

Seminars Are a Cause for Concern

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INTRODUCTION

The Social Concerns Seminars represent one of the oldest traditions and yet one of the most dynamic programs of the Center for Social Concerns. Building on the model of the Urban Plunge (see Research Report 6) that flourished in the 1970s, students and staff—inspired by the Catholic social tradition—began in 1980 to serve in rural Appalachian communities over break periods. The Appalachia Seminar soon grew in collaboration with community partners to foster engagements from home repair and tutoring to spending time in solidarity with people living in one of the highest areas of poverty in the United States.

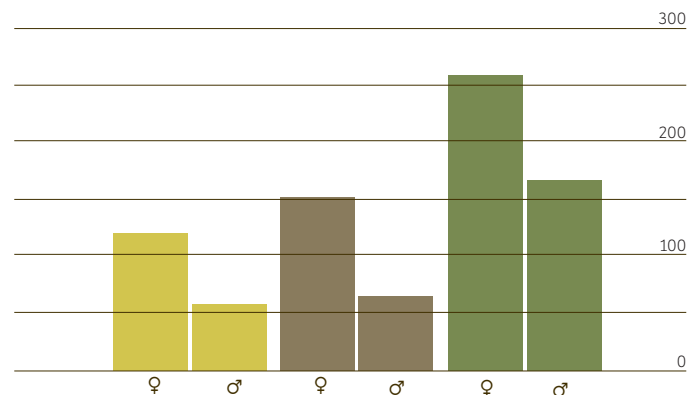
From such foundations grew a formative model for what is now a diverse constellation of approximately 20 distinct seminars employing a range of academic community engagement approaches—including service learning and community-based research—at over 60 sites across the United States and abroad. Through collaborative pedagogy informed by research on student development, Center faculty and student site leaders adapt seminar foci to address the signs of the times, exploring homelessness, global health, sustainability, immigration, violence prevention, healthcare, spirituality, and more. Since the earliest years, each of the seminars bears one credit for the academic reading, writing, and analyses integrated throughout. Pre- and post-immersion classes are taught by Center and University faculty from across the disciplines, while theological reflection and social analysis are imbued across contexts.

Figure 1 outlines seminar participation by gender and college. Since 1980/1981, when 289 students completed one of the seminars, average annual participation has grown to over 800 student participants. Females and students enrolled in the College of Arts and Letters and

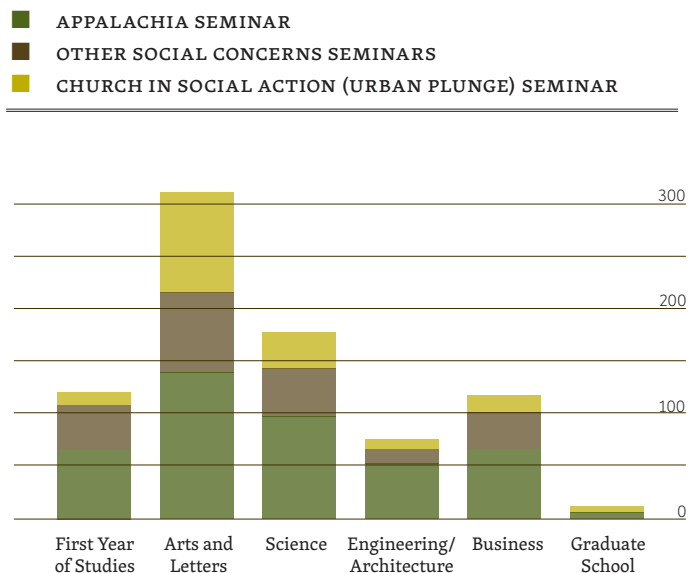
FIGURE 1

Average number of Social Concerns Seminar participants annually by gender and college

(Over the last five academic years, 2006/07 through 2010/11)



817 students a year **65%** female (♀) **35%** male (♂)



the College of Science show higher levels of participation overall (consistent with national trends in forms of engaged learning).

The seminars continue to be a model for student leadership development—students play a significant role in managing logistical and curricular details as site leaders each year. Graduate students may also participate in the seminars; some offer a leadership role in instruction: for example, the Children and Poverty Seminar has been taught by doctoral students in psychology whose academic interests center on resiliency among youth at risk.

The Social Concerns Seminars employ three key elements that we believe combine to facilitate salient learning. First, the seminars are built on well-defined learning objectives that call students to adopt a self-directed posture of learning with and from community partners. Second, course structures are well-aligned with learning objectives and provide a quite consistent press toward full engagement: for example, immersion experiences are sustained and provide an experience of dislocation and perspective taking. Finally, academic rigor is expected from start to finish: assigned texts, reflection, and analyses are not add-ons but integrated throughout.

The present research was designed to examine the effectiveness of the set of seminars. While the seminars cover a range of topics, each is intended

to promote two broad learning goals central to the University of Notre Dame's mission. Specifically, we wish to promote within our students (1) a disciplined sensibility toward poverty and injustice, and (2) a sense of human solidarity and concern for the common good. The study described below examines our effectiveness in fostering these goals; toward that end we examined constructs that are quite salient in community-based learning: openness to diversity, understanding of poverty, views of helping and responsibility, and beliefs about justice. For a more thorough description of the study, see the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (Fall 2010).

SAMPLE AND DATA SOURCE

Participants were 387 undergraduate students (71% female, 22% students of color, 64% first-years and sophomores) that completed a Center for Social Concerns seminar in fall 2008, winter 2009, or spring 2009. Before the first class, instructors requested that students complete an online survey. This survey contained seven scales that measured students' attitudes and values, along with various other items (e.g., demographics) upon entry. After the final class of the semester, the instructor or course coordinator asked students to complete a final survey containing the same seven scales as the pretest.

IN DETAIL

Global Health Seminar

One example of an immersion seminar is the recently developed Global Health in Honduras Seminar. In collaboration with the Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos Holy Family Surgery Center and Dr. Peter (ND '82) and Lulu Daly (MSN), the Center for Social Concerns offers a weeklong immersion course near Tegucigalpa, Honduras. In six class sessions on the Notre Dame campus, students examine the challenges to global health delivery in impoverished communities. Course readings and lectures emphasize health problems that transcend national borders or have a global political and economic impact. Students assess the work of major international agencies such as the

World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Millennium Development Goals, and the World Food Programme (WFP). They also explore development efforts by faith communities and the role of Catholic Social Teaching in addressing global health and the complex social forces that affect it.

Over spring break, students travel to Tegucigalpa to gain exposure and insight into the medical care and health conditions in rural Honduras. Students observe orthopedic surgery, volunteer their time assisting doctors and medical staff with clinical intake, and assist in the general laboratory at Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos outreach medical brigade. Students

also visit rural clinics and meet with local Honduran doctors to learn about the social, economic, and political forces shaping healthcare in the region.

Following the experience, students gather back at Notre Dame to examine their experience through a theological and vocational lens. Students discuss the value of physician and patient relationships, including the role of servant leadership and Catholic Social Tradition as a framework for practice. Class assessment utilizes reflection on theory and practice to examine the future of global health and its implications for developing nations.

TABLE 1 Overview of scales used to measure student learning outcomes.

Scale (and source)	Sample item	Number of items	α (Time 2)
Situational Attributions for Poverty (adapted from Feagin, 1971)	Some people are poor because there are “low wages in some businesses and industries”	6	.72
Openness to Diversity (adapted from Pascarella et al., 1996)	“Learning about people from different cultures is a very important part of my college education.”	4	.83
Responsibility for Improving Society (adapted from Nelson Laird et al., 2005)	Describe how much personal responsibility you have for “speaking up against social injustice”	7	.83
Empowerment View of Helping (Michlitsch & Frankel, 1989)	“People should help others help themselves.”	5	.63
Belief in a Just World (Dalbert et al., 1987)	“I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve.”	6	.66
Social Dominance Orientation (Sidanius et al., 1994)	“It’s OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others.”	8	.82
Self-generating View of Helping (Michlitsch & Frankel, 1989)	“When things are tough, people have to rely on themselves and try harder.”	7	.72

Note: The last three scales were reverse-coded for inclusion in the analyses. α denotes Cronbach’s alpha measure of internal reliability.

MEASURES

The seven outcome measures constitute a related set of attitudes and values pertaining to the recognition and denunciation of societal inequality and the importance placed on helping others. We have described this overarching construct as equality and social responsibility orientation (Bowman & Brandenberger, 2010, in press). Situational attributions for poverty conveys a belief that poverty is caused by societal factors (e.g., poor school systems); this six-item scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .72) is adapted from a survey used by Feagin (1971). Four items from a scale by Pascarella and colleagues (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996) were used to gauge openness to diversity (α = .83). Responsibility for improving society assesses how much personal responsibility one feels for taking action to help others and the world; this seven-item scale (α = .83) is adapted from Nelson Laird, Engberg, and Hurtado (2005). An empowerment view of helping describes beliefs about whether people can overcome their problems with the assistance of others; this five-item scale (α = .63) was taken from Michlitsch and Frankel (1989).

Three additional scales were reverse-coded, because lower values on these scales are generally viewed as reflecting more positive outcomes. Belief

in a just world describes the belief that people get what they deserve: good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people; a popular six-item version of this scale (α = .66) was used (Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987). People who hold this view may be unaware of the substantial injustice that occurs throughout the world; we hypothesized that seminar participation would lower belief in a just world. A short form of the social dominance orientation scale was used (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994); this eight-item scale (α = .82) measures people’s preference for and acceptance of inequality among social groups. Finally, a five-item self-generating view of helping scale (Michlitsch & Frankel, 1989) gauged people’s beliefs that individuals are only able to help themselves overcome their problems (α = .72). Table 1 provides sample items and an overview of all scales.

Several demographic variables were used, including year in college (1 = freshman, to 4 = senior), gender (0 = female, 1 = male), race/ethnicity (0 = White/Caucasian, 1 = student of color), and family income (1 = less than \$25,000/year, to 9 = \$200,000 and above). In addition, two dummy-coded variables indicated whether students had taken one previous Center course or two courses or more; zero courses served as the referent group.

TABLE 2 Means (and standard deviations) for t-test analyses examining pre-post differences in equality and social responsibility measures.

	Mean (SD)		t-value
	Pretest	Posttest	
Situational Attributions for Poverty	2.94 (.49)	3.01 (.48)	2.76**
Openness to Diversity	4.37 (.55)	4.46 (.55)	3.47***
Responsibility for Improving Society	3.27 (.52)	3.32 (.49)	2.31*
Empowerment View of Helping	3.88 (.44)	3.96 (.50)	2.95**
Belief in a Just World	3.26 (.51)	3.26 (.54)	.09
Social Dominance Orientation	6.01 (.69)	5.92 (.76)	-3.01**
Self-Generating View of Helping	2.85 (.55)	2.91 (.54)	2.41*

Note: The belief in a just world, social dominance orientation, and self-generating view of helping scales were reverse-coded so that higher values reflect outcomes parallel with course goals. + $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

ANALYSES

Paired t-test analyses were conducted to determine whether there was a significant difference between the pretest and posttest on each of the seven outcome variables. In addition, seven multiple regression analyses were performed; one posttest measure served as the dependent variable for each analysis, and the independent variables for all analyses were race/ethnicity, gender, family income, year in school, previous Center coursework, and the corresponding pretest.

LIMITATIONS

Some limitations should be noted. First, this study did not contain a control group of students that did not participate in Center seminars. A non-seminar group would provide an ideal comparison to determine whether the gains among students in seminars were significantly greater than among other students. However, some research has shown that social dominance orientation, importance of social action engagement, and appreciation of diversity, for example, do not change much at all during 1-2 years in college (Bowman, 2010; Hurtado, Engberg, &

Ponjuan, 2003; Pratto et al., 1994); therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that any significant growth during two or three months between the pretest and posttest would be greater than that experienced by other students. Second, the outcomes in this study only measured students' attitudes, perceptions, and values, so we cannot determine whether seminar participation contributed to other forms of growth (e.g., critical thinking). Finally, while our results are quite positive, our design does not allow us to attribute causality (despite the title of the report).

RESULTS

As shown in Table 2, students in the Social Concerns Seminars gained significantly in the expected direction on five of the seven outcomes. For example, after taking the course, students became more likely to endorse situational attributions for poverty and less likely to hold a self-generating view of helping (i.e., to feel that people can only overcome obstacles by working harder). To ease interpretation of what may constitute a desirable change, the last three scales in Table 2 were reverse-coded so that higher values actually reflect lower levels of the (non-preferred) outcome. Moreover,

students changed in the opposite direction on social dominance orientation, such that students became more accepting of group inequality after the seminars. No significant change occurred for belief in a just world.

Multiple regression analyses predicting each posttest outcome were also conducted. Because the analyses controlled for pretest values on the relevant outcome, any significant effects should be interpreted as predicting changes that occurred during the course. As shown in Table 3, race/ethnicity, gender, and family income were, for the most part, unrelated to the seven outcomes. Men had smaller gains than women in empowerment view of helping, while students of color had smaller gains than White students in belief in a just world, and family income was negatively related to gains in belief in a just world. No other significant relationships were observed.

Some additional student characteristics had more consistent effects. Year in school was negatively related to gains in situational attributions for poverty, openness to diversity, and social dominance orientation. In other words, freshmen and sophomores tended to have greater learning gains from the seminars than did juniors and seniors. In addition, students who had taken previous Center courses had significantly greater gains on situational attributions for poverty, openness to diversity, and empowerment view of helping than students who had not taken any previous courses.

DISCUSSION

Taken as a whole, the results suggest that participation in Center seminars has an overall positive impact on college student learning: seminars may help students develop a sense of personal concern

TABLE 3 Standardized coefficients for multiple regression analyses predicting equality and social responsibility measures at Time 2.

Independent variable	Situational attributions for poverty	Openness to diversity	Responsibility for improving society	Empowerment view of helping	Belief in a just world	Social dominance orientation	Self-generating view of helping
Student of color	.018	.025	-.013	-.057	-.082*	.001	-.047
Male	-.030	.002	-.023	-.124**	-.052	.002	-.065
Family income	.068	-.022	.020	-.038	-.098*	-.040	.047
Year in school	-.086+	-.101*	.007	-.051	.029	-.070+	.009
One previous CSC course	.114*	.066	.072	.043	.007	.032	-.014
Two previous CSC courses	.046	.079+	.059	.101*	-.053	.016	.002
Pretest value	.542***	.603***	.546***	.491***	.615***	.671***	.659***
Adjusted R ²	.315	.381	.308	.277	.401	.455	.456

Note: The belief in a just world, social dominance orientation, and self-generating view of helping scales were reverse-coded so that higher values reflect more desirable outcomes. CBL = community-based learning. + $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

and responsibility in relation to social issues. The outcomes in this study capture a fairly broad set of attitudes and values related to inequality, poverty, justice, social change, and diversity. We believe that a short community immersion experience by itself is not sufficient to yield these effects. An intensive and educationally effective community engagement course should integrate academic content into real-world experiences, take students out of their comfort zone for a sustained period of time, and be designed to achieve identified learning goals. We believe that these aspects of our seminars are responsible for the growth observed in this study.

The gains on these seven outcomes were largely unrelated to students' race/ethnicity, gender, or family income. This consistency suggests that students from a variety of backgrounds can learn a great deal from their engagement in Center seminars. In contrast, students who participated in seminars earlier in their undergraduate years tended to have somewhat larger gains than more advanced students. Compared with juniors and seniors, first-year students and sophomores may perceive their seminar experiences to be more novel and eye-opening, and these characteristics are associated with greater learning and development in college (Bowman & Brandenberger, in press).

For several outcomes, students who had taken at least one previous CBL course exhibited greater gains than students who were taking their first course, which suggests that continued involvement in community-based learning yields important educational benefits. Therefore, it is important to provide opportunities not only for a broad range of students to engage in a single CBL course, but also for some students to take several courses that strengthen their knowledge, understanding, and commitment to social issues.

Some additional analyses have provided further insight into these findings. For example, while students who are earlier in their undergraduate careers tend to benefit most from taking seminars, this pattern is especially pronounced among students in the Appalachia Seminar. This finding suggests that Appalachia may be most effective as an introductory course, which students should take in their first or second year. Other analyses have suggested that taking one of the smaller seminars (e.g., Washington or L'Arche Seminar) is associated with greater gains among students who later participate in the Summer Service Learning Program. More inquiry is needed to fully explain this result, but it appears that these smaller seminars may help prepare students for the more intensive eight-week summer immersions.

CONCLUSION

In summary, students who participate in Center seminars achieve numerous desired learning outcomes, including increases in their personal responsibility for improving society, recognition of situational causes of poverty, openness to diversity, and empowerment perspectives on helping others. We feel that it is important to conduct both short-term and longitudinal assessments of outcomes associated with key college experiences. Consistent with this emphasis, in a related study we found that taking Center coursework is associated with having a prosocial purpose, volunteering behavior, personal growth, and well-being 13 years after graduation (Bowman, Brandenberger, Lapsley, Hill, & Quaranto, 2010). However, there is still much to be learned about the outcomes of such coursework and how "learning becomes service to justice" (Mission Statement, University of Notre Dame).

For a more thorough description of this study, see Bowman, N. A., Brandenberger, J. W., Mick, C., & Toms Smedley, C. (2010). Sustained Immersion Experiences and Student Orientations toward Equality, Justice, and Social Responsibility: The Role of Short-Term Service-Learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 17(1), 20-31. See also: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mjcs/>.

TABLE 4

SEMINAR OFFERINGS	TIME AND LOCATION				
	Fall	Winter	Spring	National	International
Appalachia Seminar	•		•	•	
Approaches to Poverty and Development in Chile [†]			•		•
Border Issues Seminar	•			•	
Children and Poverty Seminar			•	•	
Church and Social Action: Urban Plunge Seminar		•		•	
Energy Policy, the Environment and Social Change Seminar	•			•	
Environmental Justice and Human Rights Seminar			•	•	
Gospel of Life Seminar	•			•	
Global Health Seminar			•		•
Latino Community Organizing Against Violence Seminar	•			•	
L'Arche Seminar in Disability Studies			•	•	
Migrant Experiences Seminar			•	•	
Organizing, Power, and Hope Seminar		•		•	
Urban Poverty and Causes of Homelessness Seminar		•		•	
United States Healthcare: Policy and Poverty Seminar			•	•	
Washington, D.C. Seminar: Sustainable Development	•		•	•	

[†] Available to students studying in Chile during the spring semester.

The Center for Social Concerns also offers one-credit seminars that utilize a more local mode of community engagement (different from the model described above). These include *Leadership Through Solidarity*, *Leadership Training in Social Concerns Seminars*, *Take Ten Anti-Violence Seminar*, and the *Discernment Seminar*.

For more information on all seminars visit socialconcerns.nd.edu

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