

## **Gender, Spirituality, and Community Engagement: Complexities for Students at Catholic Women’s Colleges**

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*In this research, we explored the ways that junior and senior students at two Catholic women’s colleges in the Midwestern United States understand community engagement, and we examined how they came to know and understand their gender and spiritual identities in relation to their engagement activities. Participants seemed to draw on both an ethic of care and an ethic of justice (Gilligan, 1982) when framing their motivations for doing community engagement work. The findings enhance what is “known” about how students experience and make meaning from structured programs that encourage community engagement.*

While much attention has been paid to the development of students while in college, a recent book reported a lack of emphasis on students' inner development, and in particular, spiritual development (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). Like Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, we believe that society's problems require people who are not only technically skilled and "book smart," but also self-aware, concerned for others, and oriented toward justice. College experiences have the potential to help students develop those "inner" traits. As feminist educators, we generally use the phrase identity development, rather than inner development, as we help college students consider life's biggest questions: Who am I? What do I value? What is my place in the world? How do I want to change the world?

Identity development happens via many avenues and experiences inside and outside of college. In this research, we explored the ways that junior and senior students at two Catholic women's colleges in the Midwestern United States understand community engagement, and we examined how these students came to know and understand their gender and spiritual identities in relation to their engagement activities. We use the term community engagement to encompass activities participants described as change agency, charity, civic engagement, service, service-learning, social justice advocacy, and volunteering. Our research was guided by two overarching questions: How do the discourses of community engagement at Catholic women's colleges shape students' understandings of their identities? How do students make meaning of their community engagement experiences within their college context?

We focus our research on community engagement because previous studies have made connections between gender, spirituality, and engagement. Existing literature has found that participation rates in community engagement are much higher among college women than among college men (Damon-Moore, 2000). Participation in engagement activities also tends to be higher among religious people than among those who identify as non-religious (Wuthnow, 1999). However, the interconnections between community engagement, spirituality, and gender have not yet been fully explored. In framing our study, we noticed a paucity of research on what participation in engagement activities means as an aspect of student identity development.

We chose to conduct our research at Catholic women's colleges because these institutions have missions that are overt in their attention to gender, spirituality and ethical commitments to communities. They are *Catholic* and *for women*. Further, Catholic women's colleges have been lauded for successfully connecting their missions to the needs of their students and communities that they serve (Knoerle & Schier, 2002). Roman Catholic institutions are places where engagement, in general, and "charitable involvement," in particular, tends to be very high (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). One way in which Catholic colleges and universities frame their educational missions is through the tradition

of Catholic social teaching. With its attention to the dignity of all people and care for the environment, Catholic social teaching forms the basis for a particular form of ethical development. As institutions committed to educating women in the tradition of Catholic social teaching, Catholic women's colleges present a unique research context for studying community engagement. We wanted to know how students who attend such a type of institution, attentive to both identity and community engagement, made sense of their college experiences.

Our research is also situated within previous research on caring. Much has been written about caring as an ethical and moral perspective. The purpose of this paper is not to rehash arguments about orientations of care and justice, or to defend care as a (mature, feminine) way of moral reasoning. Rather, our research asks what explicit attention to the development of gender, spiritual, and caring identities means for college students. This study also seeks to introduce readers to discussions of care and justice among students participating in community engagement activities at two Catholic colleges for women.

In this paper, we first review literature related to gender, spirituality, and community engagement. We discuss literature on caring and the unique context of Catholic women's colleges, informed by commitments to gender and spiritual development. Then, we discuss the specific methods used to conduct this research. In the findings section, we consider how participants interpreted their community engagement experiences in relation to their own gender and spiritual identities. We explicitly consider how students drew on both care and justice frameworks in understanding their community engagement activities. We end the paper with a consideration of how these frameworks are complicated by discourses of gender and spirituality.

### **Ethic of Care**

In her important work on moral development, Gilligan (1982) posited that women framed and resolved moral problems through a care focus—concerned with connection, peace, and responding to need—whereas men framed and resolved moral problems through a justice focus—concerned with equality, reciprocity, and rights. These two moral orientations, care and justice, were not opposites, but simply different ways of thinking about moral problems. The care orientation attended to problems of detachment or abandonment, with the ideal solutions being attention and response to need. The justice orientation attended to problems of inequality and oppression, with the ideal solution being reciprocity and respect (Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988). Gilligan posited that women, through a care focus, envisioned moral problems as attached to their own situation, rather than as a more abstract issue of equality. The result was a different envisioning of the available responses to the moral problem, not a stunting of moral development as previously theorized.

In her scholarship on caring, Noddings (1984) agreed that a commitment to caring and to defining one's self in terms of capacity for caring is a feminine manifestation of the highest level of moral thinking. In her understanding, caring is not synonymous with care-giving, which historically has been the domain of women, but the ethic of care does have its origin in the female experience. While both men and women can be caring, women in particular approach moral problems by assuming personal responsibility for the choices to be made. Caring about others (a feeling) is a foundation for caring for others (an action of service). Noddings (1984; 2002) posited that education plays a critical role in developing students' ethic of caring.

In addition to being a gendered ethic, caring is also related to spirituality. In Astin, Astin, and Lindholm's (2010) study of spirituality, which developed ten measures of students' spiritual and religious qualities, three measures related to caring: Ethic of Caring (caring about others), Charitable Involvement (caring for others), and Ecumenical Worldview (connectedness to others and the world). Not surprising given earlier research on caring, the authors found that more women than men scored higher on all three measures. The authors concluded that personal involvement in charitable activities enhanced students' sense of caring and connectedness, two important spirituality measures. Particularly, community service experiences were a powerful means to enhancing students' spirituality. Other research has found important effects regardless of whether the experience was course-based or extracurricular (Astin & Vogelgesang, 2006).

### **Community Engagement: From Charity to Social Justice**

As noted above, community engagement encompasses a broad range of activities whereby students *engage* with *communities* outside academe. This range of activities includes change agency, charity, civic engagement, service, service-learning, social justice advocacy, and volunteering, as well as other activities. Scholars of community engagement have described paradigms of service differentiating a charity paradigm from a social change paradigm (Moely, Furco, & Reed, 2008; Morton, 1995). Generally, a charity paradigm involves offering assistance to individuals who are in need of help with immediate problems. In contrast, a social change paradigm focuses on making changes in the societal structures that lead to inequities among groups of individuals. Past research has shown that college students most often express a preference for charity rather than social change engagement (Bringle, Hatcher, & McIntosh, 2006), and that women students in particular prefer the charity paradigm (Moely, Furco, & Reed, 2008). Discussions of these paradigms often put them on a continuum, with charity at one (lower) end and social change on the other (higher) end.

Foos (2000) used Gilligan's (1982) work on women's moral development to challenge the assumption that the goal of community engagement is to move students along a continuum that has charity at one end and social change on the other. Foos argued that this sort of a continuum devalues the direct service work of women and leads to a "narrow view of what mature service should look like" (p. 74). Foos suggested that the care and justice orientations may lead women and men have differing service preferences. From Foos's perspective, charity and social justice are highly inter-related; they are both valuable paradigms of service, and neither is deficient or preferred. We believe, echoing Neururer and Rhoads (1998), that community engagement in multiple forms has the potential to help college students bridge the gap between the self and the other, between individualism and community, and between an ethic of care and an ethic of justice. Further, we take a feminist approach to our research on community engagement, paying particular attention to the ways that identities and power structures mediate the ways that students experience engagement activities in Catholic women's college contexts.

### **Feminism and Community Engagement**

A feminist perspective raises particular concerns about the ways in which engagement and identities co-exist on- and off-campus. Discussions of community engagement rarely consider the important exploration of identity that happens when students do work within a community. It is also infrequent that these discussions consider the identities of those being served. Feminism generally argues that there is a need to pay attention to the ways in which gender, power imbalances, and the possibility for social change are mutually constructed (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). It is one lens that can be used to understand the relationship between the identity of students and the identities of those "being served." This perspective calls for service to "be reenvisioned in a more equitable, mutually beneficial way for those serving as well as for those being served" (Wilson, 2008, p. 131). This reenvisioning involves questioning why and who women serve, how their service efforts contribute to social change, and how their efforts benefit the communities they serve as well as the women themselves. Wilson posited that such reenvisionings are possible through service-learning experiences in college. Similarly, Damon-Moore (2000) claimed that community service experiences in college offer students "the opportunity to take risks and to explore their identity with working with, rather than for, others" (p. 47). Both Wilson and Damon-Moore note that women's studies classrooms provide an excellent location for such re-envisionings to occur. We extend this logic to women's colleges, positing that they also could provide a location for students to participate in equitable and mutually beneficial community engagement activities that allow women to explore their own identities.

### Community Engagement at Catholic Women's Colleges

As noted above, Catholic women's colleges express their missions overtly in terms of gender and spirituality. They also are informed by Catholic social teaching and have missions that explore issues of social justice. Catholic social teaching refers to the "sum total of teachings provided by Catholic leaders—popes, bishops, and sometimes theologians—concerning social issues of the day" (Connors, 2008, p. 289). It includes a commitment to the dignity of human beings, a call to supporting the well-being of communities, an instruction to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first, respecting the rights of workers, a commitment to non-violence, and a call to stewardship of the environment (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). The two institutions we studied have missions committed to educating women to become "ethical, reflective and socially responsible leaders" who "engage with the world" around them.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, there are also many ways in which Catholic social teaching is complicated, especially for women who wish to have this value system inform their efforts. As Hesse-Biber and Leckenby (2003) note, social justice actions can be in direct conflict with the hierarchal structure of the Roman Catholic Church. While American Catholicism has a history of dedication to countering discrimination and an emphasis on social justice, the Catholic Church also has "a counter-tradition of misogyny and of second-class status" for women (Stetz, 2003, p. 101). The Vatican's recent doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and subsequent actions is only one example of this (*Doctrinal Assessment*, 2012). Such contradiction and tension between Catholic social teaching, traditions, and doctrine about the roles of women in the Church add complexity to how community engagement is understood by students at Catholic women's colleges.

Most Catholic women's colleges were founded by orders of women religious, their campuses constructed in close proximity to convents so that the Sisters would be able to easily negotiate serving as college presidents and faculty members while also adhering to the strictures of cloister (Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, 2001). While the number of Sisters on most of these campuses has rapidly declined since the Second Vatican Council, many Catholic women's colleges continue to express their Catholic identity in ways that align with the articulated mission of their founding orders of women religious (Morey, 2002). Since these founding orders of women are micro-cultures of complicity with and resistance to patriarchal Church structures, it is important to note that the culture

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<sup>1</sup> These quotes are taken directly from the mission statements of the two institutions we studied, but our commitment to keeping these institutions as anonymous as possible foreclosed opportunities to quote these statements at length.

of each of these unique colleges is also complex. While we have chosen two Catholic women's colleges for our study, we make no claim that the two institutions are identical or interchangeable. We proceed with an acknowledgement that our study captured but a fraction of the possible discourses in existence at either campus.

## Methods

We conducted our study at Amata College and Magda College (both pseudonyms), two Catholic women's colleges located in the Midwestern United States. Both colleges have publicly articulated mission statements that commit to social justice, service, and Catholic social teaching. Both colleges also promote their close connections to a founding order of Catholic Sisters. Magda College has common core courses in which students are introduced to stories about the founding Sisters and readings that explain Catholic social teaching and social justice. It also has an office that is responsible for coordinating community engagement opportunities for faculty and students, and runs a series of Catholic social teaching and social justice retreats and workshops through its campus ministry office. Amata College also has an office that coordinates community engagement activities and an active campus ministry office that provides community engagement connections between students and the monastic community. It requires two courses on Judeo-Christian Heritage. Both campuses make their missions clear in curricular and extra-curricular offerings for students, and aim to provide quality community engagement experiences for their students.

In order to examine how students at Amata and Magda understood their community engagement experiences, we used purposive sampling to select information-rich cases for this study (Patton, 1990). We worked with staff members in campus ministry and service-learning offices at each institution to identify students of junior or senior credit standing who had participated in long-term community engagement work. Potential participants were sent an email invitation to join the study. A total of five focus groups containing 21 students were conducted, and 19 students chose to participate in follow-up individual semi-structured interviews. Each focus group lasted one to two hours and follow up interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews and focus groups were conducted by the authors, and the questions asked students to describe the community engagement activities in which they had participated, their motivations for doing community engagement work, and the ways that their own identities mediated their community service activities. Within the interviews, we sought in-depth knowledge about each participant, in line with a qualitative research design (Ragin, Nagel, & White, 2004).

Demographic information about participants is shared in Table 1. All participants are referenced by pseudonyms. About half of the participants

identified as Catholic, and another quarter had been raised Catholic but did not currently identify as such. Fourteen students identified as White American, two were international students, three were students of color, and one student identified as biracial (Latina and White). One student, Elise, identified as an out lesbian, and other students identified as heterosexual. Students represented a variety of majors, with social work and Spanish most highly represented. The sample is representative of the demographics of the two institutions, with the exceptions of social work and Spanish being overly represented.

We asked students in this study not only about their religious participation, but also about their spiritual beliefs. For some students, religion and spirituality were highly connected, but for others, they meant quite different things. We include in our study participants who identified themselves as “not religious or spiritual” and “Atheist/individualist” because we believe that these identifications also represent the values and beliefs fundamental to these students’ lives as they seek answers to life’s big questions. Our own understandings about spirituality are constantly evolving, and we attempted to make no assumptions about the students’ spiritual perspectives or lack thereof. We crafted our interview and focus group questions so that students with multiple belief systems would be able to respond meaningfully.

Participants described a range of community engagement activities, including ministering to inmates, building homes for families, preparing high school students for college, volunteering at a women’s shelter or an orphanage, providing health education to immigrants, and teaching students with disabilities how to swim. Students described projects that reflected traditional “women’s work,” things like teaching, nursing, and care-giving, but they also related experiences in leadership and policy development. While all of the projects involved service, not all were strictly volunteer experiences. Many participants indicated that they had received some fellowship or work-study money in order to complete certain projects, and others had done projects as part of a service-learning requirement for a class.

Participants articulated that those majors that required service-learning projects at both Amata and Magda were most often traditionally female-dominated majors like social work, education, and nursing. All of the social work majors participating in this research noted that their major was popularly considered “women’s work.” A social work major at Magda commented that the very few men in the profession were the ones who generally took leadership roles. And, in traditionally male-dominated majors like science and math, community engagement activities were rarely required. Mikayla, however, noted that many people at Magda did not need a service-learning requirement to participate in service; they did it voluntarily.



Table 1  
*Interview Participants*

|           | Race/Ethnicity               | Religion/Spirituality                              | Class  | Major                                       |
|-----------|------------------------------|--|--------|---|
|           |                              | Amata College students                             |        |   |
| Ellen     | White American               | Catholic   | Junior | Communication                               |
| Brooke    | White American               | Catholic   | Junior | Psychology                                  |
| Michelle  | White American               | Catholic   | Senior | Spanish                                     |
| Katie     | White American               | Raised Catholic, not religious now                 | Senior | Political Science                           |
| Georgia   | White American               | Catholic   | Senior | Economics                                   |
| Noelle    | White American               | Catholic   | Senior | Psychology                                  |
| Jen       | White American               | Not religious or spiritual                         | Senior | Spanish/Social Work                         |
| Alice     | White American               | Raised Catholic, not religious now                 | Senior | Social Work/Sociology                       |
| Christine | Bosnian                      | Christian Orthodox                                 | Senior | Political Science/Peace Studies             |
| Amber     | White American               | Raised Catholic, now more spiritual                | Senior | Political Science                           |
| Marie     | White American               | Raised Catholic, now spirituality is guided by CST | Senior | Biology                                     |
|           |                              | Magda College students                             |        |   |
|           | Mexican-American (Immigrant) | Catholic   | Senior | Biology/Pre-Dentistry                       |
| Guadalupe | White American               | Raised Catholic, now more spiritual than religious | Senior | Accounting                                  |
| Mikayla   | White American               | Catholic   | Senior | Social Work                                 |
| Rebecca   | Hmong American               | Atheist/individualist                              | Senior | Sociology/Women's Studies                   |
| Jules     | Polish                       | Raised Catholic, does not subscribe to it now      | Senior | Nursing/Public Health                       |
| Apple     | White American               | Catholic, but only interested in CST               | Senior | Art/Journalism                              |
| Lily      | White American               | Raised Lutheran, not religious now                 | Senior | International Relations                     |
| Elise     | Native American              | Catholic   | Senior | Social Work/American Indian Studies/English |
| Kateri    | White American               | Catholic   | Senior | Spanish/Elementary Education                |
| Teresa    | Latina & White American      | Catholic   | Senior | Spanish                                     |
| Sally     |                              |  |        |   |

In conducting this research, we acknowledge our own identities and experiences as researchers. We are both white women who attended Catholic women's colleges as undergraduate students, and who subsequently worked at Catholic women's colleges. We were both raised Roman Catholic, and have grown away from the Church in our adult years. We each identify as feminist, and are committed to social justice through our research agendas. These subjectivities, along with many others, affected our research and analysis.

In the next section, we discuss how participating students described the relationship between their gender and spiritual identities relative to their community engagement activities. We find that women participants drew on both an ethic of care and an ethic of justice in their community engagement activities. Their community engagement work was influenced by the gender and spiritual identities they brought to their activities as well as the gendered and spiritual environments in which they were acting. Participants perceived that Catholic women's college environments were both complicated and supportive environments in which to learn and from which to launch community engagement efforts.

## **Findings**

### **Gender**

All participants at Amata College, and most at Magda College, made connections between their gender identities and their community engagement activities. All participants noted that the community engagement activities in which they participated were overwhelmingly populated by women, even though most of them were open to women and men at other colleges and in the community. Many articulated a particular commitment to working on women's issues and for women's rights. Several of the women noted that they felt comfortable doing community engagement activities because most of the leaders of these efforts were women.

*Why did the women participate in community engagement activities?* Four of the ten Amata students and one of the nine Magda students participating in individual interviews mentioned inborn female traits as a possible reason why they were interested in serving others. Inborn sex differences also were mentioned in focus groups at Amata and Magda. For example, Alice said that her "motherly nature" contributed to her desire to work with children. Brooke noted that "natural tendencies" caused women to provide service to others: "Women are the nurturing mothers and the caretakers and the healers—more emotional, more empathetic" than men. Michelle articulated that "women tend to be more outwardly-centered" and relational than men. Noelle agreed that women have a "natural maternal instinct to want to help others." Sally noted that men and

women look at problems in entirely different ways, and that women are more likely to be loving and caring.

In contrast, five Amata participants and three Magda participants credited socialized gender roles with encouraging them to participate in community engagement activities. Some of these women said socialized gender roles trumped inborn sex differences; others said that inborn sex differences and socialized gender roles both worked to motivate them to serve others. Ellen noted that her experiences at Amata had helped her break out of socialized gender roles by taking on leadership roles within her community engagement activities. During college, she became more confident in her capabilities as a woman, and she was inspired and motivated by the examples of her capable and confident classmates.

Several women, especially students at Magda, talked about the importance of role-modeling for younger women. These women often participated in community engagement programs which aimed to prepare young women for college. They saw their community engagement activities as a way to create social change by encouraging women from various backgrounds to aspire to higher education. Participants identifying as women of color, as first generation college students, and/or from lower socioeconomic statuses were particularly committed to being mentors for their communities. As one Magda focus group participant said:

I feel like as a woman from a woman's college, I am, like, responsible, and I should be a mentor for . . . young girls because we hear about gender inequality. . . . I was thinking that as a woman, I should show these girls that you can be whomever you want.

Generally, the participants' reasons for participating in community engagement were expressed in terms of attachment, rather than equality, consistent with an ethic of care rather than an ethic of justice (Gilligan, 1982). Participants emphasized the relational aspects of their service, the connections they felt to the communities they served, and the role modeling they did for other women. Still, even as they reaffirmed some stereotypes about women being biologically predestined or socialized to serve others, Amata and Magda students seemed empowered to be active change agents in their communities, and they were also attentive to problems of inequality and oppression, consistent with an ethic of justice (Gilligan, 1982). Many identified as feminists, and they were interested in women's rights and women's issues. They were committed to social justice for women around the world and empowered to help other women in their community by volunteering at battered women's shelters, helping young women prepare for college, and teaching refugee women about women's health. They were educated about women's positions around the world and they were aware of the freedoms that women in the United States have won throughout history. In one of the focus groups, a student shared that her experience at Magda has

“broadened the ideas of what I think needs to be changed.” In college, she became aware of how differences between men and women matter in society, and became committed to changing this.

*What role did the women-focused campus environment play in students’ community engagement experiences?* Most participants noted that their college environment had caused them to question socialized gender roles and empowered them to take on traditionally male roles, such as volunteering for Habitat for Humanity building houses or running for a leadership position on the student senate. Still, Alice noted that service was “easier for females to get involved with [than males] because I think especially in this community there is a little bit of stereotyping. And what males and females are supposed to do, their gender roles.” Participants at both schools agreed that men outside their college environment were not encouraged to provide service without an “ulterior motive” like resume building or paid compensation. They seemed to agree that men were missing out on the opportunity to serve others and to take on traditionally feminine roles, and that community engagement efforts suffered somewhat from the lack of men participants.

Brooke noted that outside of the campus environment, women were often lauded for their service but judged when they took on leadership roles. In comparison, participants noted that both Amata and Magda provided numerous opportunities for both service and leadership in the community, and that women benefited from taking on both kinds of roles. Nearly all of the participants talked about taking on leadership roles in their community engagement activities. For example, Ellen noted that there were opportunities to fill leadership roles in previously established community projects and support for women students to start their own engagement initiatives. In her words: “You’ve got some leaders’ molds to work with, and you’ve got lots of clay to work with.” Mikayla articulated that her Magda College experience had encouraged her to stand up and be a leader, rather than ceding power to men.

Women at both Amata and Magda noted that learning and working in all-women environments gave them confidence to participate in service and to take on leadership roles. A participant in a Magda focus group articulated that her women’s college experience had taught her that “It’s okay to speak up. You don’t have to put a qualifier in front of your answers.” Many of the students cited women mentors and role models within the campus community who had inspired, empowered, and supported them in their community engagement activities. As Jules said, “The people that I surround myself, the departments, the offices, the staff, my mentors: there’s social justice as a big part of these women’s lives as well, and it’s part of what they do, and what is important for them.”

In sum, participants at Amata and Magda articulated that the gender identities mediated their community engagement in multiple and complex ways.

Some said their gender biologically ordained them to serve; or that social norms about gender roles encouraged them to participate in community engagement activities. Some said that the women's college environment encouraged them to take on leadership roles within community engagement activities, whereas others pointed out that there was still stereotyping about gendered roles in their college environments. Many participants talked about the importance of role modeling for younger women, and some participants said that education about injustices toward women motivated them to work for women's rights and women's issues. Most participants credited a number of these gendered themes for encouraging them to participate in community engagement activities.

## **Spirituality**

Many of the participants from both Amata and Magda said that their spirituality was directly or indirectly related to their service work. While students participating in individual interviews described their spiritual identities in a variety of ways, many related their community engagement to their spirituality and said that their community engagement activities led to spiritual growth.

*How did students relate to the Catholic Church?* About half of the interview participants identified as Catholic now (10 of 19), and a majority of the participants (16 of 19) had been raised Catholic. However, participants described their relationship to the Catholic Church in varying terms, with many expressing conflicted relationships with the Catholic Church due to its prescribed gender roles and strict stance on homosexuality. A Magda student in a focus group said:

It's hard for me to look at the Catholic Church and say, "This is me" when I can't get involved . . . in the decisions that are made. . . . It's my religion, too, but I can't have any say in it. How is that fair?

In one of the focus groups at Amata College, a student talked about the importance of distinguishing "between the hierarchy of the Church, the Church as a very powerful political institution, and the Church as the Body of Christ, which are all of us and the people that do the work of Christ in the world." By differentiating in this way, this student was able to find a place for both feminism and God in her life. A Magda student said that the college sometimes struggled to achieve a similar level of compartmentalization, especially when donors or Church officials disapproved of some of the feminist social justice events planned on campus.

The Sisters seemed to serve as important role models for Amata and Magda College students. Participants described them as radicals, leaders, independent thinkers, models of community involvement, powerful and strong women, and change agents. Sisters were described both as mythical characters and as real people. Most of the students reported hearing inspiring tales about the Sisters' historical works, but they also had interactions with individual Sisters on campus.

During a Magda focus group, one student said that the campus was politically liberal because of the Sisters' leadership. The Sisters living near and working on campus served as examples of how to make change even within the constraints of the Church. Apple described the Sisters as both powerful and caring, as leaders and servers of others.

Many participants agreed that the Catholic Church's treatment of women was in direct contradiction to the messages about women promoted at their Catholic women's college. Alice noted that within Catholicism, she perceived a stereotyped view that it is a woman's responsibility to care for a home, a husband, and a family. Several of the women said that women could not become priests, the most public leadership role in the Catholic Church. This conflicted directly with the messages of Amata and Magda that "women can do anything and be anything," as stated by Alice. Amber articulated that these conflicting messages led to tension on campus between a desire to empower women and the Church's patriarchal system. Apple went so far as to say that Magda was committed to developing women leaders and therefore not really a Catholic institution. She perceived the administration and the Sisters associated with the college as practicing a very open-minded, flexible, and liberal form of Catholicism. Elise noted that there are lots of ways to be Catholic.

Several Amata students noted that they believe the best way to change the patriarchal Catholic hierarchy is from within, and they saw it as part of their spirituality to question their faith and challenge the gender roles of the Church with which they disagree. For example, Michelle thought that everything within the Catholic Church needed to be questioned, but she had chosen to do that questioning from within the Church. Ellen noted that she saw integrating Catholicism and feminism as a challenge that she felt empowered to take on. While others might see Catholicism and feminism as movements at odds with one another, Ellen noted: "They go together in my life, manifested in me. They have to work because they are working [in me]. I find that empowering." Ellen perceived that God was challenging her to be creative in how she makes change within the Catholic Church.

Students articulated that Amata and Magda promoted certain aspects of the Catholic Church more than others. At Magda, Catholic social teaching was a focus. Amata upheld certain community values coming from the religious order that founded the college, including community, hospitality, justice, stewardship, and respect for all people. At both places, students identified a culture of engagement that came from the Catholic nature of the colleges, and from the religious orders that founded them. According to Marie, this culture of engagement encouraged students to become involved in service activities, and it attracted students interested in service to these two colleges.

In the Catholic women's college environment, students' engagements with the distinct concepts of feminism and Catholic social teaching also seemed to

provide ways for them to draw on an ethic of justice in their community engagement work. Catholic Sisters provided models of social justice and change agency. Knowledge about systems of privilege and oppression prompted participants to work for social change. Support for women as leaders provided an alternative to the women as servants model.

*How did students relate their community engagement work to their spirituality?* Participants most often said that religion was more about good ethical values than about dogma. As noted above, many of the Catholic participants described struggles they had with the Catholic Church, but they were committed to the religion because it was how they could connect to God. Catholic social teaching seemed to be a key aspect of that connection to God. For example, Ellen said that God is present when she serves others. An Amata focus group participant noted that she resonates with the teachings of many religious traditions, but that Catholic social teaching serves as a “spiritual manual” for her actions. Another participant agreed that Catholic social teaching guides the “path of [her] life.” Michelle noted that Catholic social teaching “hits right at the core of how [she] understand[s] her spirituality.”

Kateri noted in her individual interview that her spirituality, influenced by both Catholicism and Native American beliefs, emphasized the connectedness of everyone. The view encourages her to serve others because what happens to them affects her. Four Amata students (Amber, Brooke, Alice, and Ellen) also said that their spirituality was about connecting to other people, in a relationship with others, and in a community. In Brooke’s words: “That’s why God made us, to be in relationship with one another.” From Brooke’s point of view, service was a way of building relationships with other people, so it was a key way in which she connected with God and her spirituality.” Ellen described her relationships with God and other people through service as a “trifecta” of mutually beneficial relationships: “It’s me, and God and these people and we’re all getting something out of it, and we’re all doing it for each other, in a way.” This emphasis on relationship is gendered and consistent with Gilligan’s (1982) ethic of care and the sense of connectedness to others and the world identified as a domain of spirituality by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2010).

Michelle perceived that more Amata students were “involved in social justice and engagement work for spiritual reasons than at a public university.” She articulated that she had grappled with certain aspects of her faith, but what “always remains constant is the passion for service on a spiritual level and the feeling of a spiritual motivation for service.” Michelle attempted to live Catholic social teaching in her daily life. Catholic student Brooke described a Catholic woman in this way: “We all believe in God. We all believe we should be in service to others; take care of each other; be good stewards; show respect dignity, [and] faith; pursue justice, especially social justice.” In her description of a Catholic woman, it is clear Brooke connected with Catholicism through service,

stewardship, and social justice. Brooke went on to say that she sees places in the Catholic Church where women can be leaders through service.

Marie, Noelle, Teresa, and Guadalupe noted that community engagement experiences allowed them opportunities to explore and grow in their spirituality. Teresa said that her community engagement led to her spiritual growth because she finally found something “real” that she could connect with in the Catholic Church. In her words, she finally found a way she could “be important in making it work.” Community engagement offers a role for women to play in the Catholic Church even as they are excluded from other leadership roles in the Church. Another Magda student, raised Catholic, said that serving others was more important to her spirituality than going to Church. And still another Magda student said that Catholic social teaching gives her hope for her Church, and allows her to find herself in the religion. Kateri said that her community engagement activities gave her a place to celebrate her spiritual identity. Several Magda students said that Catholicism was a support system that encourages them to connect with other people through service. In a focus group at Magda College, a student shared that although she did not agree with everything for which the Catholic Church stands, she focuses on those aspects in which she has a clear agreement:

giving back, with time money or whatever else; ... being respectful to the people that surround you, and to think about others, not just yourselves; not to be selfish; help out and volunteer; listen to the needs of others and in any way possible, try to figure out a way to help them out.

Ellen noted that Catholic social teachings were present in people’s actions and in campus values at Amata College, but that they were rarely talked about as Catholic social teachings. Georgia agreed. Instead, people on campus talked about leadership values, or the values of the founding religious order. Most participants noted that they had not learned about Catholic social teachings in their college classes, but many were familiar with the teachings from their high school experiences, their experiences with campus ministry, or their encounters with the Sisters.

Whereas some students at Amata College noted that Catholic social teaching was not always an explicit part of the curriculum, Magda students said that they did learn about social justice in their college classes. One Magda student who was not Catholic said that she first learned about Catholic social teaching at Magda, and that she’s adopted many of those ideals into her own life. Teresa said that Catholic social teaching named the things she already held as values, but that she had not learned about them before college. She felt that Catholic social teaching was a big connection point to lead people back to the Church, and that it should be featured more prominently within the Catholic Church. Another Magda student said that her sociology and women’s courses had prompted her to think about her beliefs and identities, including her gender and spiritual



identities. Magda students agreed that classes talked about expanding notions of charity and service to include social justice. Magda students also stressed that social justice was not a concept “owned” by Catholics; many other religions also stress the dignity of others.

However, not all Magda students felt that they had been afforded enough opportunities to learn, question, and grow in faith. Lily, in particular, said that many students miss out on these opportunities. She did say however, that the Sisters had changed her perspectives about who Catholic women are and what they do. She found the Sisters’ lives inspiring.

Several students at Amata also conveyed that they were called to share their gifts with others. In this way, they identified themselves as privileged individuals (as White, from families with financial resources, people with access to education, people with specific abilities) who had something to contribute to their communities. One student who was adopted had a particular sense of being placed in her current situation by God, and had a particular commitment to sharing her gifts with others.

Ellen challenged herself to never say no to a service opportunity. She saw these opportunities put before her by God, and she felt that they were her life’s path. Conversely, Georgia had decided to pull away from some of her service activities, finding herself burnt out from taking on too much. Now, she is more reflective about participating in activities that relate directly to Catholic social teaching and contribute to her own spiritual wellness. Amata participants agreed that campus ministry and other groups provide numerous opportunities to serve others.

Eight participants (four at Amata and four at Magda) identified as not religious. These women perceived that they could be good people without being religious. One participant said that the morals she grew up with were rooted in spirituality but that spirituality did not continue to affect her service. Another agreed that religion and spirituality could be motivators for people to serve others, but that it does not have to be a governing force. A third participant said that the religious values of Amata probably promote a culture of service on campus, but that spirituality was not a personal motivator for her to participate in community engagement activities. Two students—one at Amata and one at Magda—described their spiritual beliefs by saying “I believe in myself.” They believed that they held the responsibility and the credit for what they do in the world, and they defined their own passions and beliefs.

Katie, a student who was raised Catholic but did not identify as religious, planned to instill service as a value in her future children. She saw community engagement as a way of instilling a moral compass without religion. She continued to participate in a Catholic organization dedicated to feeding the hungry even though she did not believe in the spiritual elements. Although she did not agree with many of the teachings of the Catholic Church, she

acknowledged that it has given her a moral compass and that it promotes community engagement.

### **Orientations of Care and Justice**

All participants seemed to draw on an ethic of care when framing their motivations for doing community engagement work. This is not surprising given Gilligan's (1982) assertion that most women draw on an ethic of care when making moral decisions. Students articulated that relationship with God and with other people was a key part of their spirituality. In one of the focus groups at Amata College, a student noted that her gender and spiritual identity as a Catholic instilled in her a mission to help and to love. As women, many of these students perceived themselves as either naturally prone or socialized to want to serve others, and those values were supported by traditional notions of Catholic women.

In the Catholic women's college environment, students' engagements with the distinct concepts of feminism and Catholic social teaching also seemed to provide ways for them to draw on an ethic of justice in their community engagement work. Catholic Sisters provided models of social justice and change agency. Knowledge about systems of privilege and oppression prompted participants to work for social change. Support for women as leaders provided an alternative to women as servants.

Comments from Georgia assert the importance of integrating an ethic of care and an ethic of justice. Georgia perceived that Amata College promotes leadership values, but she also stressed the importance of doing direct service. In her words:

[In] hands on service, you come face to face with the people you're saying you care about. . . . Service gives you that hands-on sort of reality check of "Holy crap. I say poverty shouldn't exist and as a Catholic I believe that we should help the poor, but I really had no idea how big of an issue this was."

Georgia thought it was important that both men and women college students take part in both service and leadership experiences, in charity work and in social justice work. She saw work within both paradigms as important to her own moral development.

As posited by Gilligan (1982), care and justice focuses are simply different ways of viewing the world and neither is morally superior. We agree, and we do not view either an ethic of care or an ethic of justice as a superior motivator for community engagement work. However, we believe that participants in this study were well-served by their ability to focus on both care and justice in their community engagement efforts, and we believe that their communities were well-served by student's willingness to both serve the community directly and

connect their acts of service to a larger quest for social change. In participating in community engagement activities, participants articulated benefits for the community and personal benefits for themselves, including enhancing their leadership and professional skills, learning more about their own identities and world around them, and contributing to positive social change that made their world better and more equitable.

### Conclusions

It is important to realize that the perspectives of these women may not represent the average student at Amata College or Magda College. Participants were very involved in community engagement activities. Yet, there was also a sense that community engagement was quite prevalent within these Catholic women's colleges, perhaps even institutionalized. This raised a number of questions for us: How does institutionalized community engagement at Catholic women's colleges reinforce traditional notions of women as servants? How does the incorporation of service-learning requirements into traditionally female-dominated majors (like nursing, social work, and education) and the exclusion of such requirements for traditionally male-dominated majors (like math and science) reinstitutionalize the gendered nature of service and the gendered nature of particular majors? What does it mean that participants were involved so heavily in engagement activities that involved caring for children, teaching others, and serving food, traditionally female tasks? At the same time, how do mission commitments to develop women as leaders, policymakers, and social change agents complicate traditional gender roles? How does Catholic social teaching help push the dialog from charity toward social justice? How do competing discourses about Catholic women—coming from the patriarchal Catholic hierarchy, the models of Sisters working on and near Catholic women's college campuses, and the Bible—complicate notions of community engagement and social justice for college women at Catholic women's colleges? To what extent can Catholic women's colleges help women transgress the discourses that shape and restrict their work?

Like Foos (2000), we challenge the assumption that the goal of community engagement is to move students along a continuum that has "charity" at one end and "social justice" on the other. We found that many students were aware of philosophical differences between charity and social justice, but that these meanings were often blurry and dependent on individual perspectives and experiences. Many of the students in the overall study noted that our discussions were the first time that they had been asked to describe how they made meaning of their community engagement work within the broader context of their lives. Students said that they enjoyed hearing each others' stories, and that this opportunity to talk about the complexity of their lives in relation to social justice

work opened up new perspectives that allowed them to hear stories of difference. As such, we recommend that educators at all types of colleges provide opportunities for reflection and reflexive praxis that can help students make sense of their identities in relation to their community engagement experiences.

As noted above, participants seemed to draw on an ethic of care and an ethic of justice when framing their motivations for doing community engagement work. In these Catholic women's college environments, students' engagements with the distinct concepts of feminism and Catholic social teaching provided ways for them to draw on an ethic of justice in their community engagement work, while many students attributed their ethic of care to their identities as (Catholic) women. We believe that participants in this study were well-served by their ability to focus on both care and justice in their community engagement efforts, and that their communities were well-served by students' willingness to both serve the community directly and connect their acts of service to a larger quest for social change.

Participants within this study, to a large extent, saw themselves as having an integrated spiritual/gender identity. In order to make sense of disjunctures and ruptures present on campus (competing discourses about Catholic women, competing discourses about leadership and service), most of the students interviewed needed at times to compartmentalize different aspects of their identities and moral commitments, especially when they came into direct conflict with each other. This finding seems to suggest that these identities are fluid and in-process and, ultimately, context contingent. As a result, educators need to consider the role of experience as we attempt "identity development" or "inner development." The micro lens that we gave to our study illustrates that the process of meaning-making is necessarily bumpy, as it likely is for most students on most campuses.

Compartmentalization seemed to allow students within this study the ability to navigate cognitive incongruities and complex power relations. For most of the students in our study, this was a useful skill that allowed for choice, agency, and a positive self-concept. More research is needed, however, to understand how compartmentalization may limit students' abilities to develop as whole people, and may constrain their avenues for identity development.

Each of the 21 students in our study added another layer of complexity to what is "known" about how students experience and make meaning from structured programs that encourage community engagement. Our findings suggest that the interrelationships between aspects of identity and specific contexts and interpretations of community engagement experience are far from fixed. More research is needed to understand the ways that community engagement activities enhance the inner development of college students in a variety of campus contexts.

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