The Value of Volunteer Leadership for University Students Formerly Enrolled in Prescribed Reading: An Anti-Deficit Model

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ABSTRACT

Local volunteer opportunities hold the potential for university students to develop as leaders and engaged members of the academic community, but students taking prescribed (sometimes termed *developmental education*) courses may be overlooked as candidates for these kinds of opportunities. Taking an anti-deficit stance, university faculty may promote student success by recruiting students from prescribed courses to participate in carefully-designed volunteer programs. In this qualitative case study, I explored the perceptions of growth in the areas of academic engagement and leadership and the motivation to participate in future community volunteer service in student volunteers who had previously been enrolled in prescribed reading courses. Three such university student volunteers reflected on their experience as leaders in a short-term academic outreach program for high school students. In open-ended survey and interview responses, the university volunteers described their development of specific skills as well as changes in self-perception. Their responses indicated that they perceived the volunteer experience as effectual in all the investigated areas. Notably, they reported that serving as role models for youth encouraged specific academic habits. The study includes descriptions of the academic outreach program with supporting theory for its design because the context of the volunteer service cannot be separated from the findings. This study is a unique contribution to student success literature—there is no previous model linking students from prescribed courses with community volunteer opportunities.

Keywords: university student leadership development, student success, developmental education, anti-deficit, volunteer experiences

Universities provide prescribed courses with the aim of supporting student academic success (Chen, 2016). Yet, it is possible that students in these classes do not typically benefit from other types of opportunities known to foster desirable success outcomes. In this article, I focused on one such opportunity: a carefully planned volunteer program. I helped to develop a community academic outreach and recruited, as volunteers, students who had previously taken prescribed reading courses that I taught. I wondered how and to what degree the participating university students perceived their own growth and development. I addressed this question by conducting a case study.

Development of a Student Volunteer Opportunity

Benjamin (pseudonyms are used for all university students) came to my office to inquire about potential opportunities to volunteer in the surrounding community. I had informally served as a mentor to Benjamin since his enrollment in a prescribed reading support class that I taught during the previous semester at a large university in the southern United States.

At the time of Benjamin's visit, I had been investigating the potential of developing a community literacy program. My research had led me to observe a Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom School site in another city—a model that I found very compelling. In addition to responding to Benjamin with information about various local opportunities, I invited him to join in the beginning stages of the investigation into community partnership possibilities for literacy development. Somewhat serendipitously, I was invited shortly thereafter to join with other university faculty and a local community leader to formulate a grant application for an academic outreach program. The planning team agreed to include Benjamin as a member in all aspects of discussion and decision-making. The

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university's Community Service Grant Committee funded the project, and the planning team began to design Scholars Overcoming through Academic Relevance 2020 (SOAR). The program's purpose was to engage local high school students in reading and math enrichment activities that would take different approaches than high school curriculum while supporting engagement and academic success in high school.

Immediately after funding was received, the planning team (now calling ourselves the SOAR Planning Team) began searching for university volunteers. The most likely recruits were students who, like Benjamin, had previous connections with sponsoring faculty. In addition to Benjamin, I recruited three volunteers who were former students from prescribed reading classes. Based on program needs and university student interests, two volunteers exclusively worked with reading activities, one served in both academic areas, and one focused solely on math. The SOAR Planning Team successfully recruited eleven additional volunteers from the community and university.

SOAR was held at a local community center one evening per week from 4:00 p.m. to 6:15 p.m. Approximately nine high school students participated each week. The high school participants were divided into two groups—some participated in 45-min math sessions first, while others began by meeting with their literature circle. A second session was held in which the groups alternated activities. Between each session, students and volunteers enjoyed a meal (included in the grant funding) while listening to a guest speaker. Speakers included a known author of young adult fiction, a small business entrepreneur, a woman working in corporate management, and a local musician. The majority of university student volunteers whom I did not personally recruit served in the areas of set-up, tear-down, and meal service. SOAR met for four of six planned in-person sessions before restrictions related to COVID-19 became necessary. The final two meetings were conducted remotely at a later point in time.

Important Considerations for Engagement with the Community

Facilitating volunteer opportunities for engagement necessarily involves careful planning related to community-university relationships (Gazely et al., 2013). Without this emphasis, community engagement, even when invoking the language of social justice, might exemplify and reproduce problematic themes of power that university faculty and student volunteers may hold in relation to those who are supposed to benefit from the volunteer service. As noted by Simpson (2014), the term *service* has, in many respects, replaced the idea of charity work without transforming the practice. Forms of engagement that reproduce unhealthy power dynamics are harmful to communities and recipients of volunteer service (d'Arlach, 2009) and are also inherently miseducative to university volunteers.

The SOAR Planning Team addressed these issues in a couple of ways. The team selected a particular community center as our event location based on the fact that it was a familiar setting for many local youths. As the team wanted to create an atmosphere of shared leadership instead of a university-based program, we recruited a volunteer staff that included representatives from the local community as well as the university.

Research on specific community volunteer settings attests to the idea that the demographics of university student volunteers affect the level at which the classic *town-and-gown divide* must be considered in planning. Maurrasse (2001) explained that many students at Xavier University (a historically Black university in New Orleans) who were involved in volunteer service came from neighborhoods with similar characteristics to those that they engaged with through university-community initiatives. In contrast, students at Duke University who participated in an after-school tutoring partnership were reported to have had little prior involvement in communities like the one in which they volunteered (Jentleson, 2011). The cultural differences described in the Duke University study were not insurmountable—Jentleson shared positive results. Yet, a setting like this would require additional planning and perhaps volunteer training focused on cultural dynamics.

The SOAR Planning Team was attentive to African American representation among speakers and university and community volunteer leaders in an effort to ensure that the offering was culturally responsive to the anticipated high school participants. Three of the four recruited guests speakers were African American, as were the majority of volunteers. University students and other volunteers who participated in the SOAR program, like those discussed by Maurrasse, generally represented the

demographics of the community. A couple of university student volunteers, in fact, shared that they saw their own experiences mirrored in the lives of the high school participants. Under these conditions, the SOAR Planning Team did not think it necessary to focus additional effort on navigating cultural dynamics. It is important to note that SOAR 2020 was a short-term program, and more consideration for community interaction would have been required for a long-term endeavor.

University Student Volunteer-Led Literature Circles

Literature circle discussion on a shared text is a common component of the prescribed reading courses I teach. Based on this model, the SOAR Planning Team opted to invite university volunteers to host literature circles for high school students. The chosen text was Bryan Stevenson's (2019) *Just Mercy: A True Story of the Fight for Justice (Adapted for Young Adults).* In this book, Stevenson described his legal work with people on death row and provided background for understanding racial inequity and other forms of injustice in the U.S. legal system. The SOAR Planning Team felt that this book would open doors to transformative dialog and noted that some university volunteers were already familiar with Stevenson's work.

I designed an accompanying participant binder and a guide to be used by those leading the literature circles. Literature circle activities included opportunities for written and spoken personal reflection, vocabulary work, role-play, discussions on themes of injustice, and metacognition related to the reading process. The leader's guide provided volunteers with background information about the text, lesson structures, desired outcomes for the literature circle experience, and examples of facilitator talk to foster these outcomes.

University student volunteers who led literature circles encouraged high school participants to complete writing activities in their binders each week. I collected the binders after each session and encouraged the university volunteers to read entries made by the high school students and write positive feedback in response. Each university volunteer who was leading a literature circle added comments at least once during the program's duration, and each high school participant received feedback on some of their reflective writing.

Literature Review

As this article focuses on university volunteer student experiences in a specific program, I have conducted interdisciplinary research to address the facets of this initiative including benefits of university student volunteering, practices associated with volunteering that foster leadership development, anti-deficit instructional approaches, and historical frameworks upon which the academic outreach program investigated in this study was built. In the review that follows, I additionally offer contextual information on university-prescribed reading courses.

University Student Community Volunteering as Academic Engagement

University student community volunteer opportunities can offer environments in which students build confidence and develop practices that promote academic success. Kuh et al. (2010) used *engagement* as a term for "educationally purposeful activities" in the college and university context (p. 13). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2020), a tool used to measure student engagement on college and university campuses, contains a list of 10 general indicators and 47 linked survey items that provide examples of engagement activities, such as reviewing notes and meeting with academic advisors. Many of these items focus on student behaviors, but some pertain to faculty and university staff practices. University student volunteering, under the right conditions, can include identified forms of academic engagement such as collaboration with faculty, personal formation through life experiences that have academic connections, and participation in activities that promote social involvement (NSSE, 2020).

Available literature supports the belief that university student community volunteering holds prospective benefits for student success. For example, Astin and Sax (1998) conducted a large longitudinal study to discover how participation in community service affected undergraduate students. The robust findings indicated that "participation in volunteer service… enhanced the student's academic development, civic responsibility, and life skills" (p. 255). Other literature connects university student engagement in volunteer community service with increased initiative (Carlisle et al., 2017), persistence (Pusztai et al., 2021), higher GPA (Collet-Klingenberg et al., 2015), increased disciplinary knowledge, self-confidence, and student-ascribed value to the larger university experience (Saville et al., 2022). Astin and Sax further found that student community service led to other types of engagement, including increased time invested in studying, accomplishing extra academic work, more contact with faculty, and plans for participation in future volunteer service opportunities (these outcomes are consistent with NSSE, 2020, indicators).

As Holmes et al. (2021) have shown, universities have employed a wide range of models to foster student volunteer community engagement ranging from service learning and university-community collaboratives to

one-time service experiences. Additionally, a variety of terminology is used to describe these various models (Paull et al., 2015). The variations of student experience challenge the reliability of board statements about the benefits of volunteering, pointing to the value of qualitative studies (for example, Weinronk et al., 2018) and mixed-method research (for example, Harkins et al., 2020) that explore student perceptions of volunteering in specific settings. Contextual analyses of student volunteer experiences can highlight beneficial trends and practices.

University Student Community Volunteering as Leadership Development

Self-perception and action as a leader can be viewed as a form of self-efficacy—a research-demonstrated benefit of volunteer engagement (Gonsalves et al., 2019). Self-efficacy was defined by Bandura (1995) as "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p. 2). Self-efficacy in leadership simply refers to such beliefs and actions that relate to influencing others. As Ritchie (2016) pointed out, self-efficacy is always contextually specific. As an illustration of this idea, a person may exhibit high levels of confidence in their ability to organize events but avoid making weighty decisions.

As an example of development cultivated by leadership opportunities, Good et al. (2000) shared powerful academic, personal, and interpersonal gains found with African American university students who served as peer mentors in an engineering program. Supporting the need for student leadership opportunities, Offermann et al. (2020) found that formative experiences for female college students in successful goal achievement and leading others correlated with subsequent professional leadership roles. In this vein, the SOAR Planning Team invited university student volunteers to give input in program planning, prepare to lead instruction, make instructional decisions, apply previous academic learning to new settings, take responsibility for task completion, accept recognition as program leaders, and serve as role models to high school students.

Prescribed University Academic Support Courses

The participants in the present study had formerly been enrolled in prescribed reading support courses (sometimes termed *developmental*). The university in this study uses multiple measures, with an emphasis on ACT scores, to place incoming first-year students in academic support classes for areas in which they are predicted to need support. According to the data reported by Complete College America (2017), 12% of students entering U.S. colleges take a developmental reading or English course.

There is a wide range of models that are labeled *developmental reading* (Stahl & Armstrong, 2018). This breadth of practice is important to recognize, considering discussions over the past few years on the potential harm of placing students in developmental courses (Valentine et al., 2017). The university discussed here employs a corequisite model pairing each credit-bearing reading class with a U.S. history course that fulfills a general education requirement. Corequisite courses have gained recent attention as promising alternatives to stand-alone prerequisite classes (Ran & Lin, 2022). Our curriculum design embraces high-impact practices that maximize student engagement (Kuh, 2008). Yet, none of this grants exemption from a need to be attentive to faculty perceptions of students enrolled in our prescribed courses.

The Freedom School Approach

I chose to model the reading portion of the SOAR academic outreach after past and present examples of liberating literacy education. Literacy education has long been associated with social justice movements. The Citizenship Schools initiated in the 1950s by Septima Clark and others that focused on education for voter registration were inspirational to the Freedom School movement of the 1960s led by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) members. Freedom Schools relied on university student volunteer leaders to work with younger (typically middle and high school) students and provided alternative curricula not accessible to African American students of the 1960s (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998; Watson, 2014).

The name *Paulo Freire* is anticipated in conversations on literacy education and justice because of his influential work in critical pedagogy. Watson (2014) pointed to parallels between Freire's critical pedagogies and the emphasis Freedom Schools placed on alternate curricula that served as a catalyst for social change. Chilcoat and Ligon (1998)

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highlighted the Freedom School foci on reflection on personal experience and student roles as dialog partners with teachers, ideas also connected with Freirean thought.

Contemporary Freedom Schools sponsored by the CDF (such as the one that I visited prior to SOAR) continue in the spirit of their predecessors by relying on university volunteers and weaving access to multicultural curriculum, themes of justice, and shared language and text experiences together to fill urgent educational needs that are exacerbated by failing schools (Jackson & Howard, 2014; Watson, 2014). The multiple facets of the Freedom School approach served to inspire the SOAR program design, particularly the reading component. I believed that the environment fostered would affect the university volunteers as well as the high school participants (as also suggested by Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998).

Faculty Taking an Anti-Deficit Approach with Students from Prescribed Courses

I propose that the model for recruiting students who have taken prescribed reading courses to lead as volunteers in an academic outreach is an example of action based on an anti-deficit educational approach. Faculty may perceive academic deficits in students based on race and ethnicity (Valencia, 2010), which can lead to discriminatory actions that affect student success (Park et al., 2022). This is pertinent to this study because first-year African American students at four-year institutions enroll in developmental English (including reading) courses at over three-and-a-half times (31%) the rate of White peers (8%) and Hispanic students (15%) are almost twice as likely as White students to be enrolled (Complete College America, n.d.). An anti-deficit perspective focuses on the strengths of students from minoritized demographics (Valencia) instead of assumed risk factors (Cooper & Hawkins, 2016; Exarhos, 2020).

There is scant research related to faculty perceptions of students enrolled in developmental or prescribed courses. In one notable phenomenological study, Hicks (2017) found a pattern of "chilly learning environments" (p. 84) reported by African American students who had successfully completed at least two prescribed developmental community college courses. The students described these courses as "extremely quiet, strained, non-participatory, uncomfortable, and unwelcoming" (p. 84). Terms commonly associated with student populations enrolled in developmental and prescribed courses, such as *underprepared*, *not college-ready*, and *at-risk,* give further credence to the inference that faculty may perceive students as less capable than peers not taking prescribed courses.

When faculty embrace anti-deficit perspectives, they imagine what students enrolled in their classes might contribute and achieve—rightly viewing the students as capable collaborators (Valencia, 2010). Faculty attitudes are important to student success (Vetter et al., 2019), and carefully designed and contextually appropriate practices are essential to changing deficit-based dynamics (Peck, 2020). This understanding provides a basis for inviting students who have taken prescribed courses to participate in the kinds of activities that have been widely demonstrated to promote student success. The design of the academic outreach program (particularly the literature circles) was also well-aligned with the anti-deficit paradigm—Chilcoat and Ligon (1998) noted that the Freedom School approach is, by its nature, anti-deficit.

In this study, I propose that the anti-deficit thinking modeled by faculty recruiting university students who had completed prescribed reading courses to serve as volunteer leaders has transformative potential. In opposition to the idea that university students who received reading support lacked capabilities in reading, most of the student volunteers in this study who had previously taken prescribed reading courses led literature circles. The volunteer opportunity facilitated obvious possibilities for university student volunteers to develop in ways that would contribute to student success.

Research Questions

I conducted this study to address the following questions:

1. How did university student volunteers believe that their experience with SOAR affected their sense of engaged belonging in the academic community?
2. Given that university student volunteers were placed in leadership roles in the SOAR program, how did this experience affect their confidence and self-understanding related to leadership?
3. Did the volunteer experience inspire participation or interest in subsequent community engagement opportunities?

Responses by university student volunteers addressed their perceptions of the effectiveness of a program that was designed as part of an anti-deficit model of education. Therefore, I additionally asked:

4. Does this study support the theory that an anti-deficit approach with students who had taken prescribed classes would have positive results in promoting student success?

Method

To address these questions, I chose a holistic single case study design because I believed that

the specific context of the academic outreach was integral to the potential outcomes of the study (Yin, 2018). Yin states that a case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon" (p. 15) where the phenomenon being investigated cannot be clearly separated from the context in which it occurred. The present study also focuses on students from a particular population—those who have taken prescribed reading courses. The model for the volunteer opportunity provided was uniquely designed with these student volunteers in mind. The study is revelatory as there is no known prior research on the effects of volunteer community service on students who have been enrolled in prescribed academic support classes. The case study approach allowed me to investigate and present the model holistically while emphasizing university student perceptions of the experience.

Participant Recruitment

In the spring of 2021, I sent an email invitation to the four university students who had previously taken a prescribed reading course and had additionally served as volunteers in the SOAR academic outreach. Three of these students agreed to participate in this study. Protocol approved by the university's Institutional Review Board was followed for inviting participants and collecting data.

Data Collection

Each participant who was recruited for this study was sent a survey composed of open-ended reflective questions as well as a short demographic survey to complete and return. The initial reflection questions were:

1. How would you describe your participation in SOAR 2020?
2. In what ways, if any, did your participation in SOAR 2020 affect your self-perception as a member of an academic community… (the specific university campus was referenced in this question)? You might discuss any changes in thought related to your courses, extracurricular activities, service, or possibilities for future activities that you would like to be involved in.
3. In what ways, if any, did your participation in SOAR 2020 affect your self-perception as a leader or one who has the capability of influencing others? Please give details in your response.

4. If given the opportunity, would you participate in a future service activity while still attending the university? Why or why not?

I conducted follow-up phone and ZOOM individual interviews within three weeks of receiving the surveys. Follow-up interview questions were based on the participants' responses to the initial survey questions. In these interviews, I sought participant elaboration (e.g., "Can you tell me more about…?") and clarification (e.g., "What did you mean by…?"). I took notes and, at times, repeated responses to the participants to ensure the accuracy of my understanding.

After the data were collected, personally identifying information was dissociated from student responses. In addition to the student interview and survey data, I used personal observation of the SOAR program in order to give context to the study.

Analysis

I used the first question in the survey to gain contextual information about university volunteer roles and activities and their feelings about them. This gave each study participant the ability to summarize their thoughts about the experience using their own terms.

I used the definition by Kuh et al. (2010) of engagement—"educationally purposeful activities" (p. 8)—to identify university student participation as members of the academic community. I considered activities referenced in survey items from the NSSE (2020) to be guiding examples. Because this study was focused at the level of self-perception, I considered stated plans and motivations as well as reported engagement experiences to be valuable data.

During the course of this study, my understanding of personal leadership development grew. Eisenhardt (1989) explained that while a priori theorizing can be helpful in shaping a case study, constructs may change during a study based on findings. The practice of beginning with theories but looking for clarity in particular areas fits in what Ridder (2017) called the "gaps and holes" design. I connected study findings with an existing theory to better understand the ways that two student volunteers felt that they developed as leaders. I began with the idea that leadership involved self-awareness of the potential to influence others and the confidence to act on this. In the paradigm of self-leadership described by Uzman and Maya (2019), one becomes a

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leader by assessing and managing personal thoughts and behaviors to achieve life goals.

Adding the above paradigm to the concept of self-efficacy discussed earlier, I looked for the following indicators as evidence of growth in leadership: (a) university volunteer reflection on their own practices, (b) perception and affirmation of their own capacities for influencing others (achievement, decision making, and serving as role-models), and (c) action in accordance with these positive self-perceptions.

Although the survey question regarding interest in future engagement specifically referenced service activities, university student participant responses were indicative of additional types of engagement that they felt related to their work with SOAR. These responses were included in my discussion.

The answer to the fourth research question addressing the anti-deficit approach was largely interpretive. On the one hand, overall positive responses could be indicators of the effectiveness of the approach. However, I was specifically interested in any aspects of student responses that would indicate the uniqueness of this opportunity as a transformational experience in comparison or contrast with past experiences.

Methodological Integrity

The questions posed to the university student volunteers directly addressed perceptions—the specific phenomenon I was investigating. Yet, the conditions for seeking university student responses could have affected what was shared or omitted.

Having served as an instructor for the students who participated in the study and as a coordinator for the SOAR program, I was aware that my relationship with the participants in this study could influence responses. When I interviewed the university volunteer participants, I encouraged them to acknowledge any lack of positive effects with the assurance that their candid accounts were helpful for research. I also affirmed the possibility that they may have contributed positively to the program and perhaps enjoyed it (which was apparent from observation) without experiencing any profound personal benefits in the areas mentioned in the survey.

The specificity of responses and the depth of personal reflection, I believed, would serve as indicators of data validity. To verify the accuracy of my interpretations of and communication about their experiences, the university volunteer study participants each reviewed a draft of the present article with the opportunity to provide feedback for correction or clarification

Findings

I have chosen to organize the findings by participant in order to present a holistic picture of each that combines demographic information and pertinent information shared.

Camille

Camille is an African American woman and a first-generation university student. She served in the program as a literature circler leader.

Describing her responsibilities, she said, "This program allowed me to step up and out of my comfort zone because I was able to lead four-to-five high school students." To prepare weekly, Camille shared, "I read my binder [which contained the curriculum], and although I did follow the steps, I altered it to [the high school students'] learning styles. I went further to ask them questions about their experiences."

Still responding to how she would describe her participation, Camille said, "I would describe my participation in the SOAR program with one word: *growth*." When asked in the follow-up interview how she grew, Camille replied, "Leadership, definitely—I knew I had skills in leadership and speaking. This experience allowed me to use these skills instead of just harboring them. I was putting my best foot forward for the greater good."

Responding to the question about SOAR's effects on self-perception as a member of the academic community, Camille shared that the diversity of the high school students in her literature circle helped her recognize the diversity of the university campus. She shared, "The students that I taught showed me that we, as students, are all different. We sometimes require different teaching styles based on the way we learn, and I've seen the same thing in students attending [the university]."

Camille also felt that her experience as a leader in SOAR affected specific academic practices. She elaborated in the interview, "[SOAR] helped me stop my procrastinating. I couldn't be a good example to the high school students if I fell behind. This helped me with time management. I bought a new planner and put things in time slots so that I wouldn't spend too much time on any one thing."

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Camille reflected that she developed skills related to leadership and teaching. She stated, "This allowed me to take a step back and reassess my teaching style for the younger generations… Here I could observe everyone's learning style and help them learn according to their specific needs."

The motivational effect went further, according to Camille. Speaking on the topic of leadership in the follow-up interview, she said, "I was on this high, and after SOAR stopped [due to COVID-19], I didn't want to stop. I was already writing [a book] before SOAR, but SOAR helped me get back on the horse and finish." This correlated with the topic of leadership because the book is on personal success. Camille, indeed, has published!

Responding to the final survey question on participation in future opportunities, Camille said, "I truly enjoyed my time in the SOAR 2020 program. I liked the duration of time of each meeting and the book we read [referring to *Just Mercy* by Stevenson, 2018]. Along with our weekly guests [speakers], this was a great program, and each week was different but still interesting. I would not change anything." She affirmed that she would definitely be interested in another service opportunity because, in her words, "…while I was participating in this program, it improved my self-discipline and time-management skills. This helped make me a better student and allowed me to put my best foot forward."

As an additional thought shared in the interview, Camille stated that she was particularly inspired by one of the program's guest speakers—a woman who was African American and held a position in corporate leadership. Camille stated, "I really connected with her through her story. The following week at the end of our literature lesson, I mentioned the woman to my students, and, to my surprise, she resonated with another girl in the group. The experience gave us the courage to be something outside of what our parents expected from us…while still being successful."

Martin

A male student originally from Zambia, Martin has a family member who attended college in his country of origin. Martin helped with literature circles and math enrichment lessons and was excited to participate because, as he stated, "It reminded me how I was helped by college students in high school, and they taught me how I can be successful in college. Once we started our program with Dr. Nelson, I felt so happy to be able to share my college experience with kids in high school."

Writing on his self-perception as a member of the academic community, Martin stated, "the SOAR program shaped me in many ways that I didn't expect to be [shaped]. I was in a [literature] circle where I interacted with brave kids." He viewed SOAR as an opportunity to practice conversing in English. In the follow-up interview, Martin shared, "I found the weaknesses I had as a student and the strength[s] as a student." He believed that his communication skills improved as a result of the experience.

Martin shared an interesting story in response to the question regarding leadership, describing a subsequent opportunity that he took advantage of. Martin felt that participation in SOAR aided his courage to take the steps he described:

Last semester I was trying to find an opportunity for research. I was pushing… myself to reach out to those with big opportunities. It was impactful to me. After SOAR I was able to reach out to some professors who I would have been scared to reach out to as a freshman. I received an email from an academic mentor [who encouraged me] to apply for opportunities to teach elementary and high school students. I had confidence to apply for something that would improve my skills and experience. It would improve my teaching and being part of the larger community.

Martin shared that he would encourage the university to support more organizations like SOAR because this program "…shapes leaders and students to be different and accept who they've become."

Benjamin

Benjamin, whose story has already been shared in part, is a Caucasian male and is not a first-generation college student. As he reported about serving on the planning team, "We met to discuss logistics and brainstormed ideas as to how we can incentivize local students to participate in our program." Benjamin regularly attended planning team meetings and additionally worked with me to create and print flyers and organize logistics.

Regarding his role in the weekly SOAR sessions, Benjamin stated, "My primary role was to serve as an aid to professors and local teachers reviewing Algebra for local high school students. I helped students when they made algebraic errors while solving problems on their own. Outside of this role, I helped transport teaching supplies [to SOAR]."

Like Camille, Benjamin viewed his role in SOAR as a motivator for university coursework. In response to the survey question about self-perception as a member of the academic community, he stated, "…[SOAR] showed me that my mathematical and communicative skills have an impact on others;

therefore, my daily decisions and work ethic directly impact my community. It taught me that there's a correlation between my academic work ethic and how effective of a public servant I can be."

Addressing his self-perception of growth in leadership, Benjamin said, "My participation in SOAR was the first time that I had ever served in a leadership role. Prior to participating in SOAR, I had never envisioned myself as a leader in any capacity. After participating in SOAR, I not only envision myself as someone capable of leading, but someone who's significantly improved in areas that I struggled with while leading because I've been able to locate my weaknesses and focus on them."

Benjamin went further to explain that public speaking was an area that he chose to work to improve as a result of his experience. He attributed growth in this area to his volunteer experience, as can be observed in this response:

> Recently, I had to present part of a project at a podium in a lecture hall, and I was vastly improved after studying different speech techniques. Not only was I more confident going into the speech because I had practiced, but I was also an engaging speaker because I used hand gestures, made eye contact, and varied the pitch of my voice. I felt as if I deserved to deliver my message in front of the audience, and I would've never arrived at that point had I not accepted the opportunity to volunteer in SOAR and reflected on my performance.

After the experience with SOAR, Benjamin has sought other volunteer opportunities, although at the time of the survey and interview, he did not report participating in any. In a continuation of thought about future opportunities in the interview, he shared:

> Having an opportunity to directly help others overcome obstacles by providing your expertise, or simply reaching out a helping hand, is a blessing because it not only benefits the individual you're helping, but also yourself. I firmly believe that most of our underprivileged youth are capable of excelling in whatever field they choose, but they may not feel that way. They may not have been raised to be confident in themselves. With that being said, it's not only the moral choice to help… these individuals develop into who they want to become, but obligatory. Some of our youth may be one intervention away from aspiring to

be someone revolutionary, or from beginning to question the notion instilled in them that they're incapable. As someone who lived in the shoes of that struggling kid, I understand the importance of positive reinforcement and what that can spark. I can tell you firsthand that I have never encountered anything as difficult as overcoming an instilled lack of confidence, but when you have a community of individuals that reinforce you, it becomes much easier.

Noting that he used the term "underprivileged youth," it is important to mention that Benjamin viewed his own experience as similar to that of students recruited from the community. Though this perception is worth exploring, much of his help in planning SOAR was related to the fact that Benjamin grew up in the community from which we recruited and viewed his own opportunities as similar to those of participating youth.

Discussion

This study yielded some unexpected results. The unsolicited mention of particular communication skills, such as public speaking and English fluency, demonstrated the thoughtfulness and specificity of student responses. Beyond general feelings of growth related to service, university volunteer participants articulated unique areas in which they perceived benefit and were able to express concrete examples of how this impacted their lives during and after their time of volunteer service.

Perceived Effects on Engagement in the Academic Community

Two participants, Camille and Benjamin, reported increased academic motivation based on their perception of responsibility as role models. In these scenarios, it seems that leadership responsibilities affected academic engagement. Benjamin expressed a heightened awareness of ways that his academic skills in mathematics affected the high school students with whom he worked. It is not clear what Benjamin's reference to "daily decisions" (that impact others) included, but his perception of connections between the volunteer experience and his regular academic experiences was valuable to this study. He claimed to gain a higher appreciation of the relevancy of university academic work and attached this to his potential to affect the lives of others (benefits of value similar to those discussed by Saville et al., 2022). Interestingly, Benjamin also connected his academic and personal developments with community responsibilities —a transformative move that links volunteering, academic engagement, and citizenship.

Reflecting on Martin's comments connecting his desire to practice conversational English skills with his self-perception as a member of the academic community, I had a realization: Whereas other university volunteers connected honing communication skills with leadership, for Martin, the ability to converse with others in English (not his first language) was integral to his sense of belonging and also to engagement.

Martin addressed a topic in response to the survey question on leadership that I believe also speaks to academic engagement. He was offered a new opportunity after he reached out to professors—interaction with faculty is an indicator of engagement based on the NSSE (2020). Another NSSE indicator relates to having discussions with students from diverse backgrounds. Camille's discussion linking the diversity of learning styles that she experienced among SOAR participants to the diversity of the university campus seems to show movement toward engagement in this area.

Perceived Effects on Leadership

I had anticipated that responses would focus on self-understanding and levels of confidence, as can be observed in Benjamin's mention of a newly-developed self-perception as a leader. However, two responses pointed to an additional dimension. Camille seemed to indicate that she came to the program with a high level of self-efficacy: "I knew I had skills in leadership and speaking." Yet, when asked about the area in which she grew, she responded, "leadership," and added that she viewed SOAR as an opportunity to use her abilities. On the other hand, Benjamin felt that his communication skills improved after his recognition of an area of weakness in public speaking. These experiences are consistent with Uzman and Maya's (2019) theory of self-leadership—confidence to lead others is built, in part, through comfort in one's own skill levels.

Camille's in-depth description of her practices related to instruction was intriguing. She reported an awareness of diversity among learners in the literature circle she led and connected this with her attempts to diversify instruction. She demonstrated initiative in modifying and developing the curriculum and adapting her approach to meet the needs of her students. In these ways, Camille recognized her own professional capacities and acted on them. The combined university student volunteer reflec-

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tions supported the idea that growth in leadership would be directly related to the roles in which the volunteers served (Ritchie, 2016). Camille's perceived growth as an educator is an example of this.

Inspiration for Student Future Engagement

Each participant expressed that SOAR was a positive experience and showed interest in future engagement. Two participants, Martin and Camille, shared specific post-SOAR engagement experiences and attributed some of their motivation for these to their SOAR experience. The opportunity that Martin pursued had similarities to the SOAR experience—it involved instructional leadership. Camille, on the other hand, found added energy to complete the manuscript for a book that she was working on—though not a volunteer opportunity, certainly a form of academically related engagement.

Additional Perceived Benefits

I observed that the guest speakers played an important role in the program for the high school participants and college volunteer leaders alike. We had to modify the evening schedule on a couple of occasions due to lengthy interaction between the speakers and participants (both college and youth). On at least one occasion, university student leaders spent additional post-session time conversing with a guest speaker. Camille's mention of the impact of one of these speakers on her and on a high school student in her literature circle added confirmation to our observations.

SOAR brought university students together with university faculty and community leaders (educators, artists, and a local pastor who also facilitates a campus ministry) as a team of volunteers. The university volunteers were respected as partners in this endeavor—their input and reflections were valued throughout the process. This is particularly demonstrated in Benjamin's participation on the SOAR Planning Team. The additional contact and collaboration with faculty and university peers outside of the classroom boosted the number of educationally purposeful activities fostered by the initiative (Kuh et al., 2010).

The Success of the Anti-Deficit Approach

Returning to the anti-deficit approach modeled in this study, I believe that the SOAR Planning Team's perception of the student volunteers' potential was accurate. Of the three university volunteer

study participants, the anti-deficit approach seemed to have the most transformative impact on Benjamin, evidenced by his expression, "Prior to participating in SOAR, I had never envisioned myself as a leader in any capacity." It seems that the recognition of Benjamin's potential, which led to the invitation to participate, positively impacted his self-perception. It is notable that he also served in more capacities than the other student volunteer participants. Benjamin's experience, along with the positive findings for all the university volunteers who participated in the study, speaks to the value of the contribution of this study.

Future Program Direction

The next step of this work involves creating a study circle (Nembhard, 2014) that includes community members who are intimately connected with the specific neighborhoods and schools (community volunteers from the pilot program would be good candidates) as well as university representatives. Using SOAR as a pilot, the goal will be to engage in critical reflection that moves toward addressing community needs in ways that are liberating.

I hope to involve university student volunteers who are recruited from prescribed reading courses for longer periods of their college careers, ideally beginning while they are still in the prescribed classes. I noted that prescribed reading courses at our university are linked with history courses. I envision more succinctly connecting the history curriculum with community engagement opportunities. For example, student participants would benefit from connecting the histories of Freedom Schools with creative planning for engagement.

Mindful of the ways that participants in the present study reported and valued personal growth in soft skills, I anticipate a mentoring model in which previous student participants or sponsoring faculty members will help newly recruited volunteers maximize the benefits of the experience. As an example, one participant suggested that members of a new cohort be encouraged to obtain and begin using planners prior to volunteering in order to organize time commitments from the beginning of their service.

Community volunteer service has far-reaching potential to promote engagement, raise questions for academic exploration, shape the interests of volunteers, and influence their sense of civic responsibility. This study testifies to the possibility and power of university educators imagining holistic models of discipline-based community service in which students are invited on a journey as collaborators and volunteers. In publishing this study, I hope particularly to encourage faculty to challenge

deficit perceptions and make directed efforts to include students who are currently or have been recipients of prescribed academic support.

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