unexpected. When you have kids, you don't necessarily know how to handle [all] the situations, but as long as you can continue the day and make it flow nicely.*

Working within an after-school program and juggling one's multiple roles can be stressful. TAs expressed that having humor as a healthy coping mechanism aided in their reduction of stress. For example, Beverly said: "Having humor in these situations [helps]. Even though you may get frustrated and it's tough, sometimes you just need to laugh at yourself."

The last resiliency trait that emerged was values orientation, an internal right-and-wrong conscience and acceptance of others. Through her service, Elizabeth hopes to promote acceptance:

*[I want to promote] acceptance. You don't know where someone's story started. You never know what one of these kids will do one day, but you never know what they had to overcome, [what they had to] be resilient to. Just not judging someone on their now and realizing they have a past.*

Individual responsibility, which is no longer part of the CARE Now character measurement, was recognized in data analysis. This may be due to the fact that the TAs who are currently in the program were taught this trait and facilitated programming around it. Individual responsibility was defined as an internal motivation to strive for excellence. Timmy represents this character trait by saying:

*I want to keep [the kids] out of trouble. It's a hard time, where they are in their lives. So I think anything that we can do to help them benefit their lives and make their day better... That's why I do it.*

Lastly, rule following is a dimension of the Citizenship Scale CARE Now recently began using to measure character. Rule following is defined as an ability to listen to and follow directions from others. Nemo expressed a personal connection to rule following: "Following directions... being a TA, I've learned how to be a little more organized in my other classes and follow what my teachers say to do."

### **Contextual challenges faced during service**

Contextual challenges are related to the environment and social conditions in which the children being served live and how this context impacts the TA's. More specifically participants mentioned low-socioeconomic status, lack of support and resources, unstable homes, and bullying as contextual challenges.

Low socioeconomic status (LSES) was defined as poverty, poor community conditions, lack of perceived options, and perceived safety. Through their work with CARE Now, TAs have become aware of neighborhoods that have a high level of poverty. The implementation of hot meals, which are free to the children, provided during the after-school program at each of the sites has impacted many TAs, including Elizabeth. She said: “A lot of them, the meal they get at school is the last meal they get until they come back to school.”

In relation to poor community conditions, one of the after school sites has an extremely high population density compared to the rest of the city, approximately 74% more people per square mile. This community also has a 70% poverty rate compared to the national average of 15% and 19% of the rest of the city (City Data, 2013). John recognizes the risks of living in a low socioeconomic neighborhood:

*The community is always a big factor... you can be in the same community for so long, that's what you start to live like... You might not have the time to venture out... to see that it's just not just the community you live in, there are other places. It's good to [venture out] because it gives you something to strive for, it gives you something to look to. It opens your eyes to see that there is more out there than just the community you stay in.*

Unstable home was defined as a heightened level of responsibility and caretaking by a child, single parent home, neglect, abuse and uneducated parents. In one community that is served by the CARE Now program, the average head of household only has a level of educational attainment of 11.50 grade level (City Data, 2013). Nemo was deeply aware of the challenges the children may deal with on a daily basis:

*They don't have a lot of resources if they do have problems at home. They don't [have anybody to go to and] say, 'Hey, I'm having a problem at home' or 'Hey, I don't understand my homework.' Because, I guess the biggest problem is their parents may not know how to do the homework; it's not that they don't want to help them they just don't know how to do it, 'cause they didn't get that far in school.*

An unhealthy relationship was defined as negative influences, negative role models, and/or a lack of support from the systems the child is a part of (e.g., family, friends, teachers). TA's have had children in their program disclose experiences of abuse. Diego reported, “One of the students [disclosed that] he was raped...” Similarly, Jessica shared an experience she had dealing with a child's contextual challenge: “[A child] thought his mom was bringing a gun back to the house, I don't know how I can help besides just calling Child Protective Services.”

Through CARE Now, TAs have been faced with contextual challenges that not only relate to the children's home life, but also to school. John mentioned an example: “Dealing with certain situations at the bus stop, then dealing with certain situations on the bus, then coming to school, dealing with those same situations. Possibly be put down by teachers as well.”

Finally, bullying was mentioned by several participants as a concern for the children being served. For example, John stated that the children at his site struggle with “Being bullied and picked on because of the clothes that [they] wear. [And] not having the best of everything.”

Some of the participants also recognized the value of uniforms in the school district as a way to diminish bullying on some regards. Elaina discussed this: “I like that they have uniforms. [It's] a stress off their back. It helps not to target people or bully

people or leave them out.” Although uniforms do not solve all bullying matters, participants did note this as a positive step in removing at least one factor related to bullying.

### **Service as a transformational experience**

For the purposes of this study, transformational experiences can be defined as an individual’s experiences with eye-opening, extreme, and culturally different situations which can result in heightened awareness about the benefits of service learning and increased empathy toward the population in which the individual is serving.

Timmy talks about the impact that his service experience has had on him and the power behind the realization that he is making a difference in the population he serves.

*You know, we get to help these students, and we really see the impact that we put towards the work that we put into our after-school program. The students they really drive me to keep going, to see that sparkle in their eye...to see that passion and that energy that they bring.*

Similarly, Elizabeth discussed the awareness she now has regarding the value of what the children have taught her about life.

*I think we are similar in the fact that everyone is trying to make the best of what they don’t know is a bad situation. [The children] don’t have everything they need and they are okay with it. I know I don’t have everything I need and I don’t have everything together, but I’m starting to become more ok with that. They are teaching me how to become more okay with it.*

It was not until Maddie became a TA that she recognized the impact of her role as an advocate with

CARE Now. She cited, “These resiliency traits could really have a forever impact on the kids. They might be different mothers and fathers then they would be normally. I can just see it more clearly now that I’m removed from it directly.” Not only were participants able to recognize changes in their views about cultural differences, life experiences, and the power behind service, but they were also able to change their views about their own futures. For example, Elaina’s experience with CARE Now has allowed her to consider other career options she had not thought of before her service with children. “I hadn’t planned to work with kids in my career path...but it could be a possibility in my future.”

### **Growth as it relates to service**

Through service, because of its transformational abilities, individuals experience growth in multiple facets of their lives. Participants cited examples of personal growth, professional development, and the ability to recognize experiential learning. Experiential learning, for the participants, includes the ability to take knowledge gained from coursework and apply it to real-life situations. For example, Timmy said: “What we learned in class was about facilitation skills and risk management and different styles of learning and different styles of teaching—we really get to practice those skills and assets that we’ve learned [during CARE Now after-school].” Elizabeth further supports experiential learning by stating:

*[Being a TA] allows me to get a feel for facilitating a class and running the logistics of a class and an entire program and seeing what goes into the behind-the-scenes that the advocates don’t really see and all the side work and prep work and after work that gets done with it.*

In addition, personal and professional growth was seen as an important, impacting factor relating to the

participant's service experience. Personal and professional growth includes improving social and emotional potential and identifying and building skills associated with professional aspirations and goals. Annie mentioned both personal and professional developments that she has experienced working with CARE Now: "[Being a TA for CARE Now] definitely increased my confidence and organization skills and it's definitely taught me how to work with a group and try to do it more equally than before and not take over like I used to."

Maddie spoke to the importance of having park, recreation and tourism studies students working closely with a counseling and human services student for a collaborative service learning approach: "Working with people who don't have the expertise you do, or seeing two fields come together to do one thing, has been cool and valuable. It has been cool for the professional field."

Beverly spoke to a different aspect of professional development.

*Being able to have the lab is putting all the course work, like implementing it, into real life situations. For example, using responsive language; we learned a lot about that, we went in depth about what it was, how to use it, what examples of it are. And [now] we consistently use responsive language when we're dealing with the students and trying to resolve conflicts and trying to get them motivated to do something.*

Every participant spoke extensively about the personal and professional growth that resulted from his or her service with CARE Now. Timmy cited this development in his own experience as a TA and advocate:

*It's difficult the first couple weeks of CARE Now, if you've never been...Some students haven't working with all African American*

*kids or all kids with disabilities and low income houses and students who have a bad attitude. I think the advocates develop throughout the year; they get to know the kids, they get to know the environment, and that's what makes them grow.*

Eyler and Giles (2001) emphasized that social benefits can emerge through service learning experiences with multicultural and diverse groups. This can include things such as cultural understanding and reducing stereotypes.

### **Promoting change through mentoring and advocacy**

This includes participants' promoting change through role modeling and/or mentoring their students and peers and by advocating for the populations they serve. Many participants expressed that their ability to be a role model has been a very powerful experience. John cited his personal experience as a role model for the children he serves: "I feel like I have definitely been able to be a role model. I think that may be my biggest contribution; [being] someone you can talk to, someone your children can talk to." And, Beverly mentioned the importance of mentoring her peers and students:

*I think I've been able to give good insight to some of the advocates about how to mentor and how to facilitate activities for the students. I think I've been able to mentor a little more just some of the new students, middle school students, this year.*

Similarly, Diego spoke to the importance of mentoring her advocates: "You can pass [knowledge] on to the advocates and you can see that [knowledge] with them with their students." Nemo identified the value she feels in being able to mentor the children she serves through CARE Now: "[I could] possibly reach someone that otherwise would not have ever

seen a girl in a stronger light; maybe they only see guys as being leaders.”

There is tremendous strength behind the words spoken by the participants about their passion and desire to advocate for the children and population they serve through CARE Now. For instance, John said:

*[I want to] change the idea that everything isn't as good as you think it is; there are children that need help; and that people will often shove those thoughts aside or shove the children aside, but they really do really need help and the children really are our future. And that is what is really going to become important. So if we don't cater to that now, our future is doomed.*

Promoting change in the students and community the participants served was also expressed during Beverly's interview.

*[I want to] promote the idea that even if you come from an under-privileged household you can still succeed in school and you can still learn and be able to go on and have a sufficient education and be able to get a degree and be able to be successful in life. That you don't have to be stuck in the same situation that people in your community, or your family, are in.*

In order to help the students being served through CARE Now, Diego expressed the importance of giving students the confidence to believe in their futures. She said: “[I want] to make sure the kids understand what they're learning and let them know there is help out there if they need the help and not to be embarrassed about it.” Overall, participants identified the importance of advocacy. Timmy said: “We all have a passion to help them get to the next step.” Further, Nemo expressed: “If we teach

our kids young enough, then a lot of the problems we see now can start to get better. ‘Cause they don't need a way to fix it; if we show them the right way to do it now.”

### Discussion

Teaching assistants (TAs) were internally motivated, either by relating their motivation to positive previous involvement and/or through a personal connection with the population being served. At the time of data collection, each TA already had at least one semester of service learning participation (as an Advocate) in CARE Now. While internal motivation was high, TAs faced and overcame various personal challenges, which included managing multiple roles, balancing life, and assisting their peers to become internally motivated.

One unique aspect this article highlights is a potential pitfall of service learning. Through data analysis it was discovered that undergraduate TAs, who helped lead the service learning experience, experienced challenges outside of the program implementation. TAs, while expressing increased resilience in relationships, found relationships with their peers to be more challenging. This challenge was due to the multiple roles of TAs and perceived lack of internal motivation of their peers. While the researchers cannot say if this information is generalizable, it is still valuable for those implementing service learning projects incorporating student leaders.

Another challenge, not supported by previous literature, is motivation of peers. TAs mentioned frustration with peers regarding their lack of perceived internal motivation. Service learning is a transformational process for many who are involved. It has been noted (Epplier, Ironsmith, Dingle, & Errickson, 2011) that service learning can be associated with positive cognitive and social changes, including advances in moral reasoning, prosocial reasoning, and decision-making (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Conrad & Hedin, 1981). However, educators should take note of the potential pitfall of unmoti-

vated students. While these incidents seem to be controlled, researchers wonder how educators can equip students and student leaders with the tools to increase the motivation of others or to increase motivation prior to the service learning experience.

It is interesting to note that six out of the seven resiliency traits emerged from the data. TAs are put into leadership roles where they have to work independently and collaboratively while implementing outcomes focused around after-school programs. It was interesting to see that there was no mention of the resiliency trait independence. While TAs work independently throughout the program, they seem to value collaborative learning, with a fellow TA or human services Advocate. It should also be noted that out of all the resiliency traits, relationships had the highest occurrence in the results with teamwork, relationships, and collaborative approaches mentioned.

In relation to contextual challenges, TAs observed higher levels of adverse situations confronted by the children they serve, including abuse, poverty, low socioeconomic status, and bullying. Due to high levels of exposure to contextual challenges, this may illuminate current advocacy in the program. Advocacy was mentioned as either current or future. TAs enjoyed mentoring their younger peers, even though there were challenges relating to their multiple roles. TAs shared impact statements relating to their future engagement of advocacy. This supports previous research; Gray, Ondaatje, and Zakaras (1999) found that students who participate in service learning courses are more likely to continue taking an active role in helping to address societal problems later in life in comparison to non-service learning students.

### **Implications**

This study contributes to the understanding of high-impact service learning. Specifically, this research gives voice to a smaller group of individuals participating in continued service. This manuscript creates a great starting point for measuring the

impacts of service learning on teaching assistants who are participating in a hands-on experiential learning environment for extended amounts of time. The challenge of multiple relationships in regards to leading peers in a service learning project is a topic that has not been researched extensively. This also paves the way for outcomes-based programming to determine if programming not only gives outcomes for the individuals it was programmed for, but also for the individuals who led it.

### **Limitations and Future Research Direction**

The researchers noted several limitations throughout the study. The first was changing interview protocols midway through collection of data. While there did not seem to be significant changes in responses in regards to coding and themes, the authenticity of the first interviews may have been compromised due to some leading questions on the initial interview protocol. Sample size is also another limitation to this study. This research only looked into ten teaching assistants in the CARE Now program at a specific university. Finally, interviews were collected midway through participants' experiences as teaching assistants. A complete capture of the impacts may not be possible without follow-up interviews.

The current study made it apparent to the researchers that further research is required in the following areas: 1) measuring the impacts of service learning on students participating in service learning opportunities over multiple semesters; 2) measuring the impact of service learning on teaching assistants as it relates to challenges of multiple roles; 3) determining if facilitators of outcomes based programming have similar outcomes as the individuals they facilitate for; and, 4) comparing service learning impacts on teaching assistants compared to first semester students prior to completing any service learning courses. This study stated the impact service learning experience had on teaching assistants.. It is important to continue to explore impacts relating to

service learning as this method of teaching and learning is being implemented by colleges and universities across the country.

### Conclusion

Growth through experiential learning and through personal and professional development was the largest impact demonstrated in the data. Respondents mentioned personal and professional development consistently throughout their interviews. Service learning is designed to allow students to apply skills learned in the classroom to real-world situations. With the support of faculty, students may feel increasingly confident in their professional growth. As stated by Burnett, Long, and Horn (2005), service learning instruction is aimed to increase the understanding of concepts studied in a classroom environment by providing students with opportunities for direct exposure to problems, issues, and strengths of communities. This also mirrors missions and visions of universities nation-wide.

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