

Chapter 80

“I See Myself in Them”: Understanding Racialized Experiences of Students of Color Through Critical Race Service–Learning

Liliana E. Castrellón

University of Utah, USA

Judith C. Pérez-Torres

University of Utah, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores a first-year ethnic studies course to highlight the importance of engaging the diversity within the classroom in relation to the diverse communities being served. Students participating in this course are self-identified Students of Color, many of whom are first generation college students, from lower socioeconomic communities. Introducing a Critical Race Service-Learning framework, the authors highlight how Students of Color in this course learn about race, class, gender, language, citizenship status, phenotype, sexuality, etc. to challenge the status quo while also actively engaging in service-learning with/in diverse communities as an empowering pedagogy. Findings indicate the foundational tools learned within the course pushed students to speak back to the educational inequities they witnessed at their service sites and experienced in K-12 to further empower them to continue giving back to their communities beyond college.

INTRODUCTION

As the demographics of today's college students continue to become more diverse, service-learning educators must restructure classroom approaches in order to better serve and engage this shifting population and the communities with which the students will engage. Although service-learning has played a critical role in higher education and is widely recognized as the best economical approach to address today's societal needs and issues (Gilbride-Brown, 2008), service-learning literature has generally rep-

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resented the experiences of White middle-class university students who serve an *unknown* community off-campus (Mitchell & Donahue, 2009).

Within a service-learning model, university students are asked to academically reflect on the connections between the class and the “unknown” community (Mitchell & Donahue, 2009). Such “academic” reflection can influence students to format responses based on their grade and can further underscore the separation between the students and the communities being served. Consequently, university students and communities are left further harmed and divided by an “Us vs. Them” dichotomy. Such recognition lacks an asset-based representation of the racially diverse university students within these classrooms and those who serve their own/similar communities. Several scholars have challenged traditional service-learning models by calling attention to the need to further fulfill the students’ engagement with diverse communities through the use of Critical Service-Learning (CSL) (Mitchell, 2008; Rosenberger, 2000). CSL scholars explain the need to extend beyond the deconstruction of stereotypes and assumptions about diverse communities and move towards the examination of why service needs to happen in the first place (Mitchell, 2007, 2008; Rosenberger, 2000). The authors build on this work and argue that conversations on race, racism, and socioeconomic status can help students to understand better how socially constructed barriers and dominant discourses continue to oppress historically marginalized communities.

This chapter explores an existing first-year program in a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) that incorporates an ethnic studies course and participation in CSL as a method to retain students of color (SOC) in higher education. This analysis explicates how using critical race pedagogy enabled students to develop an understanding of the racialized educational experiences they faced and witnessed in the communities they served. The authors argue for the need to implement race-based service-learning curriculum with a social justice agenda that focuses on preparing all students to challenge existing White structures and privileges within education and to become racially and socially conscious agents for change.

This study adds to CSL by offering a new lens named Critical *Race* Service-Learning (CRSL). While the program in this analysis is not explicitly named CRSL, the authors, both of whom have coordinated the service-learning component of the course over the past years, seek to introduce it as such. This approach provides a theoretical framework for students to understand how race is systematically tied to institutional injustices in the educational system (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2006), further building a racial and social consciousness (Rosenberger, 2000). CRSL can inform how SOC understand social injustices through their racialized educational experiences while attending a PWI of higher education. It can also provide a platform for SOC who participate in CSL at minority-serving institutions to examine their experiences and the experiences of the community they may be serving. This study can be utilized to inform current and future CSL scholars and practitioners within racially diverse classrooms and communities.

BACKGROUND

The Diversity Scholars Program

The Diversity Scholars Program (DSP) is a first-year program created during the 2007–2008 academic year. The institution’s Associate Vice President for Equity and Diversity at that time framed the program based on higher education research which showed that when students of color at PWI’s begin college with opportunities to network with each other, engage with faculty of color in their courses, participate

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