Reconsidering the American Dream and U.S. Latino Culture in a College Spanish Service-Learning Course

Zak K. Montgomery and Serena B. Ugoretz
Wartburg College

Sarah E. Montgomery, Sarah Vander Zanden, and Ashley Jorgensen
University of Northern Iowa

Mirsa Rudic
Waterloo Community Schools

ABSTRACT
This study explores how a joint Photovoice project about the American Dream between a U.S. Latino culture course and a multicultural middle school class influenced college students’ perceptions of Latino culture. In addition to outlining the service-learning course design, the study also analyzes the trajectory of the students’ understanding of the American Dream. As a result of the partnership, college students’ American Dreams shifted away from the archetypal personal success narrative toward a more civically-oriented approach.

RECONSIDERING THE AMERICAN DREAM AND U.S. LATINO CULTURE IN A COLLEGE SPANISH SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE

I didn’t think that the [middle school] students would have such profound American Dreams nor that those dreams would seem so similar but in reality the meanings were very different. In the end, I don’t think that the dream has to be only one American Dream, for the people in the United States, but rather more like a dream for the future, for all. (Emily, Essay 2, 11/30/2012)

INTRODUCTION
Colleges aim to provide intellectually rich opportunities to help students learn academic content in a deep and integrative way, with service learning being one recognized avenue. This paper describes a community-based service-learning partnership between an upper-level Spanish course about Latinos in the United States at a small liberal arts college and a racially- and linguistically-diverse class of sixth graders, including many Latinos, at a local public school. The one-on-one college/sixth-grade partnerships met weekly during a 14-week semester to examine the American Dream through an interdisciplinary collaboration that integrated literature and the arts, particularly photography, using a modified Photovoice approach (Wang, 1999; Wang, 2006). The teacher and professor sought increased reciprocity by co-designing an experience that had the partners work together to photograph, analyze, and narrate their own emerging understandings of the American Dream. The partners then shared their co-constructed knowledge at three public showcases, which engaged the local community in meaningful dialogue about the potential implications of reconsidering the American Dream.

The present study explores how college student perceptions of Latino culture in the United States and their understanding of the American Dream developed over the course of this semester-long service-learning partnership. Analysis of data related to the American Dream...
project demonstrates that through the partnership, the college students reconsidered previous notions of their own American Dream(s), developed more nuanced understandings of Latinos in the United States, and showed a propensity for increased civic engagement. This study also hopes to provide a model for faculty and administrators interested in cultivating community-based, interdisciplinary partnerships that go beyond service or tutoring and seek greater reciprocity, particularly those involving cultural studies or language courses in higher education.

Service Learning in Higher Education Language and Culture Courses

The discourse surrounding the potential impact of service learning in education pre-dates the term’s existence. Dewey (1938) argued for education to be experiential and relevant to learners’ lives and communities, while similarly, Freire (1970/1990) challenged the traditional “banking” models of education, where students are simply recipients of knowledge deposits by teachers. Essentially, both argued for a negotiated role for teacher and student, where both are knowledge producers (Shor & Freire, 1987; Caldwell, 2007). Likewise, it is in this space of interaction and relationship building between students and teachers where learning results (Nieto, 2010). As a pedagogical strategy, service learning also seeks this negotiated space by intentionally integrating service with academic content, considering real-life community issues through collaborative experiences, as well as structured reflection and analysis. Service learning and engagement scholarship and practice over the past two decades has strongly promoted the negotiated model introduced by Dewey and Freire, moving away from drop-in service/tutoring toward more reciprocal, co-constructed community partnerships with shared goals and outcomes between stakeholders (Campano et al., 2010; Clayton et al., 2010; Boyle-Baise, 2003).

With the notable exception of study abroad experiences, foreign language programs in the United States have been relatively slow to integrate service-learning or experiential (domestic) courses into their regular offerings, largely because the literary focus of most programs does not lend itself smoothly to meaningful field components. However, in a 2007 publication, the Modern Language Association (MLA) Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages called attention to the need to reconsider the foreign language curriculum: “In our view, foreign language departments, if they are to be meaningful players in higher education—or, indeed, if they are to thrive as autonomous units—must transform their programs and structure.”

As the MLA report indicates, there have indeed been some innovative faculty moving toward these types of high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008), yet the literature on service learning in higher education Spanish and other language courses is still relatively underdeveloped in comparison to fields such as health, social services, or education. The last major work was Juntos: Community partnerships in Spanish and Portuguese (Hellebrandt, Arries, & Verona, 2004) nearly a decade ago, while the first major volume dedicated to the topic Construyendo puentes (Hellebrandt & Verona, 1999) came just a few years earlier by the same editors. Recent studies (Elorriaga, 2007; Barreneche, 2011; Caldwell, 2007; Falce-Robinson & Strother, 2012) have centered on the language acquisition outcomes of incorporating service learning. While the findings of these studies have focused on motivation and confidence in the target language, a small number of scholar/teachers (Bromberg, 2008; Zapata, 2011) have explicitly made (inter)cultural understanding the centerpiece of course design and implementation. Although a valuable resource, many volunteer or tutoring projects, in which college students serve the community, do not promote the type of progressive, transformational, educational process advocated by Dewey (1938) and Freire (1970).

The paucity of service-learning research and teaching in foreign language courses, particularly focusing on cultural understanding rather than language acquisition, is also a product of the academy’s struggle to evaluate or, in some cases, to value community-engagement scholarship (Boyer, 1996; Freeman, Gust,
Aloshen, 2009; Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002).

Ironically, in addition to advancing the aforementioned MLA Ad Hoc Committee’s hopes for the profession, service learning in foreign language courses could help fill a gap in the timeless search for authentic learning materials, or realia. For example, Caldwell (2007) purports a new understanding of foreign language realia in the service-learning context, writing: “[W]ithin the service learning paradigm, the four walls of the classroom open themselves to a new classroom without borders, one that integrates students as participants in real-world contexts.”

The field component of the community-based course studied here embodies the MLA’s suggested move from traditional literature to more fluid, interdisciplinary experiential curricula. Instead of an add-on, the service-learning component was treated as an interactive culture studies text to expand college students’ understanding of Latino culture in the United States. Students co-constructed a participatory photography and writing project with a public school class that jointly interrogated the concept of an American Dream. In the course, college students reflected on the partnership through writing and in-class discussions, applying the field component to academic content. These reflections demonstrate how the students progressed toward cultural competence about Latinos in the United States. Martin and Vaughn (2007) define cultural competence as an ability to effectively interact with people of different cultures in a manner reflecting parity of cultures. It is comprised of four components: (a) Awareness of one’s own cultural worldview, (b) Attitude towards cultural differences, (c) Knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and (d) Acquisition of cross-cultural skills. For our purposes, cultural competence results in the ability to understand and effectively interact with people across cultures. This experience challenged students to reconsider their knowledge of Latino culture and the conceptual American Dream in light of the cultural competence gained through the service-learning partnership.

METHODS

Context of the Study

The Latinos in the United States course consisted of nine Spanish majors and 13 minors who pursued degrees in Education, Pre-Med Biology, Psychology, International Relations, English/Writing, and Communications. All students had studied abroad for a month (Costa Rica or Mexico) with a faculty member and three had studied for a semester in a Spanish-speaking country. One student was biracial, one was Asian-American, and 20 were Caucasian, all from the Midwest. The regional liberal arts college of fewer than 2,000 students that they attend is located in a small town approximately 30 minutes by car from the partner school.

The middle school class consisted of 22 sixth graders, 18 of whom consented to the study. Five consenting students were English Language Learners: one Pacific Islander, four of Mexican heritage; of the non-ELL consenting students, seven were African-American and six were Caucasian. The partner school, hereafter referred to as the Academy, is located in a metropolitan area of 150,000 people in the third-largest school district in the state. The city has a large historical African-American population that dates to the Great Migration, and in the past two decades the city attracted thousands of newcomers, particularly Hispanic (im)migrants, as well as Bosnian (late 1990s) and Burmese (2010-present) refugees who followed the demand for manufacturing and meat processing jobs to the area. These groups settled mostly in the city’s “East” side, while Caucasians have historically lived on the “West” side; this geographical distinction has magnified the community’s awareness of cultural and socioeconomic difference.

The Academy is one of four public middle schools and is the district’s second most statistically diverse school. According to district data, 76.9% of its students are ethnic minorities, including 56% African-American, 16.8% Hispanic, and 3% Asian. The middle school
reported that 91.2% of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch in the 2011-2012 building level report, up from 78% in 2004. The school has a history of low achievement, with its feeder high school having been labeled a “dropout factory” (meaning that 40% or more of its students fail to graduate) by the local newspaper in 2007. There have been major improvements in the district’s graduation rates in the last ten years, recording a rate of 77% in 2011.

**Methods and Means to be used**

The partnership described in this study, which received IRB approval from both universities, centered on a co-constructed, multidisciplinary, participatory photography project that interrogated the American Dream in today’s context as part of the regular language arts block. Middle school students read and discussed literature related to the American Dream, including Langston Hughes’ poetry and Sandra Cisneros’ The House on Mango Street. Both groups of students took and shared photos about their “American Dream” using a modified Photovoice methodology (Wang, 1999). As a pedagogy, Photovoice has three main objectives: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns; (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussion of their photographs; and (3) to reach policy makers (Wang, 1999). Both groups analyzed images, learned about basic photography, and explored multiple perspectives as part of their regular curriculum. Finally, students wrote personal narratives to accompany their photographs at three culminating public gallery events, one at the middle school, one at a local college of education, and one at the partner college campus.

The partnership between the ELL teacher and the college professor had developed over three years, with this being their second analogous collaboration. The community engagement office of the liberal arts college funded student transportation, and another local college of education and the middle school’s parent involvement committee co-funded the three public gallery events. There were also a number of community-building activities, such as a celebratory pizza party and a joint field trip to the Ballet Folklórico de México at a local auditorium.

In addition to the ELL teacher and the Spanish professor, the research team consisted of two university professors from different disciplines (literacy and social studies methods), a university supervisor, and two graduate students. The American Dream was chosen as the overarching theme because we believed it would provide a flexible lens through which to do interdisciplinary inquiry simultaneously with college and middle school students. In addition, the team opted for an adapted Photovoice (Wang, 1999) pedagogy because it lent itself to a co-constructed collaboration, both between college/sixth-grade partners and the research/teaching team, while meeting the highly structured assessment requirements of the urban school district and the college course objectives. Although the Spanish professor and ELL teacher were the primary communicators, the research team met prior to the project and communicated weekly by email to co-design and co-teach the open-ended American Dream Photovoice project, as well as to organize the public gallery showcase and other events.

**Spanish Service-Learning Course Design**

Latinos in the United States is a multidisciplinary 300-level course taught in Spanish with the following objectives: “to foment critical dialogues about the Latino presence and influence in the U.S. from various perspectives . . . [and to] attempt to challenge and analyze the stereotypes and beliefs presented both in the media and in the dominant discourse” (Course syllabus, 2012). This course iteration was designed with the service-learning project at the center, focusing on U.S. Latino culture; classroom and online discussions were conducted in Spanish with similar linguistic goals as other upper-division Spanish courses.

The Spanish professor agrees with Caldwell (2007) that service learning is new realia rather than supplemental to a course. Therefore, the service-learning field component took place during the allotted class (100 min each Thursday). Tuesday’s class on campus (100
min) typically consisted of small group structured reflection (30 min) that connected the field to reading assignments; student-led discussions about readings (30-40 min); and briefing/logistical preparations for the field component (10-15 min). The course incorporated music (e.g. Las Cafeteras’ “La Bamba rebelde” [2012] vs. Ritchie Valens’ “La Bamba” [1958]), poetry (e.g. Gary Soto), short prose (e.g. Gloria Anzaldúa) and documentary films (e.g. PBS Frontline’s Lost in Detention) by and about Latinos in the United States, as well as interdisciplinary readings from Latino Studies and Sociology journals.

**Research Questions**

This study sought to answer two primary questions: 1) how might a community-based service-learning course affect college Spanish students’ perceptions of Latinos in the United States? and 2) how does the lens of the American Dream influence college students’ perceptions of Latino culture and their own American Dream(s)?

**Data Collection Methods**

The focal data for this study comes from student written reflections (all translated from the original Spanish) from the service-learning experience. To maximize language engagement in relation to course goals, students completed a weekly private diary and interactive discussions on the course management site, responded to pre-writing prompt (PW), and wrote two analytical essays; the respective writing prompts are listed in the table below.

**Table 1: Service Learning Reflection Prompts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Writing Prompt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-writing in-class (9/6/12)</td>
<td>Write a mini-essay about the following: What is your version of the “American Dream?” What does it include? What do you think is the “American Dream” of Latinos in the U.S.? Is it different from or similar to yours? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical Essay 1 (10/4/12)</td>
<td>Choose a reading, class discussion or episode/event in the field that made you see the situation of Latinos in the U.S. in a different way or from another angle from which you had seen before. Describe why it changed your perspective and what from this situation affected you most. Why? You may connect the reading or discussions to the field experience to illustrate the idea more clearly, with specific examples from the field.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical Essay 2 (11/30/12)</td>
<td>Choose one or two stereotypes or perspectives that you had about Latinos in the U.S. before this class and comment the trajectory of your thoughts: Where did these beliefs originate? What are your thoughts about these issues today? Use concrete examples to analyze the trajectory of your perspectives. Utilize: the readings, “American Dream,” the field component, and the discussions from [course site] or the class. In the context of the class and, most of all, the field, how has your perspective about the American Dream changed because of the Photovoice project with your [middle school] partner? Why do you think that it has changed? Give concrete examples from the field or the class in general. (For example, is there a Latino American Dream? Explain.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additional supporting data sources included voice recordings during class meetings, photos and accompanying narratives of college and middle school students, and research team field notes.

**Methods of Data Analysis**

The first student, Haley, was chosen at random, independently coded, and analyzed by research team members who recognized emerging themes found in specific mentions by college students about their changing perspectives on Latino culture in the United States and new understandings of the American Dream from the partnership. Themes were crosschecked and verified by research team members and refined before analyzing five randomly-selected students using content analysis of qualitative research methods (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). The five college student participants are described in Table 2.

**Table 2: College Student Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseud.); College Class</th>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Area of Study</th>
<th>6th-grade Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haley; Junior</td>
<td>Caucasian female, suburban</td>
<td>Biology major (pre-med), Spanish minor</td>
<td>Caucasian female, non-ELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy; Junior</td>
<td>Asian-American female, medium-sized city (same school district as partner)</td>
<td>Spanish/International Relations major; first-generation college student</td>
<td>Pacific Islander female, ELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian; Senior</td>
<td>Caucasian male, rural</td>
<td>Secondary Education (history) major, Spanish endorsement; first-generation college student</td>
<td>Pacific Islander male, ELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audrey; Senior</td>
<td>Caucasian female, small town</td>
<td>Biology major (pre-med), Spanish minor</td>
<td>African-American female, non-ELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily; Junior</td>
<td>Biracial female, medium-sized city</td>
<td>Spanish/Psychology major</td>
<td>Hispanic female, ELL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RESULTS**

The primary themes that emerged underscored how the American Dream project and/or service-learning partnership 1) challenged students to analyze their stereotypes and understanding of Latinos in the United States, 2) identified their role in perpetuating perceived socioeconomic and cultural barriers between groups, leading to students’ increased civic agency or activism to break down said barriers, and 3) illuminated expanded perspectives on the American Dream that took into account a larger world view and reconfigured how they understood notions of access to the American Dream for their middle school partners.

**Stereotypes of Latinos in the United States**

What is the dominant image of Latinos in the United States? How do stereotypes of Latinos affect how they are perceived in individual communities or the United States at large?
If perceived as harmful, how can stereotypes be dismantled? These questions emerged in the student reflections while analyzing the data set. Several students began to acknowledge, consider the origins of, and challenge the stereotypes that they, or others in the United States, harbored toward Latinos. By reflecting on the service-learning component of the course, students underscored their own lack of cultural competence and questioned how to best promote increased understanding in others.

One student, Audrey, explained that before the course, she stereotyped Latinos as “a group of immigrants, many of whom were illegal that came to our country to escape a horrible life.” Additionally, she believed that Latinos could overlook “dangerous [work] conditions or lack of benefits” as it “ought to be better than [living] in Mexico” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012). Audrey’s description of her stereotypes about Latinos echoed a dominant U.S. Anglo-centrism; particularly poignant is her self-described sense of “otherness,” or an “us vs. them” view of Latinos as foreigners, which negated the reality that many Latinos are U.S. citizens. She wrote:

“I think that, unconsciously, I had de-Americanized the Latinos to be able to understand the injustices that affect them. By undoing their citizenship, their problems did not seem to be my responsibility or the responsibility of the American government” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012).

Audrey explained that using stereotypes to distance herself from being socially responsible for the wellbeing of “them” was part of the discourse among the White population in her hometown. She wrote,

“It was common to hear our teachers and parents say, ‘You need to do well in school so you can go to college. If not, you will be a worker at the meatpacking plant.’ For this reason, the lifestyle of these people, my only examples of ‘los latinos’ became a threat, an eventual punishment for the lazy. (Essay 2, 11/30/2012)”

Significantly, many of the immigrant children in the partner middle school class had family who worked under similar conditions, most in the local meatpacking plant. By the end of the course, she attributed her “us vs. them” mentality to the negative imagery conjured up by the frequent meatpacking “threat” by school personnel, which she identified as unjust and destructive. While she recognized her privilege and prejudice throughout the course, Audrey’s reflections revealed a newfound sense of social responsibility for the working conditions that she had observed, but once ignored, on a high school class visit to a meatpacking plant (Essay 1, 10/4/2012). After deconstructing her de-Americanization of Latino workers, the “threat” now had a human face.

While Audrey claimed that she learned her stereotypes in her hometown, two students noted that the media also greatly contributed to their stereotypes about Latinos. Haley wrote midway through the course:

“In the media, many Latinos are represented as illegal immigrants. They focus only on coming to the U.S. and taking advantage of systems like welfare and they want to earn an ‘easy’ life. They are shown as taking jobs that Caucasians do not take because they are inferior [positions]” (Essay 1, 10/4/2012)

Similarly, in his second essay, Sebastian questioned the cultural influence of the media’s portrayal of Latinos:

“I [thought] that . . . anyone who [spoke] Spanish [was] a part of the Latino cultural group. . . . I think that the media influenced me a lot because the Latinos are not always portrayed in a positive manner. They always put everyone who speaks Spanish in the same group and think that they share the same culture. . . . However, this is not the reality”. (11/30/2012)

Both Haley and Sebastian analyzed where their stereotypes about Latinos may have originated, which guided them through an apparent trajectory of self-acknowledged cultural awareness.

After learning about Latino culture in the service-learning course, the data also suggested that the students began to rethink the diversity of Latinos in the United States. Some identified explicit incorrect stereotypes about Latinos. Lucy wrote that prior to this course, “I thought that many people with Latino appearance were Mexican. I didn’t have enough information to know that Latinos come from other Latin American countries. I feel ignorant because I had assumed that all were Mexicans” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012). Emily also shared this sentiment.
(Essay 2, 11/30/2012); both attributed their expanded understanding to the middle school partnership.

For her part, Audrey’s final reflection delved more deeply and intentionally into the origins of her ignorance of Latinos in the United States:

“[T]he manner in which I kept stereotypes about Latinos [before] was to put the people that I met that are Latinos that have noticeably contributed to our country—like public figures, like Sonia Sotomayor or leaders in my hometown—in a group of exceptions, instead of changing my stereotypes”. (Essay 2, 11/30/2012)

By recognizing that she had previously denied the contributions of Latinos by devaluing the exceptionalism of a few, she underscored how she unconsciously othered the entire heterogeneous group. Audrey also analyzed how her previous stereotypes related to class discussions and readings on the possible terminology for Latinos in the United States (e.g. Hispanic, Chicano, Latino, Mexican-American). She concluded: “Today, I recognize that my beliefs about Latinos do not apply to the group in any significant way. My thoughts are in a trajectory that includes the idea that the term ‘los latinos’ does more bad than good” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012). Through readings and fieldwork, Audrey recognized the harm that (mis)classification does in perpetuating stereotypes, which leads to further othering by the dominant group.

Throughout the service-learning partnership, each of the college students described here went through the process of recognizing and analyzing their stereotypes and past beliefs about Latinos. Moreover, it is apparent from the reflection data that the students began to reconstruct a new, more complicated understanding of the role of Latinos in American society. In addition, they became aware of their own roles in perpetuating and deconstructing these stereotypes. This was one type of critical thinking that the course goals purported—to gain a perspective on how stereotypes affect the way students view and interact with the world around them, and to promote broader cultural competence.

**Breaking Down Barriers**

While not all of the Academy students who participated in the study were Latinos, many were a part of minority groups and/or immigrant families who may have similar experiences living in the United States. By identifying the “us vs. them” dichotomy through deconstructing their stereotypes about Latinos, the college students began to recognize their own role in creating barriers between groups. This led them to further explore the reasons for socioeconomic and cultural barriers, which they also realized could impede the ability of their middle school partners to follow their American Dream(s). In their reflections, the college students reacted to these barriers by underscoring the racist tendencies in their own communities, citing the service-learning partnerships in their shift toward a raised consciousness (Freire, 1970/1990).

Despite the fact that all of the students had studied abroad for a month and were communicatively proficient in Spanish, they still viewed their self-described ignorance of Latino culture as a major barrier. They recognized that misinformation led them to create an unnecessary dichotomy between Latino and non-Latino culture. For example, Audrey reflected on her high school experiences:

“[M]y only encounters with Latinos were in the hallway or in the cafeteria where I was intimidated by their fast Spanish and their public displays of affection. I regret that I never tried to meet some of the Latino students to learn about their culture and alleviate racism, which is subtle but unacceptable, in my high school”. (Essay 1, 10/4/2012)

Here, Audrey identified her own participation in perpetuating what she perceived as a cultural barrier and lamented the missed opportunities for cross-cultural understanding.

Similarly, Haley reflected upon barriers between cultures that encourage racist tendencies. She asserted, “[S]tudents my age that have lived their entire lives in the rural U.S. lost cultural experiences, and for this reason, they are hostile (sometimes) toward immigrants. They are uncomfortable with things that are different simply because they are different.” For this reason, Haley shared her motivation to
“learn more about Latino culture in the U.S. and to be able to discuss the issues with others in an intelligent manner” (Essay 1, 10/4/2012). After a course reading about how some food-processing employers assumed “that because everyone speaks Spanish, everyone shares the same culture,” rather than recognizing Latino diversity, Sebastian shared a need to disrupt these barriers. He wrote, “We need to learn about everyone else through experience, not through erroneous ideas and stereotypes” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012).

In their service-learning partnerships, the college students found themselves working with middle school students from cultures and/or socioeconomic statuses starkly different from theirs. They often wrote about their concerns about breaking down barriers—cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, or age-related—between them and their partners. In one of her weekly journal entries, Emily explained the moment in which the barrier between her and her partner was reduced. Emily wrote, “I think that the most important change is the interaction between me and Amelia. At the beginning of the fieldwork, she was very timid and calm. Each week she is more open and also shares more things with me” (Diary 4, 9/30/2012).

Audrey had a similar experience with her partner while discussing the photos for the American Dream Photovoice project. She wrote, “I think that my conversation with Sarah about her photos was an overall success. . . . Sarah told me more about her family in the past. . . . [I]t is a success that Sarah trusts me enough to share with me about her family” (Diary 7, 10/28/2012). Likewise, Lucy’s partner gained trust in her and began to share more about her own dreams (Diary 4, 9/30/2012). These relationships of mutual confidence and trust stemmed, in part, from the service-learning field experience and allowed for both the college and sixth-grade students to learn more about others who they initially perceived to be different from themselves. By the end of the course, the students’ reflections began to embody the parity of cultures outlined by Martin and Vaughn (2007). They analyzed their own cultural worldviews and demonstrated an openness to learning about other cultures, actually learned about said cultures, and were also able to effectively communicate and work alongside students from a different cultural background, which indicates some degree of increased cultural competence (Martin & Vaughn, 2007).

The students’ increasing cultural competence contributed to their heightened awareness of their ability to challenge perceived barriers. Two students in particular delved more deeply into the role of education in cultural competence and breaking down barriers. For example, in his second essay, Sebastian stressed the importance of teaching about other cultures as a future educator (11/30/2012). Likewise, Haley explicitly found herself motivated toward activism through education. She recollected that her friends sometimes have what she calls “a slip of the tongue” with racist comments about Latinos:

“They often try to explain saying that was the way they were raised and they are not bad for treating immigrants in this way. I think it is time to stop passing this message of intolerance to our children. I hope that when my children and grandchildren are my age, the racism toward Latinos will only be a history lesson” (Essay 1, 10/4/2012).

Interestingly, in her second analytical essay two months later, Haley demonstrated that she had already become more civically engaged. She explained how she took action and taught her family about the Chicano movement over Thanksgiving, when all of them, including those with multiple advanced degrees, did not even know what a Chicano was. Haley concludes, “I could open the eyes of various people about the history of Latinos in the [U.S.]. . . . I can have an impact on my society by sharing my understanding of Latino culture with others” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012). Although a small gesture of activism, Haley’s recognition of the potential impact of her cultural competence fueled her civic engagement. Her transformation and efforts to combat these barriers also paralleled the college students’ changing perspectives on the American Dream.

**New Perspectives on an American Dream**

Throughout the partnership, college and sixth-grade students worked together to consider what the American Dream meant, both for them
and for others. The college students reflected on the American Dream at various points; some identified drastic shifts in their own American Dreams, while others demonstrated fewer changes as the course progressed. Each student’s definition of his/her own American Dream varied, but the following themes emerged in the compositions: a shifting self-identity through increased cultural competence; the fluid, heterogeneous nature of the American Dream; who has access to the American Dream and why/how; and a more collective understanding of how and for whom the dream is pursued.

Sebastian found a new sense of self-identity through the service-learning aspect of this course. In particular, he underscored his increased cultural competence as foundational:

“I learned a lot about my life and the person I want to be. . . . The service-learning project ‘The American Dream’ part of this class helped me to change the negative perspective that I had. . . . [and] the work influenced how I view the world and Latinos in the U.S.” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012)

In the pre-writing (PW), Sebastian viewed Latinos from a deficit perspective, writing that the Latino American Dream was moving from “having nothing” to gaining privileges through economic means (9/6/2012). He initially contrasted the Latino American Dream with his own, which he believed he was living as a first-generation college student, but by the end of the course, Sebastian found cultural competence more valuable (Essay 2, 11/30/2012) than personal success or money.

While finding a sense of self was important to Sebastian, other students complicated the rhetorical “bootstraps” concept of the American Dream as the partnership developed. At the beginning of the semester, Lucy made a distinction between the Latino American Dream and her own; hers involved “obtain[ing] a strong [good] job, start[ing] a family, [and] hav[ing] kids and help[ing] them grow up” with financial security and “liv[ing] without limitations”; Lucy’s conception of the Latino American Dream was “to work hard and survive.” Significantly, she also assumed that Latinos are not citizens (PW, 9/6/2012).

Early in the course, Lucy also projected the hard work narrative onto the middle school students. She wrote that her partner, an immigrant sixth-grade student from the Pacific Islands whose father worked at the local meatpacking plant, aspired “to win a scholarship, go to a university, and to be a doctor” and that she would achieve her goals by “work[ing] hard in school and get[ting] good grades” (Essay 1, 10/4/2012). According to Lucy, her partner learned these values at home. She related the student’s situation to the course reading “Latino Lives in America,” which analyzed meatpacking plants where workers found themselves with dangerous work and low pay (Essay 1, 10/4/2012).

Although Lucy’s explanation of her partner’s family life offered a real-life connection to the immigrant working experience, her early reflections still demonstrated her belief that hard work would allow attainment of the American Dream for all.

Throughout the course, Lucy made continuous connections between herself and her partner. She was a first-generation, Asian-American student raised in the same neighborhood who attended the Academy (Diary 1, 9/6/2012) in what she viewed as a similar situation:

“I am from a family that doesn’t have a lot of money. I am from a family with a single mother working hard just to survive. I can relate to her and give her an example to fight for anything. I want to help her believe that she can be successful and have confidence in school.” (Diary 2, 10/4/2012)

Lucy unconsciously connected her pursuit to her conception of the Latino American Dream outlined above (PW, 9/6/2012), where survival was the result of hard work.

After participating in the service-learning component, Lucy began to better comprehend the variations in the American Dreams of the middle school students. However, she still saw some optimism in the American Dream overall. Although Lucy still believed that she was “in control of the success of [her own] American Dream,” her conceptual American Dream was more nuanced, both for herself and for others:

“[T]he project showed me that dreams can change over time, like mine. . . . I do not want to have the same American Dream for the rest of my life because there are limitless opportunities.
Everyone has their own personal dream based on their experiences and beliefs in life.” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012)

Throughout her reflections, Lucy appeared unable to disconnect her partner’s potential from Lucy’s own “bootstraps” story of overcoming great odds to attend college. She also demonstrated pride in her partner: “I felt very proud of her like a mother [would be] of her child” (Diary 4, 9/30/2012). Despite recognizing the challenges that were ahead for both, Lucy’s personal connection to her partner’s story made her more idealistic as the course progressed.

In contrast to Lucy, Audrey emphasized socioeconomic status as a main barrier to reaching the American Dream from the beginning. She explained that while her dreams may be similar, she understood that Latinos may have limited access to their dreams as compared to her situation due to socioeconomic status, citing education, jobs, and family as important for both her and Latinos (PW, 9/6/2012). Although Audrey demonstrated hope for everyone’s American Dream, the progression of her reflections underscored a more nuanced understanding of the barriers than Lucy showed. She wrote, “[O]ur country is constructed in the belief that everybody ought [emphasis added] to ought to have the opportunity to believe these things and to follow their own American Dreams” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012). Perhaps due to socioeconomic status and place of origin, contrary to Lucy, Audrey resisted an idealistic view of the middle school students’ access to their American Dreams, using “ought” to underscore that everyone did not have equal access.

Now cognizant of the potential barriers to the American Dream for others, Audrey wrote, “If there are children without documents in our class at [the Academy], one only needs to read their dreams to know that they deserve to live their American Dreams like everyone else” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012). In the Photovoice Narrative (PN), she expanded her American Dream to include others: “I hope to have trusting, encouraging relationships with my friends, colleagues and patients [as a future doctor]” (11/28/2012). Therefore, the data suggests that the service-learning partnership shifted Audrey’s American Dream toward civic-mindedness.

A newfound civic-mindedness was also apparent in other students’ final reflections, particularly helping provide others with access to the American Dream, which contradicts the individual exceptionalism from early narratives. For example, one sixth-grade narrative surprises Emily: “[A] girl wants to be a voice for the people who can’t speak for themselves like children or the handicapped. It surprised me that the dream of a sixth grader was about other people instead of just herself.” Emily later adopted this American Dream stance, which since her PW, changed from an individual to a collective dream for a common future (Essay 2, 11/30/2012).

CONCLUSION

By the end of the course, each of the college students described here clearly viewed the American Dream from a new perspective than they had previously. Although in their PNs, Emily, Haley, and Sebastian still believed that they could achieve their American Dreams with hard work (11/28/2012), their reflections underscored the social implications of the project as it pertains to access, expanding their dreams to include not only the personal, but also a communal element. Additionally, the students identified the barriers that one would need to overcome to achieve the American Dream(s). For example, Emily demonstrated a newfound realization of the challenges to her own American Dream and wrote, “At the beginning [of the course], the American Dream seemed easy. . . . [W]hen I had to take a photo of my American Dream I realized it is more difficult than I had thought” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012). By completing the Photovoice project with the middle school students, the college students deconstructed their own stereotypes and, as a result, developed a sense of agency to change the larger society.

Although this project was not a panacea for intercultural understanding, the trajectory of student reflections demonstrates a blurring of the dichotomous “us vs. them” view of Latinos as non-citizens many held before the course. For
example, Audrey reflected on her transformation:

“After thinking about the people that these issues affect, it is difficult to believe that . . . these immigrants are less ‘American’ than me. Do we not share many of the same goals, hopes, and dreams, like the dreams that constructed the USA?” (Essay 2, 11/30/2012)

Overall, the data demonstrates that the cultural competence gained from this experiential education opportunity helped students develop a civic-minded sense of agency to educate others and combat ignorance about Latinos in the United States, which aligns with the original course objectives.

While the students did not identify a cohesive Latino American Dream per se (which was not the objective of the course nor the partnership), the service-learning project did provide the lens of the American Dream for students to reflect more deeply on both their personal American Dreams and the implications of this concept for their future careers and educational opportunities; Sebastian received a high school Spanish teaching position at the end of the academic year in which this study was conducted, where he intends to influence his students to become more culturally and linguistically competent; Audrey enrolled in medical school for the following year, where she will gain the necessary skills to assist her community in the future; Haley intends to become a Physician’s Assistant after graduation, where she hopes to assist her Latino patients in selecting the best possible care options; Lucy and Emily studied abroad in South America the semester following the project, where they were immersed for five months in Latino culture. It is hoped that the newfound understandings and questions raised in this class, and from the service-learning partnership, has already or will impact their academic and professional experiences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE-LEARNING AND PRACTICE

Several challenges arose during this community-based service-learning Spanish course. For example, the middle school changed the partner teacher’s assigned class just days before the college class’s first visit, moving from an ELL-only class to a “push-in” with half non-ELL students. This changed the makeup of the partnership and the potential outcomes for the college students, as the new middle school class had only six Latino students. Although the college students were initially disappointed by the lack of Latinos, from the Spanish professor’s perspective, this change did not sidetrack the cultural competence course outcomes.

Another challenge was the school climate toward native languages, which detracted from the outcomes in the highly-standardized curriculum. Most ELL students, particularly the Latinos, did not feel comfortable speaking in their native language with their partners, and only engaged periodically with the Spanish professor. One possible solution is an after-school model with a focus on bilingualism, where the students’ native languages would be celebrated while creating a Spanish immersion environment for the college students. Moreover, an emphasis on written reflection and online discussion mitigated “lost” Spanish conversation and offered more students the opportunity to engage in critical dialogue about course material in the target language.

One significant challenge for these types of partnerships is timing and scheduling. The course in this study is offered every other fall, which negates the possibility of longer-term, continuous partnerships. Although both the ELL teacher and Spanish professor view their partnership over the past three years as successful, the need to plan the collaboration a year in advance based on college scheduling has required maximum flexibility as the semester approaches. In fact, much of the success of this course is due to the co-constructed nature of the partnership, which entailed immeasurable patience and collegiality on the part of the ELL teacher, Spanish professor, research team, and all students involved.

Despite the time and energy necessary to meet the needs of both community partners, this type of research and civic engagement opportunity is valuable for college students, the community they work with (not for), and faculty/researchers. It is hoped that language
faculty consider engaging in service-learning teaching and scholarship, and that academic administrators actively promote and support such community-engagement activities. Regardless of the challenges of the partnership described in this study, the data shows that the relationship between a higher-learning institution and its surrounding community can provide rich opportunities for students to apply their learning and move toward increased cultural competence.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR NOTE
Zak K. Montgomery, Department of English and Modern Languages, Wartburg College; Serena B. Ugoretz, Department of English and Modern Languages, Wartburg College; Sarah E. Montgomery, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Northern Iowa; SarahVander Zanden, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Northern Iowa; Ashley Jorgensen, Department of Teaching, University of Northern Iowa; Mirsa Rudic, Waterloo Community Schools.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Zak K. Montgomery, Department of English and Modern Languages, Wartburg College, 100 Wartburg Blvd., Waverly, IA 50677; 319-352-8435; Email: zak.montgomery@wartburg.edu