

2011 AIR RESEARCH GRANT PROPOSAL

Fostering Meaning, Purpose, and Enduring Commitments to Community Service in College: A Multidimensional Conceptual Model

Grant Amount Requested: \$40,000

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Fostering Meaning, Purpose, and Enduring Commitments to Community Service in College: A Multidimensional Conceptual Model

Statement of the Research Problem and National Importance

The mission of higher education has historically included educating students for lives of public service and civic engagement (Cohen, 1998; American Council on Education, 1949). To the extent that sheer numbers of volunteering students are indicative of success in achieving higher education's service mission, recent studies of the rates at which college students volunteer suggest that the number of students performing service in their communities is on the rise (Sax, 2004), growing as much as 20% from 2002 to 2005 (Dote, Cramer, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006). Although rates of service participation as a whole have risen over time, panel studies of the trajectories of service participation from high school through the post-college years reveal that individuals become less involved in community service with each educational transition (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2005). Given the tendency for civic values and behaviors to weaken after college, it is imperative that we understand how to foster enduring commitments to citizenship and service during and after the college years so as to maintain the integrity of higher education's public service mission. The proposed study will examine (for all students and for various sub-populations) how multiple dimensions of college students' service participation – the intensity and type of service, the motivation to serve, and the benefits of serving – shape life goals oriented toward meaning, purpose, and engaged citizenship and subsequent service involvement.

As affirmed by the 2011 funding priorities of the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC), student success amounts to more than graduation rates, grades, degree attainment, and job placement and includes outcomes that reflect students' capacity to make meaningful contributions to the society in which they live. Understanding how the college experience promotes values and behaviors oriented toward citizenship, life meaning, purpose, and service marks a critical step on the path to ensuring that higher education is fulfilling its public service mission. Generations past and present judge the relative social good of higher education on the basis of the citizens it produces. Are they compassionate and attentive to the needs of others? Are they motivated by deep conviction to make meaningful contributions to the world around them? Are they prepared to actively engage the political, social, and economic realities that confront the communities in which they live? Similar questions are at the forefront of initiatives implemented by the Corporation for National and Community Service, which provides young adults with opportunities for service through SeniorCorps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America (Dote et al., 2006), and Campus Compact, which involves more than 1,000 college and university presidents in executing the public service mission of higher education through efforts to integrate civic values and behaviors into their institutions (Campus Compact, 2007). Given this concerted national effort to engage young adults in community service work, research that addresses how to generate optimal service-related outcomes is imperative.

The policy relevance of the proposed study is three-fold: First, the study will inform educators and policymakers about the ideal structure of service opportunities by identifying whether and how the intensity and types of service are associated with life goals and long-term service engagement. Second, the study will shed light on the role of external motives for service work – and the extent to which motives associated with program requirements and social expectations

undermine intended service benefits and outcomes. Clarity on motivational forces will guide the manner in which educators present community service opportunities to students and how they recruit and “reward” participants. Third, the study will prove useful to educators and policymakers serving specific populations in that the applicability of the conceptual model and hypothesized structural paths will be assessed for students of diverse genders, races/ethnicities, income levels, and institutions. College students are not a homogenous group, and this study is attuned to the fact that multi-prong policy initiatives may be necessary to promote service engagement across different types of students and institutions.

The proposed study also carries substantial theoretical utility. Past research has generally focused on the personal and contextual predictors of service, the outcomes of service, and the motivational forces underlying decisions to serve. Rarely have these multiple dimensions been integrated into a single conceptual model. The proposed study moves beyond merely predicting service behaviors and outcomes and uses a rigorous methodological approach to explore the interrelated, multidimensional processes by which service participation transforms students’ citizenship goals and behaviors.

Review of the Literature and Theoretical Grounding

To provide a context and rationale for the study, the following brief review of the literature considers three essential questions: What predicts participation in community service? What are the short- and long-term effects of community service work? How do the motivations underlying service work shape subsequent experiences and outcomes?

Regarding the first question (why do individuals participate in community service work?), a number of research studies have identified the personal and contextual factors that predict volunteering. Women and students with greater educational “capital” generally volunteer more often than do men and those with fewer educational resources (Cruce & Moore, 2007; Dote et al., 2006). Attitudes and values also play a role in inclinations to perform and continue service work (Marks & Jones, 2004; Ozorak, 2003; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2005). Students who are socially responsible, optimistic, religious, and non-materialistic exhibit sustained participation in community service from high school to college (Marks & Jones, 2004), and students who feel connected to their communities and who perceive serious community needs tend to volunteer (Hellman, Hoppes, & Ellison, 2006). Seider (2007) argued that a predisposition toward an ethic of care is a necessary but not sufficient precursor to participation in service work; the other essential ingredient is a catalyzing academic experience that alters students’ worldviews and propels them to serve.

The second major question addressed in the research literature concerns the short- and long-term effects of service work. On the whole, the outcomes of service participation are numerous and include citizenship development/civic engagement (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Sax, 2004; Taylor & Trepanier-Street, 2007), academic achievement (Astin & Sax, 1998), multicultural competence (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Taylor & Trepanier-Street, 2007), social consciousness (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Jones & Abes, 2003, 2004; Taylor & Trepanier-Street, 2007), identity development (Jones & Abes, 2004), and physical and mental health (Wilson, 2000). Astin and

Sax (1998) found that positive outcomes were evident regardless of the type of service performed, although stronger effects were observed when more time was devoted to the service. (Astin & Sax, 1998). Additionally, the citizenship values associated with volunteering generally hinge on opportunities to reflect on the service experience (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). Using structural equation modeling to identify complex path relationships among service work dimensions and outcomes, Reinders and Youniss (2006) found that service involving direct interactions with people led high school students to feel they had made a contribution, which subsequently enhanced their self-awareness. In turn, self-awareness prompted students to help strangers, which consequently strengthened the likelihood of their future civic engagement. The work of Reinders and Youniss (2006) illustrated that the relationship between service and outcomes is anything but simple cause-and-effect.

A third key thread of the research literature on community service participation seeks to illuminate the motivations that underlie volunteering. In the psychological literature on service work motivations, researchers have distinguished between internal motivations (e.g., volunteering that stems from altruistic values and aspirations to learn, understand, and grow as a person) and external motivations (e.g., volunteering for the purposes of advancing one's career and responding to requirements or social pressures), arguing that "acts of volunteerism that appear to be quite similar on the surface may reflect markedly different underlying motivational processes" (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen, and Miene, 1998, p. 1517). The extent to which volunteering functions as an exercise that is internally as opposed to extrinsically driven influences not only the initiation of helping behavior, but also the maintenance of helping behavior (Clary et al. 1998). For instance, Clary and Orenstein (1991) found that helpers whose motivations were focused on the benefits to others as opposed to themselves were more likely to fulfill their service commitments. Some studies that examine the effects of mandatory community service work send a similar message: Requiring students to perform service reinforces external motives and may hinder continued commitment to service and the formation of a volunteer role identity (Marks & Jones, 2004; Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 1999). Even so, others argue that requiring service is not wholly detrimental in that mandated initiatives recruit students to service work who might not otherwise participate (Reinders & Youniss, 2006). On the whole, the research suggests that motivations for volunteering not only influence volunteering behavior but have significant implications for the transformative potential of service work in the areas of attitudes, values, and self-perceptions (Finkelstein, 2009; Ozorak, 2003).

In summary, engagement in community service during the college years is predicated on personal and contextual factors and can serve as a means to instilling in students the values essential to their participation as compassionate citizens in a diverse society. However, mere involvement in service work does not ensure that students will internalize the values that educators intend for them to adopt. Other factors may be at work, all of which have potential implications for students' developmental outcomes: The nature and context in which the service takes place, student motivations to participate in service, and the internal and external benefits that students accrue in the process of serving, which ultimately influence their values and subsequent participation. With a few exceptions, existing research lacks a multidimensional approach to exploring the relationships among the various elements of students' service work and the outcomes that result from it.

Research Method

To remedy the limitations in the existing knowledge base, this study proposes a conceptual model (see Figure 1) and employs structural equation modeling to address the following questions: Accounting for life goals at entry to college, how do various dimensions of service work (type, intensity, and motivations) relate to the external and internal benefits of service and, subsequently, life goals oriented toward meaning, purpose, and citizenship three years after college entry and enduring service involvement six years after college entry? To what extent are the relationships among service work dimensions and outcomes conditioned by gender, race/ethnicity, income level, and institution type?

An exploratory analysis of the proposed model indicated that life goals three years after college entry are indeed a function of students' citizenship predispositions, the intensity and context of service involvement, and, importantly, the benefits that students derive from their service participation. Becoming a more compassionate and socially-aware person as a result of service work is positively linked to committing oneself to a meaningful life marked by helping others and civic engagement, whereas vocational benefits of service actually undermine life goals. The critical missing element of the exploratory analysis was the long-term effect of service work type, intensity, motivations, benefits, and outcomes on service work involvement – a problem which can now be resolved given the recent availability of additional longitudinal data.

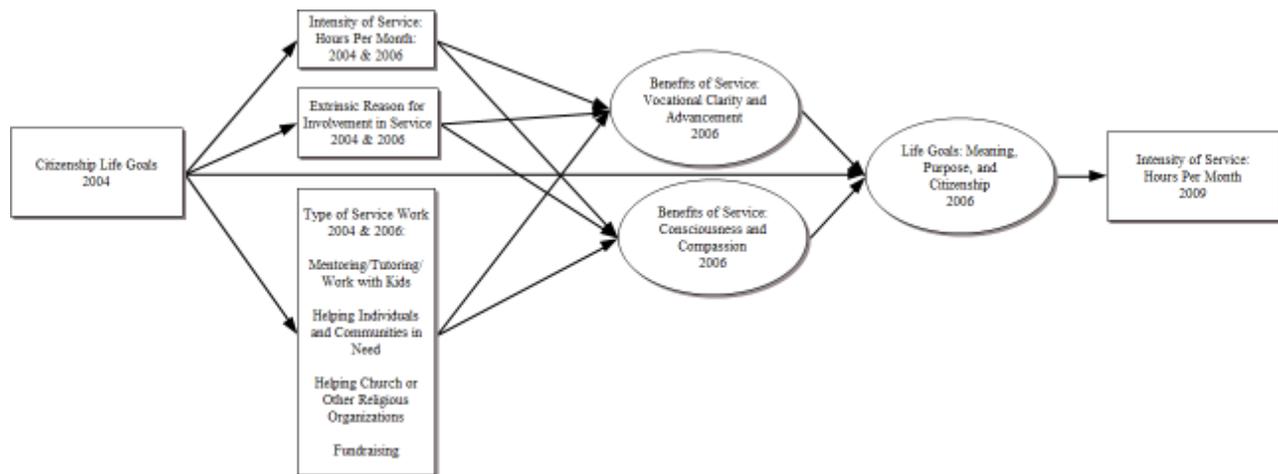


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

The sample for the proposed study will include approximately 7,500 community service participants who responded to the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study 2004-09. The measures represented in the conceptual model include three latent constructs and eight observed variables that together reflect key dimensions of community service work identified in the literature. The outcome of interest is the intensity of service work (e.g., hours per month) six years after college entry. The intermediate outcome, *Life Goals Oriented Toward Meaning, Purpose, and Citizenship (2006)*, is a latent construct comprised of four variables that reflect personal goals that students could indicate in 2006 as being “very important” to them: Being a leader in the community, helping others, influencing the political structure, and finding meaning and a sense of purpose in life. Two of the items in the Life Goals latent construct – being a

leader in the community and influencing the political structure – were asked of students in 2004 and were included in the observed composite variable, *Citizenship Life Goals (2004)*, intended to control for student propensities toward citizenship at the outset of college.

The *intensity of volunteer work* performed during college is an observed variable measured in 2004 and again in 2006 and reflects the average hours of service per month across both academic years. Four observed variables, measured in 2004 and 2006, reflect the *type of service* in which students participated: *Tutoring, Mentoring, or Other Work with Kids; Helping Communities and People in Need; Service to Church or Other Religious Organizations; and Fundraising*. Another observed variable, *Extrinsic Reason for Volunteering*, consists of four items that reflect external influences on students' decisions to volunteer in 2004 and 2006: as a result of a class or program requirement; as part of a campus organization such as a fraternity or sorority; and as a result of encouragement from friends, family members, faculty, or mentors.

The final two latent constructs in the conceptual model represent the benefits that students may accrue in conjunction with their service participation. *Vocational Clarity and Advancement* includes “external” benefits that enhance students' educational and career pursuits in the areas of career and academic major choice, resume building, and skill expansion. By contrast, “internal” benefits associated with *Consciousness and Compassion* are gains that include learning how to apply knowledge, skills, and/or interests to real world issues; increasing awareness of social issues; and becoming a more compassionate person.

Several additional variables will serve a moderating function in the analysis, including gender, race/ethnicity, income level, and institutional type, all of which have been shown to influence community service behaviors.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) with AMOS 17.0 will serve as the foundational approach for exploring the relationships among the latent constructs and observed variables in the model. SEM employs similar logic to multivariate regression, but is particularly useful in examining theorized path relationships among latent constructs. The fit of the latent constructs will be assessed using confirmatory factor analysis. Then, relationships among the latent constructs will be evaluated in the full measurement model, and slight adjustments may be made to the model to account for correlations among error terms. Following an evaluation of the measurement model fit indices, the structural model will be constructed and assessed on the basis of fit indices and path estimates (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Schumaker & Lomax, 1996). The mediating properties hypothesized in the conceptual model will also be examined.

Given the interrelatedness of service work dimensions, namely the intensity of service, extrinsic reasons for service, and type of service work, an alternative model that accounts for these associations will be tested, and its fit indices will be compared to those estimated for the primary conceptual model (see Figure 2). Should the alternative model demonstrate similar or better fit than the primary conceptual model, its fit indices will be reported.

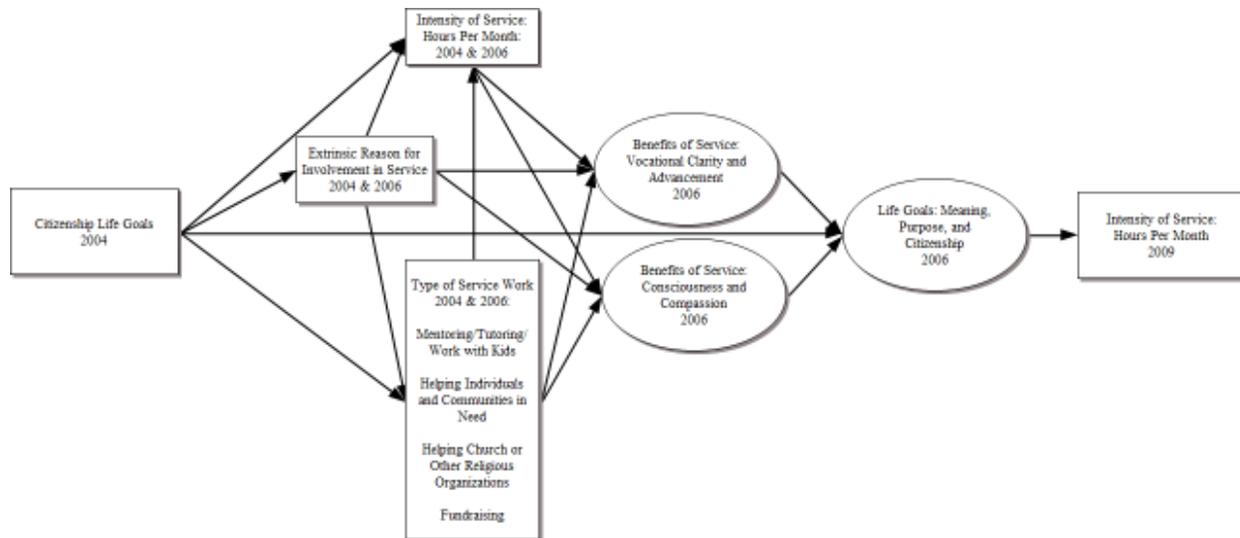


Figure 2. Alternative Conceptual Model

Following validation of the structural model, the next step will entail assessing the applicability of the model for students representing different genders, races/ethnicities, income levels, and institutional types. First, separate SEM analyses will be conducted for each group to ensure that the model fit is acceptable across the various sub-groups. Second, tests for measurement invariance will be performed to shed light on whether model parameters differ significantly between groups. Testing for measurement invariance involves comparing the unconstrained model for pooled comparison groups with models in which certain parameters are constrained to be equal between the groups. For the purposes of this study, unconstrained models will be compared to models in which 1) measurement weights (latent construct factor loadings) are constrained to be equal and 2) structural weights (regression coefficients) are constrained to be equal. The chi-square difference statistic will be used to assess whether there are significant differences between the unconstrained and the constrained-equal models. When the change in chi-square is non-significant from the unconstrained to constrained-equal models, invariance (i.e., applicability of the model across groups) can be assumed. Parameter differences will be further examined when significant changes in chi-square suggest non-invariance. In these instances, unstandardized measurement weights (factor loadings) and structural weights (regression coefficients) will be compared across groups using a t-test statistic.

Dataset

The proposed study will be based on the 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/09) conducted by the U.S. Department of Education through the National Center for Education Statistics. The BPS:04/09 respondent sample consists of approximately 16,700 students who entered college between July 1, 2003 and June 30, 2004. First-time students were interviewed in conjunction with the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04) in 2004, the BPS:04/06 in 2006, and the BPS 04/09 in 2009. The BPS is a rich source of data on student demographic characteristics, persistence in higher education, degree completion, employment transitions, and life goals. Because the BPS study is attuned to students' postsecondary trajectories, it provides a valuable longitudinal perspective on how the

college experience influences key outcomes of interest to educators and policymakers. The fact that students were assessed across three consecutive survey administrations makes this dataset an ideal choice for exploring proposed structural models that imply development over time.

Of the available national postsecondary data files generated by the U.S. Department of Education, the BPS:04/09 is a particularly useful resource for examining college students' service work. The data set contains variables that address not only whether students participated in service, but the amount time they devoted to it, the type of service work they completed, their reasons for becoming involved in service, and the benefits of their service participation. The study's focus on college student involvement in volunteer and community service activities necessitates using the BPS:04/09 dataset (see attached variable list).

Timeline

May 2011

Selection and training of graduate student researcher

June 2011

Data acquisition and preparation; update literature review

July 2011-August 2011

Analysis of proposed conceptual model

September 2011-November 2011

Validation of proposed conceptual model across student sub-populations (multi-group analyses)

November 2011

Presentation of conceptual model at 2011 Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Conference

December 2011-April 2012

Preparation of manuscripts for publication and dissemination of findings to key stakeholders

June 2012

Presentation of multi-group analyses at 2012 Association for Institutional Research (AIR) Forum

Deliverables

The results of the study will be presented at two national conferences during the 2011-12 academic year (ASHE and AIR). Moreover, at least two manuscripts will be prepared for publication in top-tier higher education journals (e.g., *Research in Higher Education*, *Review of Higher Education*, *Journal of College Student Development*, *Journal of Higher Education*).

Dissemination of Results

As noted, the results of the study will be disseminated at two national conferences and through manuscripts for publication in top-tier higher education journals. Other efforts to share findings broadly will include research briefs provided to key stakeholder groups such as the Corporation for National and Community Service and Campus Compact. In addition, practitioner presentations will be provided to educators in diverse college and university settings who facilitate community service and social justice work among emerging adults in higher education.

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Statement of Institutional Review Board Approval or Exemption

The North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board has formally approved the exploratory analysis of the proposed conceptual model involving the BPS:04/06 dataset. An addendum to the initial proposal will be provided to the IRB immediately, should the proposal be funded, to request permission to use the BPS:04/09 to examine the proposed conceptual model and its applicability to student sub-populations.

Statement of Use of Restricted Datasets

The principal investigator currently holds a five-year restricted data use license for the BPS:04/06 dataset and is currently seeking approval from NCES to access the BPS:04/09 upon its release in spring 2011.

Biographical Sketch

My area of scholarship, broadly, is higher education, and within that general domain my research and teaching explore several critical issues pertaining to student affairs and the college student experience. I received my Ph.D. in Education with a specialization in Higher Education and Organizational Change from the University of California, Los Angeles and worked as a research analyst and Postdoctoral Fellow at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) for five years on several projects involving national, longitudinal datasets [e.g., Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, Your First College Year (YFCY) survey, the National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose]. Immediately following my postdoctoral appointment, I accepted a position as an educational researcher at RTI International in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. During my tenure at RTI, I worked closely with the National Center for Education Statistics in conjunction with my project team to administer the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study 2004/06. As a result of my involvement in the BPS:04/06 data collection, I am familiar with the nuances of the dataset and have been working on preliminary analyses for the proposed project over the last six months. Since fall of 2006, I have served as assistant professor of higher education in the Department of Leadership, Policy and Adult and Higher Education at North Carolina State University.

Over the last ten years I have built my research agenda around the topics of college student values, beliefs, and meaning-making. The scarcity of research on such domains in the field to date has enabled me to contribute to our understanding of this relatively unexplored terrain. In collaboration with colleagues around the country who share similar interests, I have helped to make evident the significance of dimensions of higher education institutions and the college student experience that have received little attention in the past. To this point in my career, I have succeeded in securing over \$58,000 in internal and external funds to support the research represented in over 40 scholarly publications. Specifically, I have explored issues of religious diversity and pluralism on campus; the development of ecumenical and pluralistic perspectives among college students; campus-based religious communities and subcultures; gendered patterns of spiritual development; and the dynamics and outcomes of spiritual struggle in students' lives. I am currently striving to extend my research agenda into other related areas of inquiry, namely community service participation and civic engagement.

Importantly, my research perspective integrates several lenses that together influence the way in which I approach and analyze problems in higher education scholarship. As a mixed-methods researcher, I have discovered that both quantitative and qualitative methodologies are instrumental in exploring the many questions I have regarding religion and spirituality in higher education. I have made every effort to develop expertise across paradigmatic boundaries and expect to employ a variety of statistical methodologies in the proposed study with an emphasis on structural equation modeling (SEM). In addition to SEM, my training includes multivariate regression, logistic regression, and multilevel modeling. Above all, my research is guided by a blend of criticalist, social justice, and feminist lenses. Through my work I seek to illuminate the realities of students who have experienced marginalization in higher education as a result of any number of identity factors, most principally, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion/worldview, which is why my work emphasizes differences in the effects of college across student sub-populations.

One of my primary intentions in conducting research on the domains of values, beliefs, and meaning-making in higher education is to extend the empirical data into meaningful and effective practice on campuses by communicating findings to a range of higher education stakeholders responsible for shaping policy and practice. To this end, I participated in and co-authored the proceedings for the National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education hosted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA (November 2006), which brought together leaders from ten different campuses across the country to establish action plans and objectives related to the integration of spirituality, meaning, and purpose within curricular and co-curricular initiatives. More recently I have turned my attention to providing research and practice presentations to student affairs practitioners and campus ministers in North Carolina with the goal of theoretically informing the guidance and mentorship they provide college students. Efforts such as these bring life and purpose to empirical data, and I view research-to-practice activities as an integral component of my research agenda.

Budget

Budget/Justification		
Item	Cost	Justification
YEAR 1 (May 1, 2011-April 30, 2012)		
PI Salary	\$21,075	Two months summer salary and 10% effort during the academic year. PI responsibilities include project management, data analysis, and dissemination of project results, including presenting at conferences and preparing manuscripts for publication.
Graduate Research Assistant (GRA)	\$7,800	For 10 hours per week, 52 weeks, at \$15 per hour to assist with data analysis, literature reviews, and dissemination of the findings.
PI Fringe	\$5,901	Fringe is calculated based on a rate of 28%.
GRA Fringe	\$86	Fringe is calculated based on a rate of 1.1%.
Travel	\$4,000	Funds for PI and Graduate Student to attend 2 conferences (ASHE and AIR) to present results.
Books and supplies	\$1,138	To purchase books for the literature review and statistical software for analysis.
Year 1 Total	\$40,000	

Statement of Prior, Current, and Pending Funding

To date, the principal investigator has acquired internal and external funding to pursue the research projects listed below. The principal investigator is not currently working on a funded project, and this AIR grant proposal is the only project that is pending.

1. Net Connect: Emergent Technologies for Social Justice Initiatives

Funder and Amount: North Carolina State University, University Extension, Engagement, and Economic Development Grant, \$9,961, September 2009-December 2010

My Role: Principal Investigator

2. The Impact of Campus Context, College Encounters, and Religious/Spiritual Struggle on Ecumenical Worldview Development by Gender, Race, and Worldview

Funder and Amount: UCLA Higher Education Research Institute/John Templeton Foundation, \$10,000, June 2009-December 2009

My Role: Principal Investigator

3. The Meaning and Implications of Religious Pluralism in Higher Education: Exploring the Climate for Religious Diversity on Campus

Funder and Amount: North Carolina State University, Faculty Research and Professional Development Grant, \$6,000/Department of Adult and Higher Education, \$5,000, July 2008-June 2009

My Role: Principal Investigator

4. The Impact of Athletic Participation on Civic Engagement

Funder and Amount: NCSU College of Education, \$1,000, August 2008-May 2009

My Role: Co-Principal Investigator

5. A Phenomenological Analysis of College Students' Spiritual Struggles

Funder and Amount: NCSU Department of Adult and Higher Education, \$7,000, September 2006-May 2008

My Role: Principal Investigator

6. The Challenge and Promise of Pluralism: A Lutheran College Responds to Religious Diversity on Campus

Funder and Amount: Wartburg College via a grant from the Lilly Endowment, \$19,940, 2007

My Role: Co-Principal Investigator