



The Urban Plunge: College Student Views on Poverty in the U.S.

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Introduction

Since 1974, nearly 7,000 students from the University of Notre Dame and two nearby colleges have participated in the Center for Social Concerns' one-credit experiential Seminar referred to as the Urban Plunge. Central to the course is a 48-hour immersion in a local urban center whereby students address urban challenges with individuals and organizations working to solve them.

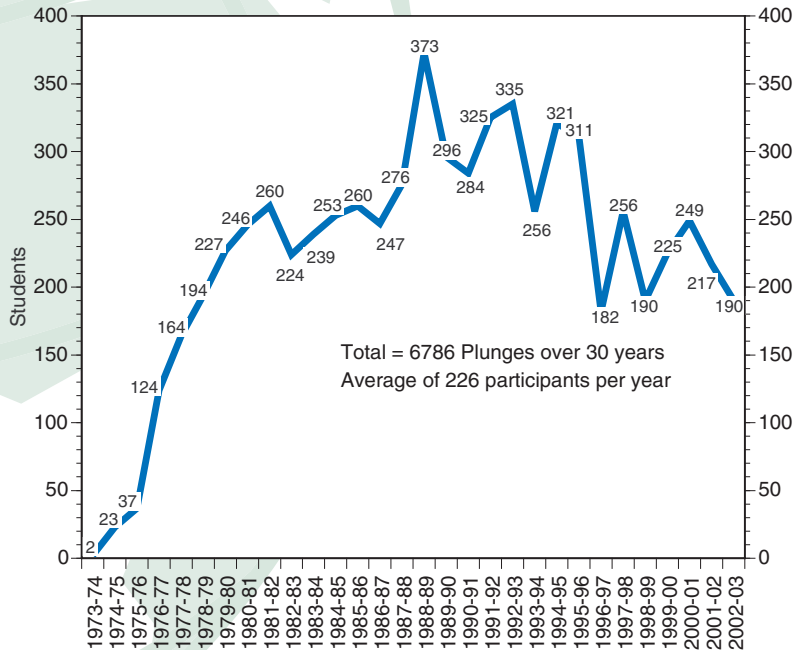
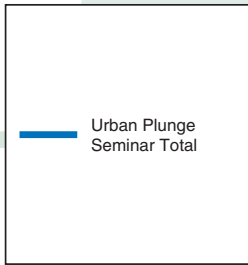
In this report, we discuss results of a study of two recent cohorts of participants designed to ascertain students' understandings of poverty and to enhance our educational effectiveness. We built our survey from one conducted by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (2001), enabling national comparisons.

The Urban Plunge Seminar

During each January break between semesters, approximately 200 students visit over 40 agency sites in more than 30 cities across the country (see Figure 1) as part of the Urban Plunge Seminar (known formally as *Social Concerns Seminar: The Church and Social Action*). Participation has grown significantly over the years, from two participants in

Figure 1.

Student enrollment in the Urban Plunge seminar since 1974



Source: Center databases
 Includes only Notre Dame, St. Mary's, and Holy Cross students who received a grade

| Figure 2. Aside from terrorism please name the biggest problem facing American Society today? | Pre-Urban Plunge | | | | | | | | Post-Urban Plunge | | | | | | | |
|---|------------------|---------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|-------------------|---------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | ND Pre-Plunge | Females | Males | A&L | Bus. | Eng. | Sci. | FY | ND Post-Plunge | Females | Males | A&L | Bus. | Eng. | Sci. | FY |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Poverty | 73.4 | 74.9 | 69.7 | 76.1 | 71.0 | 70.0 | 83.3 | 71.7 | 73.0 | 76.0 | 65.2 | 70.7 | 83.9 | 60.0 | 62.5 | 75.5 |
| Inadequate education | 33.9 | 35.3 | 30.3 | 35.9 | 38.7 | 30.0 | 20.8 | 30.2 | 39.5 | 43.7 | 28.8 | 47.8 | 41.9 | 30.0 | 20.8 | 28.3 |
| Crime | 22.7 | 23.4 | 21.2 | 25.0 | 19.4 | 20.8 | 20.8 | 15.1 | 22.7 | 24.6 | 18.2 | 20.7 | 25.8 | 10.0 | 29.2 | 22.6 |
| Excessive military spending | 3.0 | 1.2 | 7.6 | 1.1 | 3.2 | 0.0 | 4.2 | 3.8 | 7.3 | 2.4 | 19.7 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 0.0 | 4.2 | 7.5 |
| Sample Size | n= 233 | n=167 | n=66 | n=92 | n=31 | n=10 | n=24 | n=53 | n= 233 | n=167 | n=66 | n=92 | n=31 | n=10 | n=24 | n=53 |

1974 to a high of 373 in 1988. Enrollment in the Urban Plunge has leveled off in recent years given an increase in similar experiential courses offered by the Center for Social Concerns (see Research Report 5). Still the Urban Plunge remains one of the largest for-credit initiatives of its type in higher education.

In each city, students are immersed in a variety of community activities for experiential learning. For example, in Indianapolis, students visit a local jail and serve in a soup kitchen. Students in Boston distribute furniture and food to low-income families. In Pittsburgh, participants work with staff at a local legal aid office. In Columbus, Ohio, students stay overnight at a large social service agency, and work during the day at a welcome center for immigrants.

Augmenting the Seminar’s direct learning experience are orientation and follow-up classes, speakers, and tailored readings (with a focus, for example, on educational inequality, welfare reform, and responses to poverty outlined in Catholic Social Teaching). See the Center for Social Concerns’ website for more information about the Urban Plunge.

The Center’s literature claims that the Seminar “prompts investigation into the root causes of

poverty and urban concerns as well as exploration of potential solutions.” This study was designed, in part, to assess this claim.

Objectives and Methodology

Participants in the 2002 and 2003 Urban Plunge were asked to complete a two-page open-ended questionnaire as part of orientation activities in November, approximately six weeks prior to the urban immersion. A follow-up survey was administered in January, about three weeks after the immersion experience. A total of 233 Notre Dame undergraduates (see Figure 2) who participated in the Plunge completed both surveys. Content analyses were completed on each question, using categories derived from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development study (2001) as initial conceptual frameworks. Statistically significant differences are noted herein at the 95% level of confidence.

Our analyses compare student participants from each of the colleges at the University, including the College of Arts and Letters (comprised of the humanities, the social sciences, and the fine arts), the Mendoza College of Business, the College of

My experience forced me to identify with the poor authentically in a way in which I viewed myself not as savior but as friend. In many ways my Urban Plunge experience was challenging and uncomfortable. As I stepped into my car to drive only 20 minutes back to my North Side home, the reality of suffering the poor must endure remained in my memory and in many ways a sense of...responsibility inside of me intensified.

—Peter Kralovec, Urban Plunge participant, Chicago, 2003

Engineering, the College of Science, and the First Year of Studies (FY), with a particular focus on the two largest colleges, Arts and Letters (A&L) and Business. We also explore gender differences using the overall sample.

What Are the Biggest Problems?

Students were asked what they believed to be the biggest problems facing the U.S. today, other than terrorism (see Figure 2). Over 73% of students, and more than 60% in each subgroup cited poverty as a major concern, before and after the Urban Plunge, making it the most frequently identified problem. Inadequate education and crime were also mentioned consistently by each of the subgroups both before and after the immersion.

Though excessive military spending was not a problem noted by many students before the Plunge, we thought noteworthy the change in male students' responses on this question after their city experience. While 7.6% of men indicated this as a major problem before, 19.7% noted it after. Particularly interesting to us is the significant difference between male and female student responses following the Plunge; only 2.4% of women identified excessive military spending as a

serious problem.

Will You Ever Be Poor?

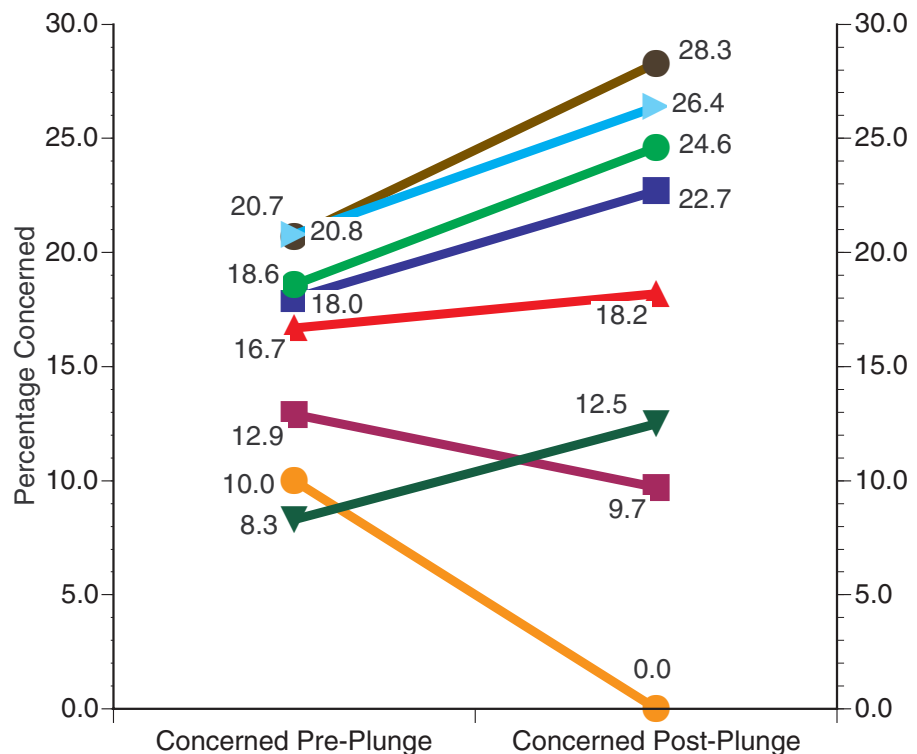
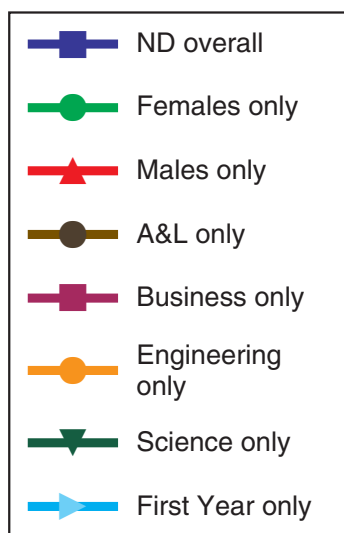
In 2000 and 2001, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) conducted its "Poverty Pulse" study of a representative adult population. The CCHD asked participants how concerned they were about becoming poor at some point in their lives. For both years, about half of those questioned were either very or somewhat concerned. Not surprisingly, 75% of respondents of low-income economic status expressed such concern.

Prior to the Urban Plunge (see Figure 3) about 18.0% of Notre Dame students expressed concern about becoming poor someday. Afterward, the percentage of those concerned rose to 22.7% (though the change was not statistically significant).

Trends in the data showed that the percentage of Business students expressing concern was considerably lower, both before and after, than for the other groups, with only 12.9% indicating concern prior to the plunge. In each of the subgroups, except Business students, more students expressed

Figure 3.

Are you concerned that you might be poor at some point in your life?



| Figure 4. What do you feel are the causes of poverty in the United States? | Pre- Urban Plunge | | | | | | | | Post- Urban Plunge | | | | | | | Poverty Pulse-2001 (overall) | |
|--|-------------------|---------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|--------------------|---------|-------|------|------|------|------|------------------------------|---------|
| | ND Pre-Plunge | Females | Males | A&L | Bus. | Eng. | Sci. | FY | ND Post-Plunge | Females | Males | A&L | Bus. | Eng. | Sci. | | FY |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Lack of education | 52.8 | 54.5 | 48.5 | 48.9 | 45.2 | 60.0 | 54.2 | 60.4 | 52.4 | 55.1 | 45.4 | 52.2 | 54.8 | 20.0 | 66.7 | 47.2 | 32.0 |
| Family cycle of poverty | 40.3 | 43.1 | 33.3 | 35.9 | 32.3 | 50.0 | 50.0 | 50.9 | 22.3 | 25.1 | 15.1 | 17.4 | 25.8 | 10.0 | 16.7 | 37.7 | 6.0 |
| Unemployment | 27.5 | 29.9 | 21.2 | 29.3 | 25.8 | 30.0 | 12.5 | 28.3 | 21.5 | 23.9 | 15.1 | 19.6 | 22.6 | 30.0 | 25.0 | 24.5 | 21.0 |
| Unemployment/lack of work | 26.6 | 29.3 | 19.7 | 21.7 | 19.3 | 20.0 | 25.0 | 35.8 | 34.8 | 35.9 | 31.8 | 38.0 | 19.4 | 20.0 | 41.7 | 45.3 | 17.0 |
| Unfair distribution of wealth | 25.7 | 22.2 | 34.8 | 30.4 | 22.5 | 40.0 | 16.7 | 18.9 | 21.0 | 18.0 | 28.8 | 22.8 | 29.0 | 50.0 | 16.7 | 9.4 | 1.0 |
| Unjust laws or social policy | 22.7 | 16.8 | 37.9 | 31.5 | 16.1 | 30.0 | 25.0 | 5.7 | 29.6 | 24.5 | 42.4 | 34.8 | 25.8 | 30.0 | 33.3 | 20.8 | 4.0 |
| Substance abuse | 19.3 | 19.8 | 18.2 | 13.0 | 25.8 | 30.0 | 16.7 | 22.6 | 35.6 | 34.1 | 39.4 | 27.2 | 29.0 | 20.0 | 54.2 | 37.7 | 3.0 |
| Personal laziness | 10.7 | 8.4 | 16.7 | 5.4 | 16.1 | 20.0 | 25.0 | 9.4 | 6.9 | 6.6 | 7.6 | 5.4 | 3.2 | 20.0 | 16.7 | 5.7 | 25.0 |
| Sample size | n= 233 | n=167 | n=66 | n=92 | n=31 | n=10 | n=24 | n=53 | n= 233 | n=167 | n=66 | n=92 | n=31 | n=10 | n=24 | n=53 | n= 1014 |

concern after the Plunge than before. Afterward, the percentage of Arts and Letters students who indicated that they were concerned about becoming poor had risen to 28.3%, significantly different than the 9.7% of Business students expressing concern.

What Causes Poverty?

Close to 50% of students in each of our subgroups indicated, both before and after the Urban Plunge, that lack of education was a principal cause of poverty (see Figure 4). While this was also the most frequently reported cause from the CCHD survey in both years, only about 32% of that study’s sample cited this factor.

Initially, a family cycle of poverty, or generational transmission, was the second most noted cause of poverty for each of our groups, except for men for whom it came in fourth. After the immersion, however, the numbers of students indicating this as a cause dropped significantly for all but Business students. Over a quarter of Business students still thought this was an important cause of poverty after the Plunge.

“Unjust laws” – e.g., changes in welfare rules, strict immigration quotas -- were initially indicated as an important cause by 37.9% of men, 31.5% of Arts

and Letters students, 16.8% of female students and 16.1% of Business students. After the Plunge, this factor was reported as important by more students in each subgroup, with the difference being statistically significant for female students. Note that the percentage of Business students who named unjust laws as an important cause rose to 25.8% (a change that approached statistical significance).

Substance abuse also was indicated by every group as more important after the immersion than before, and the change was statistically significant for every subgroup except for Business students.

“Personal laziness” was not ranked as a leading cause of poverty, and did not change significantly after the Plunge, except for Business students. Before the Plunge, 16.1% of Business students viewed this as an important cause; after, 3.2%.

How to End Poverty

When asked how poverty could be alleviated, the most frequently cited solution, both before and after the Plunge, and for every group, was better education of children, which parallels CCHD findings (see Figure 5).

Other approaches in the top four, for every subgroup except Business students, both before

and after, were: more private aid or charitable contributions, more government aid, and “changing laws” (e.g., establishing living wage policy and universal health coverage, shifting government spending from military to social programs). Education of adults, not “changing laws,” was among the top four for Business students before the Plunge. More Business students said that “changing laws” was important after the Plunge, however (the percentage rose from 16.1% before to 19.4% after, tying “education of adults”).

Increased government aid became a more frequently cited strategy after the Plunge; the change was significant for several subgroups. It replaced charitable contributions as the second most often cited approach.

What Have You Done to Help?

Students were asked what, if anything, they had done to help alleviate poverty, or to help a person experiencing poverty, over the past year. In the CCHD cohorts, 87% (2000) and 86% (2001) indicated that they had taken some action, compared to 90% of Notre Dame students. Giving money was the most frequently noted response in the CCHD study with 44% and 41% respectively. In our study, only 2.6% said that they just gave money, while 72.3% said they only engaged in direct service and 15.1% noted that they both gave

money and contributed direct service time (see Figure 6).

About 70% of Arts and Letters students said they volunteered through direct service, while the figure was 54.8% for Business students. Of Arts and Letters undergraduates, 18.7% said they both gave money and served, while 25.8% of Business students said the same.

Summary and Discussion

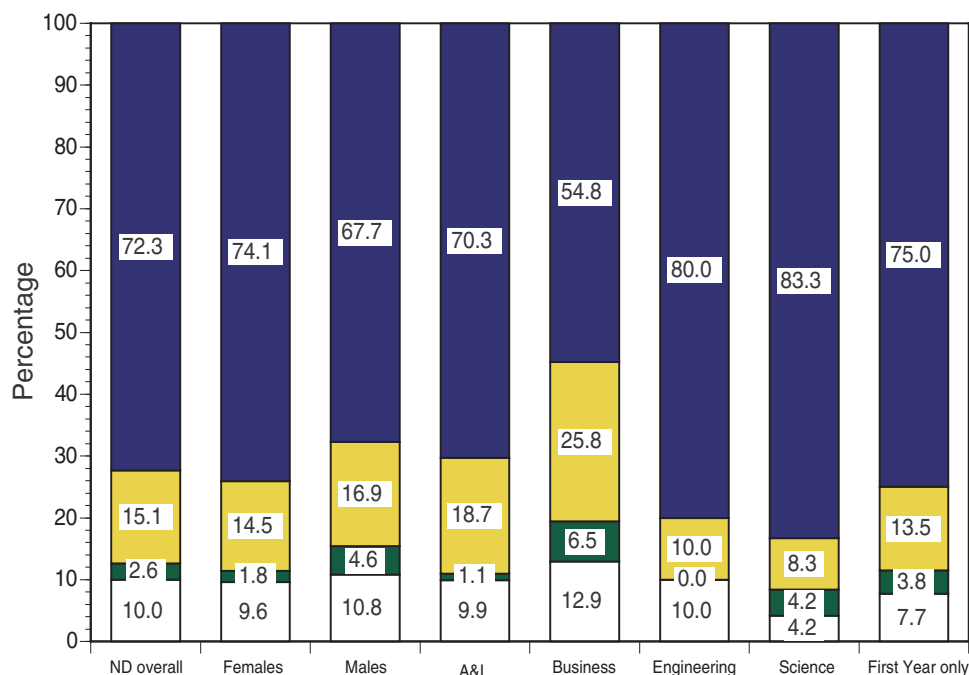
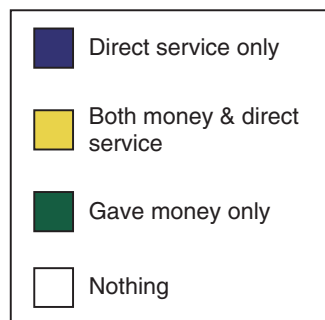
Most student views were relatively consistent prior to and following the immersion. Both before and after the immersion, poverty, inadequate education, and crime were cited as serious urban concerns. The number one cause for poverty noted, both prior to and after the experience, was lack of education. Nonetheless, even though students’ experiences were short, and studies suggest that views about poverty are resistant to change (see, Chafel, 1997), this investigation does document some interesting shifts in student thinking, as well as some contrasts between groups within the University. We also found some striking differences between our students’ views and the perspectives of those who participated in the national CCHD study. We will turn to these comparisons first.

Our students’ responses were consonant with those expressed in the CCHD study in that education

| Figure 5. What are ways to help end poverty? | Pre- Urban Plunge | | | | | | | | Post- Urban Plunge | | | | | | | | Poverty Pulse-2001 (overall) |
|---|-------------------|---------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|--------------------|---------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------------------------------|
| | ND Pre-Plunge | Females | Males | A&L | Bus. | Eng. | Sci. | FY | ND Post-Plunge | Females | Males | A&L | Bus. | Eng. | Sci. | FY | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Better education for children | 52.8 | 56.9 | 42.4 | 51.1 | 58.1 | 50.0 | 58.3 | 52.8 | 46.4 | 48.5 | 40.9 | 42.4 | 51.6 | 30.0 | 50.0 | 54.7 | 20.0 |
| More private aid / charitable contributions | 36.9 | 39.5 | 30.3 | 42.4 | 32.3 | 60.0 | 8.3 | 43.4 | 31.3 | 32.3 | 28.8 | 32.6 | 25.8 | 30.0 | 29.2 | 34.0 | 1.0 |
| More government aid | 27.0 | 23.9 | 34.8 | 30.4 | 25.8 | 30.0 | 29.2 | 24.5 | 38.6 | 38.9 | 37.9 | 39.1 | 29.0 | 50.0 | 58.3 | 41.5 | 4.0 |
| Change laws | 23.6 | 21.0 | 30.3 | 25.0 | 16.1 | 30.0 | 29.2 | 24.5 | 24.5 | 22.7 | 28.8 | 25.0 | 19.4 | 50.0 | 12.5 | 22.6 | 1.0 |
| More employment opportunities | 17.6 | 18.0 | 16.7 | 13.0 | 19.4 | 10.0 | 20.8 | 24.5 | 19.3 | 21.0 | 15.1 | 23.9 | 16.1 | 0.0 | 12.5 | 22.6 | 7.0 |
| More opportunities for education for adults | 17.2 | 19.2 | 12.1 | 13.0 | 22.6 | 30.0 | 20.8 | 20.8 | 15.0 | 17.4 | 9.1 | 15.2 | 19.4 | 10.0 | 0.0 | 15.1 | 15.0 |
| Sample size | n=233 | n=167 | n=66 | n=92 | n=31 | n=10 | n=24 | n=53 | n=233 | n=167 | n=66 | n=92 | n=31 | n=10 | n=24 | n=53 | n=1014 |

Figure 6.

What, if anything, have you done in the past year to help alleviate poverty or to help someone who is poor?



emerged as a serious factor in relation to poverty and an important remedy for both groups. Regarding solutions, however, student views differed strikingly from those of the CCHD respondents. Top strategies, both before and after, mentioned by students – government aid, charity, and changing laws – were only identified by four percent of the national group in the case of government assistance, and by less than one percent for the other two items.

Notre Dame students appear generally less concerned than those in the CCHD study that they personally might become poor, possibly due to their youth and potential income advantages. However, the significant increase, following the immersion, in expression of this concern (see Figure 3) suggests that students may have identified with those they encountered and realized that poverty can originate from situational factors often beyond individual control.

Other changes in student thinking regarding causes of poverty are worthy of further consideration. Before the Plunge, a high percentage of students identified family cycle, or generational transmission,

as an important cause of poverty. Afterward, the percentage of students indicating this as an important cause dropped significantly for all but Business students. Also, we find it noteworthy that “laziness” was not ranked high before the Plunge, and was even lower for some afterward, especially among Business students. Finally, more students indicated “unjust laws” as an important cause of poverty after their immersion.

Many U.S. citizens view poverty within an individualistic framework (Chafel, 1997). One of the basic aims of the Urban Plunge is for students to learn that

problems of urban poverty are complex, for example, to gain a greater appreciation of the roles played by laws, policies, and structural factors outside the

“Forty-eight hours. I never would have guessed that such a small amount of time could have such an immense impact on my life. Although the physical experiences with the impoverished of the city are disheartening simply due to the fact that they were in this situation, I gain comfort in the wide variety of services and the everyday people who wholeheartedly commit their lives to righting the wrongs within the systems of our society...Working for social justice is not just an occasionally nice thing to do to help others that are in need; working for social justice must be a holistic experience, one that encompasses the way in which you live your life.”

– Karina Harty, Urban Plunge participant, Columbus, OH, 2003

control of the individual. The changes in student thinking noted above seem to indicate that students indeed have some greater appreciation for the complexity of urban challenges after the Plunge.

It is also true, however, that many students appeared to have some depth of understanding prior to the experience. For example, very few cited “laziness” as an important cause before the Plunge, in contrast to responses from the general public surveyed by CCHD. This type of result may have been due to the fact that, before completing our initial survey, students attended a preparatory workshop that included some discussion of systemic causes of poverty.

To investigate this possibility, this year we have given our initial survey to students before their first preparation session. We will then be able to contrast pre-Plunge responses this year with those from the past two years.

This study also prompts us to explore further the role gender plays in student thinking, as well as differences between Business and Arts and Letters students. The gender-related finding that is of special interest to us is the larger percentage of male students who identified military spending as a serious social problem after the Plunge. In light of the impending war with Iraq in year two (data was collected in January, 2003), we checked to see if there was a significant difference in responses on this item between year two and year one (January, 2002) of the Plunge, among men. Indeed we found that there was. The year two, post-Plunge men’s response (31.4%) was significantly higher than after year one (6.5%). The fact that almost one-fifth of our male students—in contrast to a mere two percent of women—viewed excessive military spending as a serious social challenge after the Urban Plunge raises some interesting questions. Since women in general may be more reticent about military spending, did the climate of war influence the male undergraduates in our sample more than the female students? Were the male undergraduates who were attracted to the Urban Plunge different in some remarkable ways from male students in general? Did the actual immersion impact male respondents in a special way?

We find features of our Business student responses, particularly in contrast to Arts and Letters undergraduates, also noteworthy. Business students indicated less concern about becoming poor than any

Current Urban Plunge Site Locations

| | |
|----------------------|------------------|
| Albany | Los Angeles |
| Albuquerque | Milwaukee |
| Atlanta | Minneapolis |
| Boston | Mobile |
| Chicago | New York |
| Cincinnati | Oakland |
| Columbus | Philadelphia |
| Denver | Phoenix |
| Des Moines | Pittsburgh |
| Detroit | Portland, OR |
| Grand Rapids | San Antonio |
| Houston | Santa Ana, CA |
| Indianapolis | South Bend |
| Joliet | St. Louis |
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other group, both before and after. This might be due to a perception on their part that their business degree guarantees them a high income; Arts and Letters students might be less confident of this outcome. The most recent information available on the household incomes of students majoring in Business at Notre Dame suggests that these students come from homes with higher incomes, on average, than do Arts and Letters students.

The percentage of those who believed generational transmission of poverty to be an important cause dropped significantly for every other group after the Plunge, while only slightly for Business students. More than a quarter of Business students still indicated, after the Plunge, that family transmission was a serious factor. There was a large and significant drop in the percentage of Business students that believed laziness to be an important cause of poverty. Before, the gap between Business and Arts and Letters students on this item was significant; after, it was not. Finally, Business students appear to be less engaged in service than Arts and Letters students (see Report 5). Our evidence indicates that they may, however, be more inclined to give money.

Some studies have compared Business students to Arts and Letter students (e.g., Silver & Valentine, 2000). One, for example, based on student responses to 17 business scenarios, concluded that academic discipline, specifically business or humanities, “did not play a significant role in value judgments” (Curren & Harich, 1996, p. 9). This is not the first time we have identified differences between Business undergraduates and other students at the University, however (see Report 5). Thus, we are motivated to explore such differences further.

Individuals’ visions of society (Erik Erikson, 1975) and poverty (Chafel, 1997) are formed early, and the period of higher education plays a critical role for many in fostering a complex, integrated understanding of social challenges. Thus, while some of the above results may be particular to the Notre Dame context, it is likely that many readers of this report are likewise attempting to understand how best to foster civic and moral development of college students. We welcome insights and research collaboration from others on these important issues.

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