Increased interest in and attention to community service in both high schools and colleges suggests the importance of understanding why students participate in community service activities. The literature clearly supplies evidence for high-school students’ interest and participation in community service. Data on high-school seniors from the 1970s through the 1990s suggest that 22–24% of seniors report consistent service involvement (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999). Results from a recent survey conducted by The National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education report that 83% of all public high schools had students involved in school sponsored community service activities and 46% offered service-learning opportunities in the classroom (Westat & Chapman, 1999). Findings from the 2000 survey of first-year college students report that just over 81% of students had performed volunteer work in the past year. However, only 22.7% of students indicated that it was important to participate in a community action program, and 30.9% indicated they valued becoming a community leader (Higher Education Research Institute, 2001).

While research suggests that participation in community service in high school predisposes students to continue their involvement in college (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Berger & Milem, 2002; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000), only 23.8% of first-year students in the 2000 survey sample indicated that the chances were very good that they would participate in volunteer or community service work (Higher Education Research Institute, 2001). These data raise questions
about why high-school students are volunteering, the motives high-
school and college students provide for involvement, and the relation-
ship between high-school community service and college participation.

Using Selznick’s (1992) theory of social participation, which distin-
guishes between core (connected to identity, motivated by values, and 
more consistent in nature) and segmental (connected to extrinsic factors, 
motivated by personal interests, and sporadic) participation, findings 
from a study on a national sample of high-school students suggested that 
student interests and personal goals, values, and normative environ-
ments influence high school-seniors’ participation in community service 
(Marks & Kuss, 2001). Further, in a study that followed these same stu-
dents into their college years, the extent to which these students persevered as participants in community service after high school appears to 
be related to patterns established in high school as well as whether or not 
students have internalized their reasons for participation (Marks & 
Jones, in press). This investigation builds upon the work of Marks & 
Kuss, and Marks and Jones by using a constructivist approach to under-
stand student perceptions of their patterns of participation from high 
school to college. An earlier study conducted by Serow (1991) demon-
strated that qualitative methodologies resulted in far greater depth of un-
derstanding of the phenomenon of motivations for community service 
than “requiring them [students] to choose among prepackaged re-
sponses” (p. 552).

Although some research suggests that patterns identified in high 
school are typically carried over into college (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 
1999; Berger & Milem, 2002; Marks & Jones, in press), little is known 
about changes in motivations from high school to college or the mean-
ing students attribute to their motivations. Several studies have focused 
on college student motivation for involvement in community service 
activities. Typically, reasons have been organized into the categories of 
altruistic, egoistic, and obligatory (Berger & Milem, 2002; Fitch, 1987; 
Marotta & Nashman, 1998; Serow, 1991; Winniford, Carpenter, & 
Grider, 1997). In one study when asked why they were involved, 80% 
of student respondents cited personal satisfaction from helping others, 
56% gave as a reason a perceived requirement through a course or 
organization, and 54% indicated a sense of responsibility to correct so-
cial and community problems (Serow, 1991). Berger and Milem con-
cluded that understanding students’ motivations to serve is related 
to producing positive outcomes associated with community service 
as well as increasing the numbers of students involved in such 
activities.

A few studies have connected motivation to participate in community
service to the identity development process for both high-school and college students (Rhoads, 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1997). In both studies, community service contributed to the process of the development of a sense of self and social responsibility. Involvement in community service engaged students in developing greater knowledge of self through meaningful work with others, which resulted in the development of both a personal and collective identity (Rhoads, 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Further, Youniss and Yates found that high-school student interest in continuing community service depended upon factors such as the level of reflective thinking and family and peer influences on volunteering. They concluded, “High school commitment cannot be linked simply to adult behavior without taking account of such communities that encourage and shape the direction individuals take in their identity development” (Youniss & Yates, 1997, p. 115).

Baxter Magolda (2000, 2001), in her work on the development of self-authorship, described a process in which young adults move from external, formulaic definitions of self to an internal foundation of identity that integrates relationships with others. She speculated that well-designed service-learning programs provide the opportunities for the development of self-authorship in students. Applying the work of Baxter Magolda to Selznick’s (1992) theory of social participation suggests the possibility that core (internally motivated by values) or segmental (externally motivated by personal interests) participation may be influenced by where students are in the identity process.

The purpose of this study was to uncover the meaning students make of their participation in and motivations for community service and to develop an understanding of students’ perceptions of their own patterns of participation in community service. In particular, the relationship between high-school involvement and college participation was explored. The guiding research questions for this study were: What are students’ reasons for participation in community service in high school? What are students’ reasons for participation in community service (or not) in college? How do students explain and understand the relationship between high-school and college involvement? To what do students attribute differences/changes in their motivations as well as experiences?

**Methodology**

The exploratory focus of this study led to a constructivist approach to the design. A constructivist approach “assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent cocreate understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural...
world) set of methodological procedures” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 21). This approach was well-suited to the study because the aim of our inquiry was understanding students’ construction of meaning and their perceptions about their own patterns of participation. A constructivist approach requires a close relationship between researchers and participants to elicit from students their own stories told in their own words (Charmaz, 2000). As the qualitative counterpart to the quantitative study examining patterns of participation (Marks & Jones, in press), the design emphasized the construction of an emic understanding of this phenomenon and data generated from the words and perspectives of the students to tell their stories with precision and appropriate depth. All decisions regarding methods for this study were anchored in a constructivist approach to the design (Charmaz, 2000; Crotty, 1998).

Procedures

Sampling. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), or sampling for information-rich cases, was used in this study for both the identification of college and university participants and then for the selection of student participants at each institution. Letters of invitation were sent to all Directors of Community Service programs at Ohio Campus Compact schools ($n = 39$). The Ohio Campus Compact is a consortium of Ohio colleges and universities established to support the development of social responsibility and citizenship initiatives on member campuses. We bounded the sample by Ohio Campus Compact institutions because these schools represented a diverse array of institutions and presumably, by virtue of their membership in Ohio Campus Compact, a stated commitment to providing opportunities for public and community service to students. Directors were informed about the purpose of the study and asked to serve as gatekeepers by nominating four students for participation. We also asked directors to send us materials about their campus that provided data about community service programs and campus culture. Eleven directors responded that they were interested in participating.

Because of our interest in information-rich cases (Patton, 1990) we narrowed the group of participating institutions to six campuses. Criteria for sampling included institutional diversity (i.e., size, classification, rural/urban, commuter/residential), variety in reporting line and institutional structure for community service programs, and variety in student composition. These criteria led to a final sample of six institutions—3 urban, 3 rural; 3 large (over 15,000 students), 3 small (under 3,000 students); 3 private, 3 public; 2 liberal arts, 1 Catholic, 2 research, and 1 state university.

The next stage of sampling involved the recommendation by the
directors at each of the six participating institutions for student participants in the study. Each director was asked to nominate four students, all of whom had participated in community service in high school, two of the four who had continued their involvement in college, and two who had discontinued service in college. For the purposes of this study, we broadly defined community service as any form of service (curricular or co-curricular) performed in an off-campus community context and for which payment was not received. Additional criteria for participant selection included year in school and a demographic profile that mirrored the general student population at that institution. This strategy resulted in a sample of 12 students participating in community service in college and 12 who had discontinued their high-school participation in college; 9 males and 15 females; ranging in age from 18–25 years and over 50% of junior or senior class status; 17 white, 5 African American, 1 Asian Indian, and 1 Philippino American; and a diverse array of academic majors including English, history, political science, biology, art, and physical therapy. Thus, the total sample consisted of 24 students (4 from each of 6 participating institutions) who agreed to participate in on-campus interviews for the study (see Appendix for complete list of participants). Students were contacted by letter with a formal invitation to participate, information about the nature of the study, and a request for scheduling an on-campus interview. Follow-up email messages facilitated the communication and scheduling process.

**In-depth interviews.** The primary strategy for data collection was in-depth, semistructured interviewing (Patton, 1990) on the campuses of each student. The interview protocol was developed and piloted with undergraduate students at the home institution of the researchers. Adjustments to the nature and order of questions were made based upon the piloting of the interview protocol. Questions focused on the nature of community service involvement in high school and college, the reasons students attributed to their participation, and the meaning they attached to community service.

One interview with each student was conducted. The two researchers conducted all interviews. Interviews generally lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. All except three interviews were conducted on the campus of each student in a room designated by the director of community service programs. Due to scheduling or last minute conflicts, three interviews were conducted on the telephone.

**Document review and campus visits.** In addition to in-depth interviews with each of the students, we were interested in understanding the campus context in which students’ decisions about community service participa-
tion were enacted (Janesick, 2000; Jones, 2002). To this end, we examined materials sent to us from the directors of community service programs. These included campus admissions materials, office brochures and organizational charts, student newspapers, and strategic planning documents. We also viewed web sites for each of the institutions. We were interested in how institutional commitment and support for community service is evidenced in campus publications as well as assessing institutional culture and campus norms for service. During our campus visits, we toured the campus, visited the community service programs offices, and spent time talking with each director. We used the insights gleaned from reviewing these materials and touring campuses as a context for understanding students’ experiences. Both researchers made notes in an analytic journal to record observations and insights from these activities.

Trustworthiness. Several strategies were utilized to assure the trustworthiness of findings. Both researchers independently read and coded all the data. Meetings to compare notes and discuss the results of analysis followed this process. A detailed narrative serving as a summary of findings was sent to all participants for member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). And last, an inquiry auditor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) read all the transcripts and reviewed the analytic and interpretive work of the researchers.

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed using the constant comparative method characteristic of grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As a constructivist study, the analytic process moved from more concrete codes to abstract themes and categories that are reflective of the meaning participants attach to their experiences, rather than the generation of objective truth (Charmaz, 2000). This required data analysis to proceed not as a linear process of concrete to abstract, but in a more cyclical manner by constantly returning to the data with new questions and ideas until a narrative emerged that described the essence of experience for study participants. In constructivist ground theory, this essence of experience is described as the core story (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

Core Story: External and Internal Influences on Participation and Commitment

Because all the participants in this study were involved in community service in high school, the core story describes a process of meaning-making about the role of service in their lives and the relationship
between participation and commitment. For those for whom community service was consistent, the process mirrored a movement away from external influences on participation and an emerging commitment. For those participants who discontinued their community service once in college, service was motivated largely by external factors, requiring little investment of them, making fewer claims on their sense of self, and resulting in limited commitment. Participant understandings of service then were mediated by whether or not service was more internally or externally motivated and, hence, how service was integrated with an evolving sense of self.

High-school involvement was almost always motivated by external factors, such as the influence of family and friends or a school requirement. Participants, even when it was required, enjoyed community service because it made them feel good about themselves and enabled them to spend time with their friends and family. With the exception of those whose service was connected to their churches or religious beliefs, there was little evidence that participants thought much about why they were engaged in service. This was particularly true when service was required rather than voluntary.

As participants made the transition to college, new environments, the opportunity to make decisions on their own, and the identity development process complicated the process of meaning-making. For some participants, community service was relegated to a lower priority as they negotiated a new collegiate environment. For others, now out from under the influence of parents, teachers, or a requirement, interests took them in different directions, among which community service was not included. And for a few others, community service was evolving into an important part of their identities. They had developed a passion for a social issue, a more active stance toward social change, and an emerging commitment to social responsibility. Regardless of the path taken in terms of continued participation in community service, all participants were engaged in a process of meaning-making that involved reflecting on their identities and their place in the world. For some, community service contributed to this process, and for others it did not. The themes that form the core story and findings are elucidated below.

**Influences in the High School Years: Supports and Barriers to Participation**

*Family role models.* Family members’ encouragement heavily influenced participation in community service in high school. Active parents, aunts, and grandparents who modeled the importance of involvement in the community introduced community service to participants. David
reported, “My parents got us involved, . . . and that gave me the role model to get involved.” Emily spoke of her aunt with whom she spent a lot of time growing up and “she would always try to involve me in everything she did. She was big on volunteering.” Robert learned early on from his mother about caring for others. Growing up in “the projects,” he watched his mother give their food to neighbors who had less than they did. Robert noted, “My mom, if it were not for her community involvement, I would not be as involved as I am. She is a strong advocate for the poor. She fights for the poor . . . and pushed me to get involved.” Several participants grew up on farms and learned an ethos of service that required everyone to do their part in completing chores and taking care of families and neighbors. However, despite encouragement and role modeling from family members, many of these participants did not always think about what they were doing as community service. Instead, it was simply “something my family does” and yet, had become what was perceived as an important “family tradition.”

Religious foundations. Church commitments and religious beliefs also influenced participation in high school. Several participants were active in youth ministry, leading retreats and teaching religious education classes, which they perceived as community service. Brad, commenting on his involvement in community service, articulated, “My youth ministers and people involved in church, . . . they were the ones that pushed me a lot.” Similarly, Carol noted that it was her director of religious education at her church who “really is the one who got me coming to things and got me involved and really active.” Rob recalled growing up in a family guided by a set of religious principles that “taught that the ideal is that it is better to give to those less fortunate. So even going Sunday and putting my twenty-five cents into the jar every time, that was probably a beginning.”

Socializing with peers. Friends played a big role in high-school participation in service. Essentially, if friends were involved in service, then these students were more likely to participate. Service became the vehicle for fun and spending time with friends. Friends also influenced involvement in school clubs and organizations that required service. While involvement in school clubs or organizations like National Honor Society or Key Club introduced participants to service, that was not usually the primary motivation for joining the organization—it was more about being around friends and the social benefits of meeting new people. Ann emphasized that she only participated in service if she was part of a group in which “we had to fulfill requirements that way.”

Required service: Mixed blessing. Many participants noted that required service in high school produced increased numbers of students
involved in community service, presumably accomplishing some good. However, almost without exception, students noted that required service quickly took on a negative connotation for themselves as well as their friends. They were clear: as soon as they met the requirement, they were moving on to other activities. Participants’ comments on required service ran along two paths. The first was, if community service is required, it is not community service. And the second was, because service was required, they only thought about meeting the requirement and not why they were performing service.

Michael articulated, “If someone’s telling you that you have to go do community service, . . . I would tend not to see that as community service.” In his view the “desire has to come from within.” Another participant likened required community service to a “sentence” which carried a terrific negative stigma. Alternatively, Emily noted that she and her friends enjoyed their community service “because we weren’t required to do it.” Speaking about her high-school requirement, R. noted “A lot of people either found it difficult or, not exactly bad to do, but more difficult to find the time to do it.” When service was required, several students emphasized, “once the requirement is met, the service will end.”

A prevalent theme with regard to required service was that because the emphasis was on the requirement, students never had to think about what they were doing. Grace viewed her required service as “just another homework assignment.” As a result of the requirement, she was “turned off to participating in college.” Likewise, R. articulated, “I never really thought about ‘what does [service] do for me?’ other than the fact that it was on the resume, but because it was also a requirement, I never had to think ‘what if we didn’t have this requirement?’” Destiny participated in high school because she was told to, but suggested, “If I knew what I was doing, what the reason was, and I knew the person or the organization it was helping, . . . maybe that would make me feel better about doing it” [community service].

High-school environments. Community service was highly visible at Catholic high schools. Carol proudly recited her Catholic high-school motto “Omnibus Caritas”—in all things charity. Brad knew that the priests at his school were interested in graduating strong moral leaders and therefore exposed students to social issues through community service. Many schools took an approach to community service through blood drive or food can competitions. By and large, however, students commented that at best, community service was one of many activities that were important at their high school (sports often being the most important) and, more often, was not encouraged or visible in the classroom or as an extracurricular activity. A few students commented positively
Patterns of Commitment

on teachers who took the time to explain the importance of community service, inspired students to get involved, and connected service to larger social issues. For example, Kathy noted, “In my classes, I had really great teachers, really wonderful enlightened people who challenged me, ‘Why do you think that’s wrong? Go out and find out.’”

Several participants talked about engaging in service, whether required or not, because teachers told them it would build their resumes and help them with their applications for scholarships and college. They were also aware that engaging in community service increased popularity among their peers and garnered them recognition and notoriety from important school and city officials. Erica unabashedly emphasized that her high-school community service included working on the mayoral campaign because “I just wanted to know the Mayor. I wanted to be cool with the Mayor!”

High School Constructions of Self and Service

External motivations. These factors identified (i.e., family and friends, required service, the high-school environment) influenced students’ constructions of self and service in their high-school years. For most of the participants, they were involved in community service in high school because it was fun. In addition, participants commented on the good feeling they got about themselves through helping others—several referred to service as a “big ego boost.” Bob referred to this as the “warm, gushy feeling” he received when engaged in service. Participants felt good about what they were accomplishing through service as well as enjoyed the appreciation and recognition they received for their involvement. As Carol indicated:

We did it because we felt good after we did it, and we helped so many people; . . . just to see the responses from people and how grateful and how it really affected them even if was something small, . . . just to see appreciation and gratitude and the smiles on their faces and the thanks in their eyes. That was one of the things that motivated me to keep doing it [community service].

For the most part, reasons for involvement in service were more external than internal. Service existed outside the individual and was motivated more by external factors such as friends, family, requirements, and recognition. Service was understood by many as “anything done for which you are not paid.” Most students recognized that service also involved helping others out, but thought of it more as a nice thing to do, rather than as contributing to larger societal concerns.

Internal motivations. For those participants who were more consistently involved in direct service in high school and attended a high
school that supported active involvement in community service, service was an eye-opening experience that caused reflection on their own backgrounds, responsibilities, and potential for improving life for others. As Carol recalled, “I think it [service] made me grow as a person and I know it really changed me. . . . It exposed me to other people and populations, other socioeconomic statuses, and it really opened my eyes and broadened my scope.” Similarly, Casey reflected, “I think basically it [service] is good, makes me feel good, and I think I had a sense that it helped people. I don’t know if I had a sense of how much it helped people yet; . . . I think in high school I just kind of sensed that it was a good thing to do. It was right, . . . and it helped me grow as a person.” Kathy left high school with the idea that she was committed to community activism rather than community service, which she perceived as “too rah rah. . . . I don’t think community service is the way to solve everything. I think community activism is. If you change the problems at the root, then you don’t have to serve.” As these students approached college they brought with them some initial understandings of personal responsibility for social problems, interest in working toward a greater good beyond individual interest, and a growing commitment to the role of community service in their lives.

Influences in College: Supports and Barriers to Participation

Transition to college and a new community. The transition from high school to college was a big one for nearly all the participants and, in many cases, of a magnitude for which they were unprepared. Those involved in community service, as well as those not involved, commented on this transition in terms of learning to manage their time, establish priorities, and find their way around a new environment. Several commented on the rigor of the academic program compared to high school and the need to actually study in college. Ann commented, “It is hard to organize your time because you have so much more work.” Similarly, Mary noted, “Your whole first year all you are doing is learning how to set your priorities.” Nearly every student not currently involved in community service in college mentioned time and setting priorities as a deterrent to their continued participation in service. In addition, every participant, with the exception of two, was balancing significant employment obligations, with more than half working over 11 hours a week.

An awareness of the need to manage the transition to college caused some participants to put community service “on hold” until they figured out college life. Of the twelve students currently not participating in
community service in college, all articulated that involvement in community service was not possible in the earlier years of their college experience. However, those who had been consistently involved in high school spoke positively about resuming their community service participation in college once they got settled. Dwight referred to this as “getting back into the community service loop” because he had “gotten out of the habit” in college.

Part of the transition for students involved getting to know a new community—both the college environment as well as the neighborhoods in which community service typically took place. Several participants at larger schools talked about the “bureaucracy” of big institutions and trying to navigate these places—both in terms of survival as well as learning where community service opportunities might be found. R. emphasized: “My first quarter, I didn’t do any service. It was me versus the school!” Similarly, Destiny emphasized that on her mind were questions like, “How am I going to adjust? . . . I had too many other worries to think about community service, . . . making sure I was ready, because I couldn’t turn around and go home.” Victoria noted, “At such a big campus, bureaucracy is always there.”

Participants also commented on the difficulty of getting around a new town or city and figuring out where community service opportunities might be found. In high school, because she knew the area, Emily would “just get in my car and go” to community service agencies. But in college she indicated she couldn’t easily volunteer because she didn’t “know the places around here very well.” Students attending college in urban areas also discussed fear in venturing out into unfamiliar neighborhoods. April mentioned that she was “scared” to go into the city. Brad mentioned this also, but then went on to say that his unfamiliarity was perhaps a positive thing, because he did not carry the stereotypes others had about going into “bad neighborhoods in the city.”

Role of peers in participation. As in high school, friends and peers were mentioned by many participants as influencing participation. However, this was more prevalent from those not participating in college than from those who were involved. Those not currently involved in service speculated that had their friends been involved in community service, then the likelihood of their involvement would have increased. In addition, encouragement from other students makes a difference; as Rob mentioned, “I don’t know a whole lot of the people who are involved, especially the upperclassmen. And I think if I knew some of them, saw them on a regular basis, and they said, ‘hey, you should come to this,’ kind of reinforcing that it was available, that would help.” Those students who were consistently involved in college talked about volunteer-
ing with friends as fun, but also that this peer group shared values and social concerns.

Institutional influences on participation. The visibility and accessibility of community service programs influenced participation. Students at the smaller institutions were much more aware of community service opportunities than those at large institutions. At the liberal arts institutions, students spoke about the wide range of activities in which involvement was possible. In addition, these students talked about “all-campus” events with a community service or social issue focus. So while not all students chose to take advantage of community service opportunities, these students knew they were available and were also more likely to be involved in other activities. Many of the students attending smaller institutions commented that at their college, “it is easy to get involved.” This was not the case for students from large universities.

Students from larger institutions consistently mentioned that it was hard to find the community service opportunities on campus. Several students noted that they knew there was a great need in the community for student volunteers, but that they did not observe strong support on campus for such efforts. Casey commented “I think there are a lot of opportunities in the community, but I don’t see really strong support for it here.” Likewise, Mark reflected, “Well, it is such a big university. I think there are a lot of people who do put a lot of emphasis on community service, but I don’t know if the University as one voice has been like, ‘service is important.’” Fraternities and sororities provided opportunities for sporadic involvement for some students at both small and large institutions, although service was not the primary reason for joining and was often constructed as a requirement of membership.

Community service received some visibility at institutions where scholarships are given for community service work. Students all commented on the irony of “providing payment for service” and their perception that scholarship recipients were only performing service to maintain their scholarships rather than for the good their volunteering might do. Michael commented, “They’ll do their 30 hours and won’t serve again.” The paradox of this kind of institutional “support” for community service is that, according to these participants, it produces negative outcomes. R. was a recipient of such a scholarship and acknowledged, “I honestly believe that the scholarship, for a lot of college students, is a struggle with mandatory service. It is hard to see the focus of the service when they tack a number to it, rather than linking it to quality for the server or the served.”

Programmatic support for participation. Specific programs and activities were mentioned by students as having a big influence on their in-
volvement in community service. Several students mentioned activities fairs at the beginning of the school year as a time when community service opportunities were visible. In most cases, students recalled picking up printed materials but usually did not follow up on opportunities. They indicated that had there been some follow-up and help in getting them directly involved, they might have been more likely to get involved. Students from several campuses talked about orientation programs that included community service components. One institution took a select group of students to Washington, D.C., for several days of community service. This program included both direct service as well as visits to Capitol Hill to learn about public policy implications. This made a big impact on students’ thinking about service in general as well as their own involvement. Kathy referred to her trip to DC as “the most amazing experience ever, . . . it just totally opened my eyes and made me reaffirm how I want to go about living my life and how I want to continue community activism for as long as I live.”

Alternative Spring Break programs were also mentioned as “life changing” learning opportunities. Michael described his week in Appalachia as “the most incredible week of my life.” Carol spoke of a broadened perspective from her spring break trip to New York City where she received “a taste of what it was like to work with the homeless, what it was like to be immersed in these situations and just kind of help out.” Both of these programs included small groups of students who received training to prepare them for their experiences and on-site reflection with the faculty and staff who traveled with the students. These were the most structured community service opportunities we heard about from students and also, not coincidently, the experiences about which the students spoke with the greatest enthusiasm and insight in relation to their interest in and commitment to community service.

**College Constructions of Self and Service**

*External influences.* Only three students made clear that they had absolutely no interest in community service in college and their high-school participation was entirely externally driven. They had participated in high school as a resume builder for college applications and because it was required. They indicated that they had reaped the intended benefits of service in high school and saw no need to get involved in college. Erica conveyed this poignantly in her discussion of community service connected to college scholarship applications, “I tried to get involved in everything so I could reap the benefits. . . . I’m now going to college, . . . so I really don’t see it as beneficial anymore because I already got what I was striving for.”
Further, those college students who were no longer involved in community service described themselves as the “typical apathetic, lazy, and uncaring college student.” Jen boldly declared, “Hey, I am lazy. I like to sit around. . . . I think students in general are lazy; . . . I mean, in concept, the whole community service thing is a nice thing, but I am too lazy to get out and do it.” Dwight commented, “I am probably at the point where I just want to relax and not do nearly as much as I did during high school.” Christy commented more generally that “some kids here, this is typical wherever you are, they haven’t grown up enough not to be self-centered, they’re just not willing to go out of their way to help somebody else. It’s easier to just sit at home and watch T.V. and call your friends.” Thus, for these students, community service has no relationship to how they see themselves, nor did their high-school participation, motivated by external factors, produce any fertile ground for commitments to grow.

Internal influences. Those who continued their community service involvement in college offered reasons for continuing with community service that reflected a movement in the direction of greater focus on others, rather than solely on the benefit it was bringing to them. Brad conveyed that in the past he had been “blinded by being the center of attention, more so than how I was actually helping people.” Laura explained:

Right now, my main reason for doing community service is so I can give back to people who may be less fortunate than I am and to show them that there are “normal” people out in the world who do care. . . . I have learned that wherever you go, there will always be people facing the same problems, and these people are just like myself and others, but they have bigger obstacles to overcome on their journey through life.

Several participants connected to their own past personal experiences as recipients of services or feeling marginalized and hence felt a strong sense of responsibility to give back to the community. Rachel emphasized several times in our conversation, “I remember what it felt like when I needed help.” Bob recalled, “My mother was 18 when she had me, . . . a young mother and two kids, . . . no where to go, . . . going from welfare to working, so I just think helping people was a good feeling because people did that for me.”

Several students directly connected service with self. David commented on the reciprocal nature of service and self in observing, “whatever I do gets reflected back really quickly.” And Victoria reflected, “I like being known for what I am passionate about.” Casey commented on the potential of community service, “It’s a way to grow and learn yourself . . . and understand what other people go through. I think it is very
important to put yourself in other people’s shoes and see from their perspective. People would be much better to one another if they did that, and I think community service helps.” However, as R. pointed out, in order for service to be connected with self, “you have to get yourself immersed in it.” Mary reiterated, “You only know it is important if you are a part of it.” Those who continued their service began to see who they were (and who they wanted to become) and community service as connected and interrelated.

Evolving understanding of service. A couple of students talked about the importance of linking community service to social change or community activism. Because voting is frequently identified as a measure of civic engagement, we asked students whether or not they had voted in the recent election. Of note, 75% of those currently participating in community service voted, while fewer than half of those not participating had voted. Politically active as president of the college Democrats on campus, Robert emphasized that through his work in the community and his life experiences, he learned the importance of taking a stand and speaking up. He declared, “I have a passion for individual rights, whether it is civil rights, gay rights, student rights. I believe in social change because without those elements, nothing can change. You must be out there in the forefront to effect change. It begins with you and starts with you.” These participants in college were developing commitments to social issues through connecting a sense of self with their involvement in community service.

Discussion

Based upon our conversations with all of the participants, patterns of participation in community service are mediated by involvement influences and motivations in high school, the role of peers, and by how closely community service is connected to an emerging sense of self. For the most part, patterns of participation begun in high school carried over into college. For those who were involved more sporadically in high school, primarily for external reasons such as meeting a requirement, service involvement was discontinued in college. For those for whom service was more consistent in high school and motivated by family and school encouragement, service took on more personal motivations and altruistic interests, and thus the likelihood was greater that involvement would be continued in college. Further, early personal experiences that cultivated empathy also influenced continued participation in community service and an ethos of caring for others. In addition, if teachers or family members took the time to explain the reasons for
community service or introduced the larger social context in which service is provided, then service took on a more meaningful role and encouraged a developing commitment in college.

The Importance of Service as Personally Meaningful

This ingredient, service as personally meaningful, seemed to be the foundation of the participation and commitment process from high school to college. Those who continued their service after high school were those who were also involved in voluntary service, were more likely to have been involved in direct service in the community, and who had teachers who helped explain why community service was important. Continued involvement in community service provided a unique opportunity to reflect on one’s identity and what is important in one’s life. Beginning in high school and then further developed in college, participation in service introduced participants to others who might or might not share the same life experiences and to a diverse array of complex social issues. Continued community service provided the impetus for students to think through their responsibility for making life better for others whose lives had been impacted by conditions such as poverty, sickness, and unemployment. Service influenced how they see the world and their place in it. It brought clarity about the self that perhaps few other life experiences had afforded, especially in the context of education. Initial commitments to integrating service into a sense of self were made. Many of the participants were quite passionate about their community service work and articulated a commitment to continued action.

For community service to be meaningful, a relationship between the service and evolving constructions of self was present. The research in this area suggests patterns in identity development that revolve around the processes of individuation and differentiation, separation and connection, or agency and communion (Baxter Magolda, 2000; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Erikson, 1968; Perry, 1970). Our research suggests that patterns of participation in community service may mirror patterns of identity development in moving from external definitions to an internal authority. Baxter Magolda (2000) speculated, “Connection to others in service contexts can create dissonance with perspectives adopted from external sources” and “offers the opportunity to acquire an internal sense of self and to struggle with the relationship of agency and communion” (p. 154). Our findings support the idea that how individuals integrate service with self and make sense of their community service experiences may be influenced by where they are in the identity development and self-authorship process. These findings are
also consistent with the research of Rhoads (1997), who explored students’ evolving sense of self through community service work.

Intersection of Identity Dimensions and Community Service Participation

The results of this study also suggest the significance of looking at the intersections of identity dimensions such as race, gender, social class, and religion when exploring student constructions of community service and their experiences with service. For example, several of the African American students, although classified as non-participants in community service, were really quite involved in their communities. However, giving back to the community is so much a part of how they see themselves and their cultural heritage that it was impossible for them to pull out that one aspect of who they are and hold it up for scrutiny. Several of the men in the study engaged in service through what they described as more competitive than relational ways. They mentioned blood drive and food can competitions or earning points for their fraternities through service involvement. However, with increased involvement in service, a voice of care entered into their dialogue, reflecting an interest in learning how to care with others (Noddings, 1984; Rhoads, 1997). Students with strong religious beliefs or faith traditions engaged more readily in community service because they perceived service as the morally right thing to do. While community service on college campuses is frequently the activity of white, middle-class students (O’Grady, 2000), this is not always the case—and will become less so if community service is encouraged and supported for a greater diversity of students. Our research suggests that how students understand, construct, and engage in community service is influenced by the socially constructed identities they bring to the experience.

A number of the community service participants spoke persuasively and eloquently about their personal connections to service because of their own experiences as recipients of service or experiences with being marginalized as, for example, “the only Asian American in my school.” This is consistent with the findings of a study on the factors that influence individuals to lead lives of commitment to the common good (Parks Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Daloz Parks, 1996). While over half of those studied by Parks Daloz et al. reported experiencing marginality, these individuals were also “able to transform the pain of their marginality into a deepened capacity for compassion and a strength of identity and purpose” (Parks Daloz et al., p. 73). In our study, community service both enabled this transformation among participants who had experienced marginality, as well as created the conditions for others to ex-
perience marginality, perhaps for the first time, and thus, cultivate empathy and compassion for those whose life circumstances they did not share.

**Patterns of Participation: The Relationship Between High School and College**

The connections between high-school and college participation in community service uncovered in this study are consistent with previous research (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Berger & Milem, 2002; Marks & Jones, in press). In other words, those who are consistently involved in high school will likely continue participation in college, with a deepening commitment to service and greater understanding of the motivations beyond themselves for engaging in service. High-school experiences with community service that resulted in continued participation were most often voluntary, encouraged by family or friends, and made meaningful by teachers or others who helped explain why community service was important.

Conversely, those who are sporadically involved in high school, motivated by external factors, are unlikely to sustain participation in college, given their perceptions of required service, the demands of adjusting to college, and the absence of peer encouragement. Required service in high school led many participants to drop service as soon as it was no longer required. For these students, service was constructed as an obligation, with little thought given to the meaning of the service itself. During the high-school years, this negative perception of service was somewhat attenuated by viewing participation as an opportunity to spend time with friends.

**Implications**

The results of this study provide policy implications for requiring community service. The participants in this study were adamant about the negative, albeit unintended, consequences of requiring community service. Policies requiring service, crafted with the best of intentions, became a deterrent to continued involvement and any development of commitment to civic and social responsibility. Requiring service led to a singular focus on simply meeting the requirement with little consideration of the purpose of the service. Further, “community” service constituted everything from sweeping the floors of the high school to raking a neighbor’s yard—not typically the work that produces the intended benefits of social and civic responsibility. This suggests that if the quality of required service were high (i.e., students performing meaningful ser-
vice), the negative outcomes may be reduced. However, as typically constructed, required service in high school led many of the participants to drop community service as soon as it was no longer required. To increase the likelihood of continued service after required high-school service, students' involvement in voluntary and direct service could be encouraged, with opportunities provided for understanding why community service is important.

The results also suggest implications for practice. If colleges and universities are interested in accomplishing the positive outcomes associated with community service, then active, intentional steps must be taken. College faculty and administrators can enhance the likelihood of community service involvement by making opportunities visible and easily accessible as well as helping students negotiate demands on time. If colleges and universities are interested in engaging greater numbers of students in meaningful community service, attention must be focused not only on those who will most likely continue, but also on those most likely to "get out of the habit" when transitioning from high school to college. Those students who have been consistent participants in service in high school will most likely seek out these opportunities at college. However, more sporadic participants, most often for externally motivated reasons, will need extra encouragement from peers, administrators, and faculty to make initial connections for involvement.

Very few participants talked about either service-learning courses or structured reflection opportunities. It seemed clear that when someone helped students make sense of why they were doing what they were doing, it was more meaningful to them and their commitments deepened. Students who had participated in more intense community service activities (i.e., Alternative Spring Break programs) were much more articulate about the meaning and significance of their work. This is consistent with the research of Eyler and Giles (1999), who found that the quality of the service work makes a difference to producing positive outcomes. Community service programs then would be well served to design and implement activities that are consistent with the research on the principles of high quality service (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Further research on patterns of participation would continue to add depth and breadth to an understanding of the connections between community service participation, commitment, and identity development. Continued study of the relationship between community service and self-authorship is needed. The results of this study suggest the importance of research exploring the intersections between dimensions such as race, social class, gender, and religion on the constructions of self and
service. In addition, this study only touched upon the influence of campus cultures and normative environments in relation to community service participation. While students commented on their perceptions of the college environment, more detailed assessments of campus culture would create a picture of those institutional environments that promote community service involvement. Further, additional research examining the relationship between student age and the developmental influences on participation and commitment is warranted. Because of the variability in age of participants in this study, it was inappropriate to speculate on a possible relationship.

Results released from the 2001 Freshmen Survey indicate that 82.6% of first-year students reported performing volunteer work in their senior year of high school. However, only 24% indicated that chances are very good that they will participate in community service in college (Bartlett, 2002). The results of our research provide an explanation for this apparent discontinuity in patterns of participation. If the majority of high-school students are involved in community service because it is required, in a sporadic fashion, and with limited explanations for the purposes of their participation, then most students will discontinue their community service in college, because it is not perceived as important or personally meaningful. Participation in community service will more likely grow into commitment if it is direct, of high quality, and integrated into an evolving sense of self. With encouragement from friends and a nudge from university faculty and student affairs educators, the possibilities of developing internal motivations for service and for connecting service to students’ sense of self could be realized. More intentional efforts, in both high school and college, to engage students in meaningful community service will not only increase the likelihood of students sustaining the participation begun in high school, but also developing internal motivations to serve and then to develop the commitment required for active citizenship. In fact, several students articulated that society’s success depended upon students’ abilities to understand their commitments to the communities in which they live. Kathy made sense of her community service experiences this way: “I think I have the means, the capability, and the intelligence to affect social change, so I have to do it; . . . there’s no way I can just sit and watch things happen.”
## APPENDIX

### Patterns of Commitment in Community Service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>HS Type</th>
<th>Service in HS</th>
<th>College Type</th>
<th>Service in College</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Vote?</th>
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<td>4. Mary</td>
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<td>7. Michael</td>
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<td>8. R.</td>
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<td>12. Kathy</td>
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### Non-Participants in College*

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<th>College Type</th>
<th>Service in HS</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Vote?</th>
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<td>4. Dwight</td>
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<td>??</td>
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<td>5. Erica</td>
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<td>6. Christy</td>
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<td>7. Destiny</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>8. Rachel</td>
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<td>9. Jen</td>
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*Names are pseudonyms and/or chosen by participants.

**Sporadic and consistent were identified by the participants as the terms that best describe their participation in high school and college.

### References


